# Woman's Identity Crisis in the Clash of Cultures: A Study of Betool Khedairi's Novel: *A Sky So close*

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**Abstract**

This paper is an attempt to clarify the impact of Postcolonialism, one of the most challenging fields of study that has emerged in recent years, on representations of women in once-colonised countries and in Western locations. It discusses the influence of cultural differences on the status and identity of a woman who experience 'multiculturalism'. The study is an analytical reading of a contemporary novel written by the Iraqi writer Betool Al-Kudairi. The emphasis lies on the clash between two different cultures and traditions represented by the British mother and the Iraqi father and its effect on the life and identity of the protagonist. The main focus is on idea of 'hybrid identity' and the absence of the sense of belonging. *A Sky so Close* is a close look into the clash between East and West and into the soul of a woman formed by two cultures yet fully accepted by neither.

# أزمة هوية المرأة في صراع الثقافات
# دراسة لرواية بتول الخضيري: كم بدت السماء قريبة

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**الخلاصة**

هذا البحث هو محاولة لتنوضيح الاثر الذي يترتب على وضع النساء في حقبة ما بعد الاستعمار سواء في الدول التي كانت مستعمرة او في الدول الغربية. لاشك ان هذا الموضوع هو من المواضيع الشائكة بل هو من اكثر المجالات الدراسية التي تمثل تحديا كبيرا في السنوات الاخيرة. يناقش هذه البحث اثر الاختلافات الثقافية على مكانة و هوية النساء اللواتي مررن بتجربة التعددية الثقافية واشتمل البحث على قراءة تحليلية لرواية معاصرة للروائية المغتربة بتول الخضيري "كم بدت السماء قريبة".

يتناول البحث مفهوم مابعد الاستعمار حيث ينطوي على قراءة لنص انتجته الكاتبة التي هاجرت من بلدها والتي تتعامل بشكل رئيسي مع تجربة الشتات وعواقبه الكثيرة. في كثير من الاحيان، يكون الناس في الشتات معزولين ولايشعرون بالانتماء الى البلد الجديد. وهكذا، فان هذه الدراسة تسلط الضوء على مثل هذه المشاكل مع اعطاء اهتمام كبير لموضوع الهوية والاحساس بالانتماء. اضافة الى ذلك، فانها تطرح موضوع المعضلة التي تواجهها النساء اللائي يقفن عند تقاطع ثقافتين ويواجهن الاختلافات في التقاليد والدين والعرق واللغة.

ان رواية كم بدت السماء قريبة للكاتبة العراقية بتول الخضيري، يقع التركيز فيها على الصدام الحاصل بين ثقافتين مختلفتين والتقاليد التي تمثلها كل من الام البريطانية والاب العراقي وتأثير ذلك على حياة وهوية بطلة الرواية. ان التركيز الرئيسي في هذا النص ينصب على فكرة "الهوية الهجينة" وغياب الشعور بالانتماء. كم بدت السماء قريبة هي نظرة فاحصة الى الصراع الحاصل بين الشرق والغرب والى روح امرأة تشكلت كنتاج لكلا الثقافتين المتباينتين، ولكنها لاتحظى بالقبول التام في اي منهما.

The idea that diversity of cultures is good and positive and ought to be encouraged, has been widespread within the postcolonial perspective. 'Multiculturalism' represents, as Homi Bhabha indicates, "an attempt both to respond to and to control the dynamic process of the articulation of cultural difference, administering a consensus based on a norm that propagates cultural diversity."[1] While many cross-cultural forms are now considered familiar and welcomed in the postcolonial world, some of them are still rejected by the West. The dominant Western vision is still haunted by the stereotype images of the late orientalists,

which have been circulating for hundreds of years. On the other hand, positive cultural changes have been taking place in the new postcolonial and multicultural policies that encourage cultural diversity through publications of a number of cross-cultural texts. This may be seen as a good move toward a positive hybrid Eastern Western vision in an attempt to get the benefit of the espousal of the two different cultural identities. It is a fertile soil in which, in the words of Bhabha, "gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognisable, a new erea of negotiation of meaning and representation."[2]

The Iraqi novelist Betool Khedairi adopts the role of cultural translator, or informant, who is defined, for good or ill, as an Iraqi multicultural or migrant writer from between two different worlds and two different cultures realms. Khedairi was born in Baghdad in 1965. Being the daughter of an Iraqi father and a Scottish mother, she has lived an ambivalent life; much of it is retold in her first novel, *A Sky So Close* (1999). *A Sky So Close*, set in Iraq and written in Arabic and translated into English, Italian, French, and Dutch, has established her as a strong new voice in Iraqi diaspora literature who endeavours to create a cultural identity as the one Bhabha describes that "gives rise to anodyne liberal notions of multiculturalism, cultural exchange, or the culture of humanity."[3] The unnamed protagonist of this semi-autobiographical novel is the fictional figure of Khedairi herself. This novel reflects the clash between two different sets of values in her house and the subsequent confusion and loss of identity she suffers. After her father's death in 1990, she left Iraq to live in London with her mother, who has been treated from cancer.[4] The novel as Khedairi stated is "about a little Iraqi girl growing up in Baghdad with a very English mom, as opposed to her very Iraqi dad, with all their conflicts of cultures, religion, habits - even eating habits, ...in Baghdad, she is the daughter of the foreign woman, and in England, she is the Arab."[5]

One important feature of the book, as the author confesses, is the representation of everyday Iraqi life, yet she manages to interest readers who may know little about the country. Khedairi says "I was pleasantly surprised that I managed to connect to the West, I managed to show them what the Iraqi human being is about, rather than what they know through their media."[6] Khedairi admits that she had no political agenda when she wrote this novel; she only hopes that it can help mend the chasm between East and West. She adds "Some people actually think we still use camels in this part of the world ... As a writer if I can't change anything...at least I can give a bridge between cultures for people to understand each other more".[7] A similar statement was made earlier by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* when he refused the extensively propagated false attitudes of orientalist towards the Arabs as "camel-riding, terroristic, hook-nosed, venal lechers whose undeserved wealth is an affront to real civilization."[8]

The novel contrasts two antithetical cultural ways of perception triggered by different social traditions and norms, which the young female protagonist painstakingly tries to assimilate. The daughter's mixing with the children of the rural area always elicits a conflict between the father and the mother. The mother who comes from a Western country never accepts her daughter's mingling with the 'other'. The essence of this remark comes from a place of white colonialism; the view that is rooted in a dominant, white oriented place defines the *other* culture as uncivilized, strange, and different from the mainstream. This relativity of values, of ways of seeing and living informs the reader about cultural differences which the novel record through the narrator's reaction towards her parents' conflicting understanding of traditions and freedoms, their definitions of civilization, their notions of filth and disease, and their particularities with regard to eating habits and sleeping preferences.[9]

The novel, made up of a series of flashbacks, is written in an epistolary form, as a letter addressed to a deceased father. Throughout the course of the novel, the protagonist addresses her father by referring to him as 'you,' as though writing the story to and for him. This supplies the narration with an intimate sense of a daughter trying to communicate with

an absent father in an effort to compensate for her loss.[10] The novel is written in the first person with the unnamed narrator telling her story as the events unfold. This means the reader sees the actions of the novel through the eyes of the narrator and learns the details as the narrator learns them. Nevertheless, at the same time, the author intends her personal story to be universal by using the technique of leaving her protagonist nameless. It is through the loss of her name that the reader is able to step into the author's perspective and feels what she feels. Khedairi explains, "Anyone reading the book can become that character."[11] Another intention to be unnamed is to show her as a typical representative of some minority group and a stranger in both communities, the Iraqi community and the Western one. She is "the foreign woman's daughter"[12] for the neighbourhood in Iraq, while in London she is still considered as being different for having such dark skin.

The Arabic title, *Kam Badat Al-Sama'a Qariba*, literally, 'How close the sky seemed to be', is derived from an incident at the beginning of the novel. The itinerary of the protagonist starts from a small farm in the village of Za'farania outside Baghdad that portrays the slowness and peaceful simplicity of life in the countryside. The narrator's best friend Khadouja, a barefoot peasant child, is the one with whom she spends the most enjoyable time in her life:

> Khadouja had set up a swing for us between two palm trees… we take turns, Khadouja lets out several hoarse cries of joy… then it's my turn. I kick the air with my feet … I rise upward… I kick harder… I'm framed in the milky blue. All the palm trees are below my two bare feet. The sun is swimming in the waters of the river. I spread out my toes … pencils of light pass through the four gaps between them. With my other foot I kick even harder … I rise higher towards the heavens… I breathe in the horizon… then … A sky so close!(16)

The happy time of the narrator's childhood, playing on the swing made up of palm fronds and trying to reach the sky, is highly suggestive and symbolic. According to the Iraqi critic Ferial Ghazoul, it is considered as the "key image of the novel".[13] The swing is a symbol of freedom and happy childhood. The moment of swinging may represent chasing a dream for the narrator who is embracing both opposite poles in her life. This moment is dominated by a rhythm where two evocative movements are aroused: first when the little girl goes up high – within the reach of the sky - and then down to touch the earth with her bare feet. The swing eventually breaks and the protagonist falls down and finds herself lying on the ground. This sudden fall may reflect the shattering of her young dreams. What she thinks 'so close' is in fact far away to reach. The swing also may represent the bi-cultural upbringing of the daughter. The swinging action echoes the unstable manner of life that she lives or her wavering between two different styles of living.[14] It may represent this 'in-between' space; the hybrid identity of the protagonist who is fluctuating between the Eastern and the Western cultures. Bhabha maintains that "the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge. The third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and set up new structures."[15] While the narrator feels happy in merging the difference within her psyche, her hope in bridging the gap between her father and mother or, broadly speaking, between East and the West, is not an easy attainable dream and, this seemingly embraceable sky hanging over pastoral Za'farania will be ruined ultimately by bombs of the war.[16]

The author indicates that this novel gives "a glimpse of how the Western eye looks at an issue and how the Eastern eye looks at the same issue".[17] The first three chapters of the novel are dominated by conflicting values and different ideas of the narrator's parents who are unable to agree on anything including how to raise their daughter. Each one of them tries to impose his/her way of living and his/her own beliefs. The narrator's mother forbids her from

playing with the shoeless neighbour children fearing diseases and lice. She is horrified whenever she knows that her daughter goes to the farm and meets her friend Khaddouja. The narrator insists: "the more she refused Khaddouja, the more I longed for the second half of the day, when I encounter her brown face on the dusty track."(24) The mother calls Khaddouja "the filthy lice-bearer."(24) On one occasion, the narrator, by mistake, tells her mother that Bibi Hijjia had combed her hair with her wooden comb; the narrator complains: "It was as if I had announced the end of the world."(26) The mother scolds her daughter roughly and stops her from visiting the mud hunts for two weeks after that episode. Whenever the mother knows that her daughter has made another trip to the farm, she flies into rage shouting with her daughter:

- You mean you were with that dirty little girl again? Didn't I warn you not to mix with that lice-ridden child?"
- But Mummy, she's my friend.

She scolds:

- No! She's not your friend, she will only give you her diseases. Did you eat anything when you were with her?
- Only a small piece of bread with some cheese.

She erupts again:

- My God! Haven't you seen how her mother uses dried cow dung for the fire with which she bakes the bread? Haven't you seen the hordes of flies that swarm around that cheese they make with their filthy hands? (8-9)

The mother insists that her daughter must attend the School of Music and Ballet in the city to be more cultivated according to her value system. She prefers high culture associated with her part of the world over the local folk culture which she considers primitive and savage.[18] On the other side, her father, with whom the narrator identifies herself, fears that joining this school will make her spoiled. Instead, he allows her, or in fact encourages her, to mix with the peasants near their house to learn their language and traditions. He keeps arguing with his wife about the way they use to raise their daughter and asks her to listen to him and try to see what she 'can't see'. The parent's dialogue on this critical issue reflects the cultural gap between the two:

- The girl will be spoiled!
- But the schools out here are so deprived. I want my daughter to learn languages, dancing, and socialization. I'm not asking for much.
- Dancing and socializing, not asking for much! But one day, she may pay too high a price for your decision.
- I won't let her go to a primitive school!
- Don't you realize, woman, that we're now in the Arab, Islamic world, and she and I are Muslims? This education, which you are calling "arts," could damage her future prospects.
- It would be better than damaging her morale in your local girls' schools. She's showing promise and talent. Why do you want to keep her in isolation? Isn't it bad enough that she mixed with that Gypsy girl and those illiterate fools who spend the whole day running around in that disgusting farm?
- Woman, you're talking about a culture you don't understand. I've warned you about the differences we'd face in raising her. I know what I'm talking about, why don't you listen to me?
- I listened to you in the past, that's why we didn't send her to nursery school at the age of four like the other children, because we're so far

> away from civilization. But now I'm sick of this isolated village and primitive people…
>
> - Woman, let her mingle with the peasants' traditions, there's no harm in that. Let her bond with the land, with the people and their animals, the way we are raised. For God's sake, let her see what you can't see! (9-10)

The house represents a microcosm of the east-meets-west battle, a tiny and personal war that, in this story, has no clear winner. Bhabha stated that "the problem of the cultural emerges only at the significant boundaries of culture, where meanings and values are misread or signs misappropriated"[19] The narrator finds herself torn between the two worlds and constantly pulled first in one direction then in another. She does not know how to stop her parents' never-ending arguments and realises as she matures that she is somehow a pawn in their east-meets-west conflict. Yet she sometimes feels that this hovering between the two poles may have a positive effect on her personality when it allows her to be part of the two worlds. "Instead of fighting the differences," Khedairi says, "I tried to mesh and to benefit from both cultures. One learns from experience and with time you learn how to make the most out of it. In the end, it is about bridging between cultures rather than denying them."[20] It is this advantage that the narrator joyfully nourishes:

> In spite of your conflicting plans, you were unable to stop my mother from sending me to that school. And she in turn was unable to convince you to forbid me from going to the farm. Your disagreement allowed me to mingle with both worlds. Just like our house, which was in itself two worlds. (11)

As a result of living in an atmosphere full of family tensions, the daughter becomes an epitome of a 'hybrid identity'. She is a child who does not know which culture she belongs to or whom to please. She never knows which language she should speak to stop her parents' yelling. Once she addresses her father saying: "I have no say in these arguments. I don't even know which language I should use."(3) It is this hybridity manifested in the blurring of two different languages that force the protagonist to choose 'in-between' zone. This mixing of languages is a process that has been defined in linguistics as 'Code-Switching'[21]. Bill Ashcroft stated in his book *The Empire Writes Back* that "perhaps the most common method of inscribing alterity by the process of appropriation is the technique of switching between two or more codes, particularly in literature".[22] It is one way of "installing cultural distinctiveness in the writing."[23] She uses bilingual ways or sentences in expressing her bicultural identity.

Through the course of the first half of the story, the writer intends to build a parallelism between two contrasting environments, each reflecting a sharp different image. The first image reflects the genuine Iraqi environment with its simplicity, purity, sincerity, and tenderness represented by Khaddouja and her family who support each other strongly. On the other side lies the image of the narrator's house where the atmosphere is full of family tension, dissatisfaction, misunderstanding, continuous dispute, and unstable relationship. The mother spends time with her English friend David that has developed gradually into an affair. She drifts further from her family until finally her husband cannot handle her Western indiscretions and begins trying to impose more restrictions on her.

Through this comparison the writer intends to present a critique of the bourgeois way of life. Although the Western world is sustained by education, money, modern equipments and high cultivation, yet, in her point of view, it does not represent the best world even in comparison to the poor uneducated intimate world of Za'farania in which the daughter "never felt like a stranger"(36). She confesses that though they called me "the foreign woman's daughter,"(37) but they still welcomed me in any hut I chose to enter." She even prefers their

scary stories over her mother's fine stories: "The magic of the river beckons to us. But [Khaddouja's family] had frightened us with the story of the Siluwa monster, who rises from the water to swallow little children… In spite of that, I still preferred her to Snow White."(36)

Within the young girl, British, European influences mingled with Arab Muslim influences with regard to language, beliefs or even her hobbies and tastes in the arts. Attending the school of music and ballet according to her mother's desire does awaken a love of dance in her. She holds on attending this school even when most of its students left under war circumstances.

The novel central theme of identity could be read also through exploring the world of war. Searching for identity during war is significant because it expresses the quest of the individual for his being. During the course of the novel, the narrator experiences two brutal wars. The first is the war between Iraq and Iran and the second the war is The Gulf War by United States and Allied Forces against Iraq. One of the work's major concerns lies in its critique of war. War raises some unsettling questions about the values that govern the world during its course. People begin to question the validity of their identity and nationalism, which seem to vanish under such loss of life and economic devastation. "What is the point of surviving?"(160) Khedairi asks through the mouth of her protagonist. Merely being alive is neither the true test for existence nor is it sufficient reason for living. Living as a human is more important than just having a life. War is not glamorized at all in this novel. It is presented in a very real and horrifying fashion from the perspective of the narrator. The novel could be seen as a contrast between two different types of twentieth century life: the serene and peaceful life presented in the first three chapters and the misery brought by war with the beginning of chapter four. These two contrasted landscapes stand against each other. The world of peace is embodied in the simple village of Zafraniya or 'Land of Saffron', where the narrator enjoys her childhood:

> That was where the apricot trees grew. Vast acres of graceful trees, their upper branches entwined. When the sun starts to sink over the apricot farm, their shadows fall as a complex patterns of light and shade on the ground underneath. The youthful branches stretch out in all directions. Their sharp twigs seem like fingers, entangled in handshakes, exchanging bunches of white flowers. Each spring I wish that the flowers would last forever. (6)

As a result of the bad circumstances in Iraq. The protagonist is forced to leave her country and accompanied her sick mother to England. Khedairi sighs: "In England as an adult, it was devastating to see my Western half attacks my eastern half during the first Gulf war through the lens of the Western media."[24] Significantly, the war in *A Sky So Close* is not constructed as part of the plot. Rather, Khedairi strategically makes it as an interruption, a fragmentary, disruptive narrative. It is presented by military communiqués, news, reports, and official analyses via the television and the radio. This strategy of fragmenting war is significant because, first, it reflects how the media have invaded people's lives and minds. They have gained a place of privilege in a world governed by globalization. "Outside the war rages on, divided between the battlefront, the television, and the radio that was always by your ear at home."(116) New identities are being formed as a result of this cultural globalization. Maalouf clarifies in his book, *In the Name of Identity*, the distinction between the real identity and the new-age identity:

> This is an essential point with regard to current concepts of identity. On the one hand there is what we are in reality and what we are becoming as a result of cultural globalisation: that is to say, beings woven out of many-coloured threads, who share most of their beliefs with the vast community of their contemporaries. And on the other

> hand there is what we think we are and what we claim to be: that is to say, members of one community rather than another, adherents of one faith rather than another. I do not deny the importance of our religious, national or other affiliations. I do not question the often decisive influence of our vertical heritage. But it is necessary at this point in time to draw attention to the gulf that exists between what we are and what we think we are.[25]

The strategy of fragmented narration also denotes the chaotic nature of war: "An unending chaos of fear, terror, and darkness from the black mist we open our windows to in the morning, until the darkness of the night, which commences every evening with the sounds of bombardment that have now become so familiar."(199) The system of life has been crushed by its suffocating bleak image and even time has become meaningless throughout its course. In the following dialogue, the mother addresses her daughter:

- You're wasting your time.
- You mean I'm wasting more wasted time.
- May be you're right to answer me that way; after all, you're the war generation.(167)

The novelist draws a parallelism between the deterioration of the protagonist's homeland and the deterioration in her mother's health. "I breathe in the days with anticipation; in one hand I hold all the analyses of the current situation; in my other hand, I hold results of my mother's medical tests."(189) She sees her country in the image of a sick mother that is suffering and going through hard times. On one hand, she is worried about her mother's situation: "My mother's condition has deteriorated with the passing days. Her illness is covering every single item in the list of possible side effects, in sequence."(211). On the other hand, she receives another letter from her friend telling her: "My friend, it's not easy for me to describe to you the way things are deteriorating here day after day. We're living in a state of complete mental disarray. We've lost the ability to direct our lives, as our choices rapidly diminish."(213) She feels helpless before the two calamities. She is neither able to help her mother nor her country. "What are we going to do?"(188) She inquires.

With the death of the protagonist's mother, the sense of being a stranger is been aggravated more inside her psyche. She has been left alone in a country she half belongs to, with her eyes contemplating on her homeland, which is suffering hard conditions. War, with its grim effects, has intensified her sense of fragmented identity that she tries to form but in vain.

In the words of Ghazoul, "this subtle and moving novel is first and foremost a plea for life and harmony in a world full of strife."[26] It is meant to draw attention to the chasm between cultures. Life is a creator of differences. Every individual without exception possesses a composite identity. Identity is a special case. Humankind itself is made up by special cases. Even one's identity isn't given once and for all. It is built up and changes throughout a person's lifetime.[27] And when reading the novel from a postcolonial perspective, it seems to be involved to elevate the notion of cultural diversity and in promoting peace against aggression. Khedairi says:

> I find it fascinating to be able to trip in and out of cultures to explore one's own dimensions: ambitions and limitations at the same time. Positives and negatives from both worlds mesh into one open tolerant mentality that is accepting and forgiving. This is what I learnt through my writing, working as a translator to both cultures in my own words. If we could only build bridges between East and West instead of fighting the differences, then maybe we would come one step closer to a peaceful planet.[28]

**Notes**

[1] Homi Bhabha, "The Third Space. Interview with Homi Bhabha", Interviewed by: Jonathan Rutherford, In: Ders. (Hg): Identity: Community, Culture, Difference. 1990.(London: Lawrence and Wishart, 207-221), p.208-209.

[2] *Ibid*., p.211.

[3] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge,1994), p.34.

[4] Charles Recknagel, "Iraq: Author Seeks To Bridge Distance Between East And West", (URL:http://www.betoolkhedairi.com/text/press_1.htm), accessed January 16, 2013.

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] Claudia Parsons, "Iraqi author portrays "black rain" of war", Reuters, (URL:http://www.betoolkhedairi.com/press_en3.htm), accessed January 19, 2013.

[8] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, ( New York: Vintage Books, 1979), p.108.

[9] Brigitte Voykowitsch, "A Sky So Close", Die Gazzette, 10.5.2003, (URL: http://www.gazette.de/Archiv/Gazette-Mai2003/Khedairi.html), accessed January 16, 2013.

[10] Ferial J. Ghazoul, "Coming of Age in Iraq", Al Ahram newspaper, Cairo 20-26 March 2003, (URL:http://www.betoolkhedairi.com/InThePress_En.htm), accessed March 16, 2013.

[11] Heather Anderson, "Culture Conflict", Woman this month, Issue2, 2003, p.47, (URL:http://www.betoolkhedairi.com/pic/WomanThisMonth.jpg), accessed March 19, 2013.

[12] Betool Khedairi, *A Sky so Close*, Trans. Dr.Muhayman Jamil, ( Anchor Books, 2001), p.16. All subsequent references to the novel will be taken from this edition.

[13] Ghazoul,

[14] *Ibid*.

[15] Bhabha, "The Third Space. Interview with Homi Bhabha", p.211.

[16] Mark Rozzo, "First Fiction", Los Anglos Times, 9.2.2001, (URL:http://www.betoolkhedairi.com/pic/losangeles.jpg), accessed March 11, 2013.

[17] Parsons,

[18] Ghazoul,

[19] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p.34.

[20] Rana Safadi, "Betool Khedairi & Her World of Words", Interview, Mediterranean Cultural Website, (URL:http://www.betoolkhedairi.com/press_en4.htm), accessed January 16, 2013.

[21] Code-Switching: is switching between two or more languages, or language varieties, in the context of a single conversation. Multilingual—people who speak more than one language—sometimes use elements of multiple languages in conversing with each other.
Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, (Oxford University Press, 2001), p.244.

[22] Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, (London: Routledge,2004), p.71.

[23] *Ibid*.

[24] "Botox in Baghdad", The Guardian, 25 April 2006, (URL: http;//www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2006/apr/25/deadlines), accessed June 19,2013.

[25] Amin Maalouf, *In the Name of Identity*, (Penguin Books, 2000), Trans, Barbra Bray, p.103.

[26] Ghazoul,

[27] Maalouf, p.20,22.

[28] Voykowitsch,

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