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Identity and the Sense of Pertinence in White Chameleon

الهوية وشعور الانتماء في الحرباء البيضاء

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Abstract

Postcolonial literature addresses the issues of homeland , race and others with the purpose of highlighting the postcolonial national identity of the colonized. At the same time, the colonizer himself endures from a postcolonial crisis of identity, as he defeats to recognize the relationship between his self and the colonized place. Hence, in many cases both colonized and colonizer find themselves estranged, dislocated or homeless.

The present paper will examine the select play for Christopher Hampton's *White Chameleon* (1991) to demonstrate that the time of crisis is represented the fateful time when national identity and sense of pertinence are to be examined . Characters and their names, dialogue highlight the reality of the sense of pertinence of the protagonist.

**Key words:** Identity, Sense of Pertinence, The Suez Crisis.

### الملخص

تتناول أدبيات ما بعد الاستعمار قضايا الهوية والعرق وغيرها بهدف إبراز الهوية الوطنية لما بعد الاستعمار للمستعمرين. في الوقت نفسه ، يعاني المستعمر نفسه من أزمة هوية ما بعد الاستعمار ، لأنه فشل في تحديد العلاقة بين نفسه والمكان المستعمر. وبالتالي ، في العديد من الحالات ، يجد كل من المستعمر والمستعمر نفسه معزولاً أو غير مأهول أو بلا مأوى. سوف يدرس هذا البحث المسرحية المختارة لكريستوفر هامبتونز الحرباء البيضاء (1991) لإثبات أن وقت الأزمة يمثل الوقت المشؤوم الذي يتم فيه فحص الهوية الوطنية والشعور بالانتماء من خلال شخصيات المسرحية وأسمائها ، والحوار يسلط الضوء على حقيقة شعور بطل المسرحية .

الكلمات المفتاحية: الهوية, شعور الانتماء, أزمة السويس.

### Introduction :

The Suez Crisis in 1956 played a fateful historical and political role in both Egypt and England. It presented a time of Crisis with examined the essence of national identity and sense of pertinence. Hence to understand the sense of pertinence. Is it one's roots? Can one have more than one root: natural by birth, emotional, cultural, or does one's belong to one's homeland where one's re-adopt new roots? To answer these questions, it may be interesting to discuss the postcolonial play that question the truth of roots or sense of pertinence of its protagonist.

Christopher Hampton wrote his play *White Chameleon* (1991), the action dates back to 1952-1956, the years that witnessed the Nationalization of the Suez Canal and the Suez Crisis. The play is considered a journey back to the narrator's childhood memories to his dear

Alexandria. Christopher Hampton was five when his family moved to the Egyptian city of Alexandria was a marvelous place to be a child. It was 1951, Five years later, it was violently by the Suez crisis. Hampton's father, Barney, worked for Cable & Wireless, the British communications company, which at that time posted people across the empire. At the same time , It was the family servant, Ibrahim, who inspired Hampton's interest in writing. He was close to him more than his family. They hung around the kitchen together, drinking Coca-Cola and occasionally whisky .Then one day, his father came home from work and said they had to leave Alex immediately. By this time, there were no ships left. There were rushed goodbyes to Ibrahim – who gave each boy a fez to remember him and the family caught a train to Port Said. Chris enjoyed the voyage. It was only later that he realized he had been sailing away from his childhood.

In England, aged 10, he was sent to prep school. He describes it as merciless , and he hated his time there. At school, meanwhile, the young Chris was summoned to the headmaster's office to explain his views about the country. Because of his rejection position toward the burned of the Ibrahim's fez that he had given him in front of the whole school ,

Hampton said "In Egypt I had been too English," and . "In England I was quasi-Egyptian<sup>1</sup>".

Since the very beginning of the play, Hampton informs young Chris, the protagonist in his childhood, as a sincere lover of Egypt. The protagonist attitudes are important to appear the sense of pertinence that the British protagonist feels toward Egypt. The young Chris who is leading the members of the Egyptian Cross-Channel Swimming Team in their rehearsal of the Egyptian national Anthem. Then the certificate of adult Christopher where he rejects the British reaction to the Egyptian swimming team reasserts his sense of pertinence to Egypt: " When they arrived in England, Billy Butlin barred them from the race, for patriotic reason.....this was the kind of mean mindedness"(Hampton 1991, 3)<sup>2</sup>. The same unprejudiced perspective is revealed by Christopher's father when he praises the Egyptians considering them as effective as the British, and now it is time to return the Suez Canal to it's owners " the Egyptian staff are just as good as we ever were....now we have to give it back to them. All of it" (Hampton 1991, 41)<sup>3</sup>.

The role of the narrator, adult Christopher, is quite important throughout the play. He sheds light on characters and past events but also emphasizes

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<sup>1</sup> - Rix,J. *Christopher Hampton: My Egyptian Paradise*

<sup>2</sup> - Hampton,C.(1991)White Chameleon. London , p.3

<sup>3</sup> -ibid , p41

the protagonist's feelings of rootless ness and his desire to belong to Egypt; to borrow Roman Jakobson's words about the time in dramatic narration:

Hence we are confronted by events of the past and present both in their totality and their mutually determined aspect....we cannot imagine the present without the past, nor the future without the present(Jakobson 1985,14<sup>1</sup>)

Equally the dialogue between young Christ and the Egyptian servant Ibrahim, also explained by Christopher, reveals the young child's increasing sense of non-belonging to England and belonging to Egypt.

*White chameleon* can be categorized as a post-colonial play since it demonstrates Boehmer's definition of the term as a play that " foregrounds and celebrates a national or historical rootless ness<sup>2</sup>" ( 1995, 239). Therefore in his soliloquies adult Christopher sets the nation of his rootless ness explicitly from the onset of the play as the play " addresses the theme of dislocation<sup>3</sup>" to borrow Douglas Kenndy's words (1991,35). The narrator's role is highly significant in the sense that he is the one who remembers, explains and comments on the events; he is the one who still possesses this strong passion for Alexandria. the place where he chooses to belong:

*Christopher: ..... the man with roots take them for granted,*

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1-Jakobson,R(1985),Verbal art, Verbal sign. University of Minnesota press.

<sup>2</sup> -Boehmer,E.(1995), Colonial and postcolonial literature, Oxford University press

<sup>3</sup> -Kedney, D.(1991), Lines in the sand, Cambridge university press.

while man with no roots whatsoever is vividly aware of them, like some phantom ache in an amputated limb...the place I choose to drop my anchor must be here<sup>1</sup> (Hampton 1991, 3-4).

Adult Christopher consciously shifts the roles from colonizer to colonized; he identifies himself with the colonized country and its culture. However, he is unacceptable by the colonized because he is a representative of the colonizer. Therefore, he feels rootless because he belongs to neither nation. This rejection is mostly felt when Chris was beaten by his schoolmates in the Egyptian school because he is "Filthy English"<sup>2</sup> (Hampton 1991, 13). The same violations are repeated in Chris's English school in Britain when the boys at the school accuse him of being "Wog-lover"<sup>3</sup> (Hampton 1991, 46). Because he criticizes the British role in the Tripartite Aggression.

Furthermore, Christopher's childhood memories of other places are always associated with the pain, except for Alexandria. He doesn't remember his birth place Azores; his earliest memories are of the "barren landscape of Aden"<sup>4</sup> (Hampton 1991, 4). Which he describes as "only hot"; in the Catholic convent, he remembers only a "brutal nun with a mustache"<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> - Hampton,C.(1991)White Chameleon. London , p.3

<sup>2</sup> -ibid, p13

<sup>3</sup>ibid, p46

<sup>4</sup> -ibid,p4

<sup>5</sup> -ibid, p4

(Hampton 1991, 4). He describe England as a " bizarre wet country steeped in unfathomable ritual"<sup>1</sup> (Hampton 1991,17-18). Chris feels glad in spite of the disturbing weather conditions when he leaves England and is on his way back to Egypt " it don't affect my happiness of getting out of England"<sup>2</sup> Hampton 1991,19). Besides, Christopher's name indicates his statement of pertinence to either country. According to The American Heritage Dictionary in anthropology (Miffin 2003), "Christopher was a Christian martyr and patron saint of travelers (3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D) who devoted himself to carrying travelers across a river"<sup>3</sup>. Similarly, Christopher, the protagonist, is the victim of colonization. He is swinging between England, his nation and Egypt his chosen homeland, but still he doesn't have a shore. He is in between like saint Christopher who used to move to and fro between the banks of the river. Thus the readers, from the beginning of the play, is oriented to Christopher's unique position and dilemma. Marvin Carlson points out the significance of names as a channel of communication between the dramatist and the reader to send a certain message:

In highly concentrated narrative world of the drama, the name given to characters potentially provide a powerful communicative device for the dramatist seeking to orient his

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<sup>1</sup> -ibid,p17-18

<sup>2</sup> -ibid,p19

<sup>3</sup> -Miffin,H.(2003), The American heritage dictionary of the English language.

readers as quickly as possible in his fictive world.<sup>1</sup> (Carlson 1990,60)

Character depiction in play has a significant role in shaping Christopher's sense of pertinence. The character of Ibrahim, the Egyptian servant, has the great influence on young Chris's character. A servant reveals inferiority in addition to his inferior position as colonized, however Chris changes the relation between the superior colonizer and the inferior colonized by making Ibrahim occupy a superior position; he is even his mentor. Instead of asking his parents or British friends to help him in his assignments, he resorts to Ibrahim to think of a story for a play as homework:

*Ibrahim:* now, so, why he kills the old man? Must be for his.....?(*he waits for Chris to complete the sentence: when he fails to do so, Ibrahim carries on, a touch of exasperation in his voice.*) Gold! His room is full of gold, under the bed, everywhere, he never spends, he is what you call....

*Chris:* A miser

*Ibrahim:* Yes, a miser, and you must have another people, not only young man, old man, police. You must have some wives, some auntie, a brother. The young man is very, very kind to the old man, until the old man say, ' I leave you all

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<sup>1</sup>-Carlson,M. (1990), Theater semiotic:sign of life, Indiana university press



my gold' then he kill him, Gets all the gold. Then he starts to hear this .... Heart.

*Chris:* I see

*Ibrahem:* what is the name of the story? Alampo's name?

*Chris:* Tell- Tale Heart

*Ibrahim:* no good. You must have different name. call it Gold!

*Chris:* Do you think so?

*Ibrahem:* I don't like names with heart.<sup>1</sup> (Hampton 1991,34).

Hampton concentrates upon Ibrahem from the beginning when he describes the kitchen at the house as " Ibrahem's kitchen<sup>2</sup>" (Hampton 1991, 4). Though the kitchen occupies only part of the setting of the play. But at the same time, it represent the most essential and important part as young Chris spend most of his time with Ibrahem. This Egyptian character is not only appear in Egypt, but also in England through his tarboosh, as Robert King points out ".....the play in production makes the Egyptian servant, Ibrahem, the strongest dramatic presence, a forceful identity even in an England scene where he is absent<sup>3</sup>" (44). Chris represents Ibrahem as a performer of his beloved Alexandria, a symbol of his roots or sense of

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<sup>1</sup> - Hampton,C.(1991)White Chameleon. London , p34

<sup>2</sup> -ibid,p4

<sup>3</sup> -King,R. (1992), Performance: Politics and autobiography, north American press.p44

pertinence to Egypt. Therefore, Ibrahim's tarboosh which he gives to Chris as a souvenir is very important and dear to Chris because it reminds him to his roots and that one day he is going to return to his chosen country. Thus When the British headmaster considers the tarboosh a "provocative item"<sup>1</sup>(Hampton 1991,51) and sets fire to it, Chris stretches out his hands attempting to rescue the tarboosh; he feels as if his roots are brutally plucked from his chosen soil." I was holding hands with grief<sup>2</sup>"(Hampton 1991,51) At that moment light changes to shift from young Christ to adult Christopher : now they seem to be one as the sense of pertinence to Egypt connects them to each other. This analysis relates with Dr. Gindy's interpretation of the relation between young and adult Christopher:

at that moment the light focus on the two Christopher's personality- the boy and the man staring at each other and a linkage between the two is established. The boy in that moment reaches adulthood, and it dawns upon him that all roots with Egypt is severed<sup>3</sup>( Gindy 1993,308)

The setting of the play characterizes Chris with Egypt, the place where he chooses "to drop anchor must be here " as adult Christopher said (Hampton 1991,4). This supplying the atmosphere in a dramatic realization and in

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<sup>1</sup> - Hampton,C.(1991)White Chameleon. London ,p51

<sup>2</sup> -ibid

<sup>3</sup> -Gindy,N(1993), A place to drop anchor.....and Hampton's White chameleon, p, 308

turn the importance of characters is pointed out by Martin Esslin in *The field of drama* :

The most obvious function of the set or décor is an informational; it give us the environment of the action of drama, and provides much of the basic expositional information for the spectator's understanding of it by indicating it's place and period, the social position of the characters and many other essential aspects of drama<sup>1</sup>. ( Esslin 1987,73)

The writer continues to describe the setting of the play when he follows describes Chris's family habitation in Alexandria as a " semi-detached villa<sup>2</sup>"(Hampton 1991,4). Completely English in style and taste. It stands in Britain in every corner, except the kitchen which is completely dominated by Ibrahim and his Egyptian smelling food flavors. The villa is located in Thebes street, near Cleopatra station in Alexandria; though these names are iconic and factual, they are manipulated symbolically to shed more light on the strong bond between Chris and Egypt, not only Alexandria. Moreover, outside the quiet isolated British villa, the streets are full of life, Egyptian life, as Christopher Edwards comments on the production of the play:

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<sup>1</sup> - Esslin, M(1978), *The field of drama*, London , p73

<sup>2</sup> - Hampton,C.(1991)*White Chameleon*. London, p4

A fan slowly turns above a spacious, brightly lit set of bleached wood. From outside come the cries of the street. Skillfully created atmosphere combined with the work's personal air of fond recollection gives the production much of its charm and particularity<sup>1</sup>( Edward 1991, 35)

Beside, the names used to indicate certain goods are in slang Egyptian language to add to Christopher's sincerity in his overwhelming passion for his chosen homeland:

The cries of street vendors of the street selling water or tea, fowl or tirmus, yoghurt or corn or cob, Coca-Cola or gazoza, the hubbub of traffic and street life, Egyptian music floating through a neighbor's open window and the rattle of regular passing trams stand out against the usual background humming and buzzing of a tropical afternoon<sup>2</sup>(Hampton 1991,4).

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<sup>1</sup> -Edward, C.(1991), Colonial boy, p35

<sup>2</sup> - Hampton,C.(1991)White Chameleon. London, p4

Despite his sincere sense of pertinence to Egypt in general and Alexandria in specific, Christopher could not drop his anchor where he pleases because of the fact that he is British; he is a colonizer. Therefore, like Hampton, he is an outsider with no roots; he belongs nowhere. In other words, the protagonist in this play is like Chameleon, and here emerges the significance of the title. He always trying to be suitable , like the white chameleon of the title, which tries to change it's appearance to blend in. Christopher describes the chameleon as " solitary and hibernator "<sup>1</sup>(Hampton 1991,31). Like himself. This analysis harmonizes with Douglas Kennedy in his explanation of the play's main theme with regard to its title:

As the title suggests, *white chameleon* is all about mutability—the way individuals and nations alike can find themselves squeezed in between conflicting identities at a time of momentous revolution<sup>2</sup> (Kennedy 1991, 3)

In conclusion, to answer the questions raised at the starting of this paper, the play demonstrate that national identity is controlled by one's feeling of pertinence to a particular place, despite one's original roots. Moreover, the time of crisis is the perfect time to test one's real passion of pertinence as at

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid,p31

<sup>2</sup> - Kednney, D.(1991), Lines in the sand, Cambridge university press. p3

that time one will either protect one's country or will give up the whole issue depending on one's feelings of national identity. Furthermore , it is remarkable to mention the irony concerning the passion pertinence of the protagonist Christopher the British colonizer who lives in Alexandria during childhood is trying all the time to cling; to identify himself with it not with Britain to the extent that he changes roles of superiority and inferiority with the colonized and identifies himself with another culture. Thus, one of the mostly features of post-colonial literature is the effect of the concept of dislocation in determining the national identity of both colonized and colonizer. Emphasizes this influence as:

A major feature of post-colonial literature is the concern with the place and displacement. It is here that the special post-colonial crisis of identity comes into being, the concern with the development of recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place....the dialectic of place and displacement is always a feature of post-colonial societies whether these have been created by a process of settlement, intervention, or mixture of the two<sup>1</sup>. (Ashcroft 1989, 8-9)

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<sup>1</sup> - Ashcroft,B.G, (1989), The Empire Writes back, London, p8-9

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