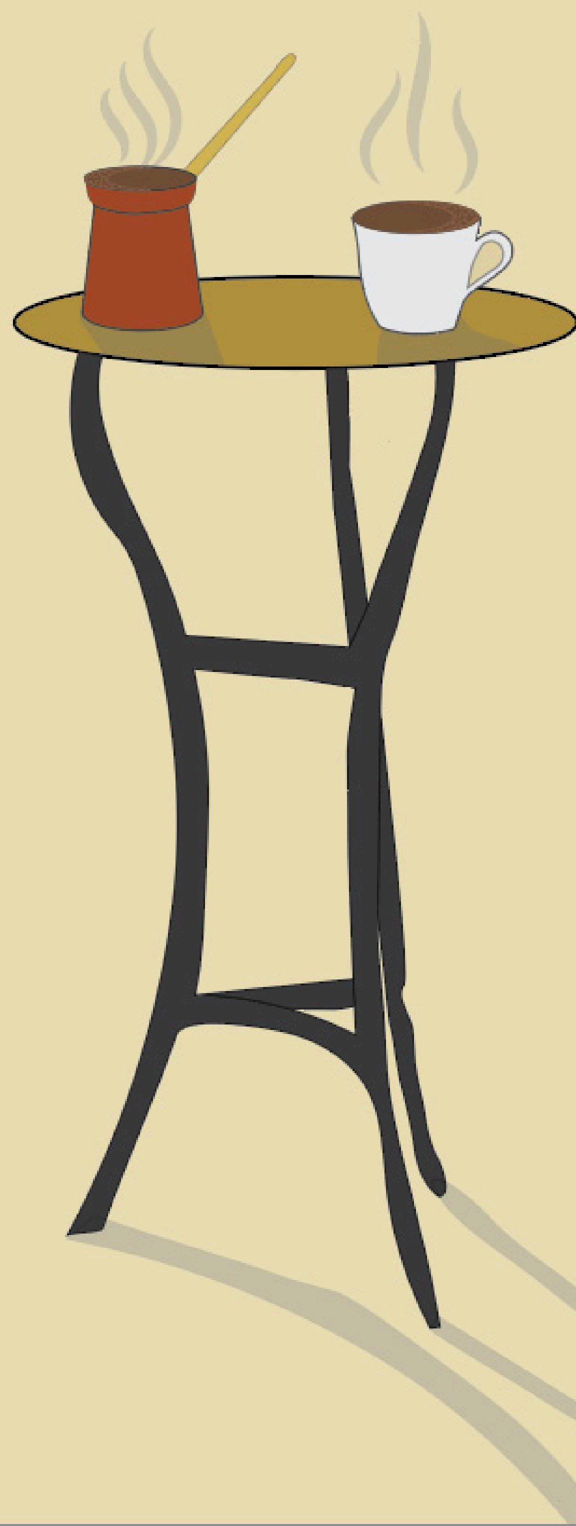

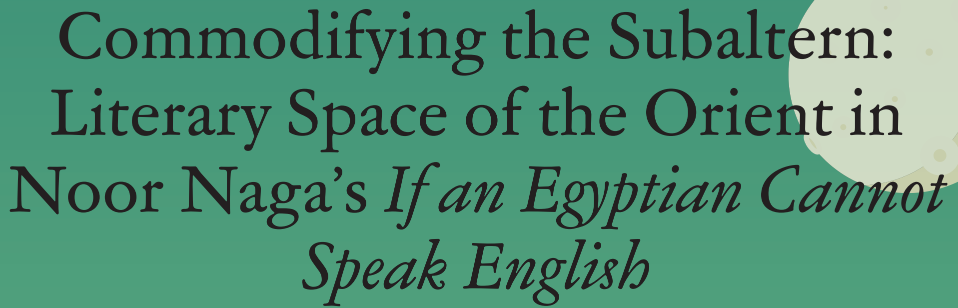

Commodifying the Subaltern: Literary Space of the Orient in Noor Naga's *If an Egyptian Cannot Speak English*

Leah Turner

This paper analyzes *If an Egyptian Cannot Speak English* by Noor Naga through the lenses of *Orientalism* by Edward Said and *On Decoloniality* by Walter Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh. By applying Robert T. Tally, Jr.'s spacio-cultural theory and Henri Lefebvre's notion of the production of space, the author shows how Naga constructs Cairo as a literary space where power, identity, and cultural misunderstanding intersect through the characters of the "American girl," the first-generation Egyptian American finding her roots, and the "boy from Shobrakheit," a former Arab-Spring photographer from rural Egypt. The novel's experimental structure culminates in a meta-fictional map of how Western epistemologies colonize and commodify the Egyptian subaltern. The structure of the text preys upon the reader's own privilege and lack of knowledge of Egypt, breaking the fourth wall of the novel. The question implied by the novel's title, *If an Egyptian Cannot Speak English,* reveals the violence in translation. By inserting herself in the narrative as the "American girl," Naga confronts both author and reader as consumers of authenticity.

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The subaltern, as defined by Gayatri Spivak, is the group that is marginalized by colonial occupation and rendered voiceless by systemic power imbalances (26). The subaltern is subproletariat, meaning that the subaltern is not just oppressed but also denied access through the colonization of their space. In Noor Naga's *If an Egyptian Cannot Speak English*, the relationship between the subaltern and the diasporic Egyptian pushes forth the crucial questions: who can tell the Egyptian's story and who counts as Egyptian? In this novel, both characters have Egyptian heritage. The subaltern is a boy from rural Egypt, rendered homeless and jobless due to his background and class. The diasporic Egyptian, Noor, is a first generation Egyptian-American. However, in Egypt, the diasporic Egyptian is not considered fully Egyptian. The 20ll Egyptian Revolution resulted in political turnover and created a rupture in national identity. In the decade that followed, layers of revolutionary optimism, militant rule, and neoliberal expansion fractured the identities of the city of Cairo and its inhabitants. In her novel, Naga analyzes the tensions among the Western gaze, diaspora, and the local subaltern. Using a theoretical framework based on Said's theory of "Orientalism" and decolonial approaches as outlined by Mignolo and Walsh, the novel's experimental narrative critiques Western privilege and commodification of authenticity. Naga's novel in structure and plot shows how Western thought and assumptions shape the perspectives of characters and readers alike, ultimately revealing how narrative space can critique privilege and fetishization, and show the limits of cross-cultural understanding.

The 2022 winner of the Center for Fiction's First Novel Prize, *If an Egyptian Cannot Speak English* follows two characters, Noor, the American girl, and the boy from Shobrakheit, who remains unnamed. Noor is a first-generation Egyptian American who decides to "return" to Egypt despite never having lived there. The boy from Shobrakheit, who was a photographer during the 2011 Egyptian Revolution from rural Egypt, has since fallen into poverty in Cairo and become addicted to cocaine. When the two characters meet, they begin a relationship despite not speaking the same language. The boy from Shobrakheit teaches Noor how to navigate Cairo and Noor gives the boy a place to live, sharing her own apartment with him. The relationship quickly becomes obsessive and abusive. When Noor bars the boy from her apartment and ends her financial support, he becomes obsessed. He breaks into her apartment, attempts to attack her new British boyfriend, before ultimately jumping to his death. The novel concludes in Part Three with the revelation that the first two sections were Noor's memoir, with the boy from Shobrakheit's perspective and voice entirely her creation. In the final section, the reader observes a writing workshop for Noor's novel in which her classmates try to understand her and the boy from Shobrakheit's story. Noor's identity, shaped by movement between cultures, inhabits a liminal space where her power and privilege shift according to the context around her.

The novel's three-part structure functions as a map of the increasing epistemic violence—the harm that is inflicted by devaluing and silencing the knowledge and experiences of the marginalized subaltern (Spivak 25). Part One of the novel establishes the Orientalist gaze; Part Two showcases colonial mapping through footnotes; Part Three reveals the Western denial of voice for the subaltern in the memoir workshop. As Robert T. Tally, Jr. notes, the space of the novel is never neutral; it is a cartographic project that attempts to organize the chaos of the real world into a readable form that "enables readers to orientate themselves and the characters, events, settings, and ideas of the novel in the world" (Tally 153). In *If an Egyptian Cannot Speak English,* the diasporic Egyptian's experience in Egypt is mapped through her perspective of Egypt. Noor attempts to colonize

the boy from Shobrakheit's revolutionary trauma and impoverished, rural background for her own identity-building project. In seeking an "authentic" Egyptian experience, she creates a dilemma where the diaspora writer risks re-centering the Western experience in narratives that should belong to the postcolonial subject.

The author Noor Naga (who will henceforth be referred to as Naga to differentiate from her character Noor) was born in Philadelphia, raised in Dubai, studied in Toronto, and lived and taught in Cairo while writing this novel (Naga, *If An Egyptian* 203). Naga's position amongst cities and cultures employs what Walter Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh refer to as a "border thinking"—knowledge produced from the perspective of the diasporic subject who exists between worlds (134-136). Naga's own scholarly work on the twentieth-century Cairo novel provides insight into the understanding of the city as a liminal space where personal and political boundaries are inherently blurred ("Romance and Liminal Space" 131). By naming her protagonist after herself, Naga performs a decolonial unveiling, acknowledging that the "American girl" is an extension of her own Western-educated privilege, thereby complicating the text's narrative authority.

Reception of *If an Egyptian Cannot Speak English* has focused on its refusal to satisfy the Western reader's desire for a legible Orient, leaving the story uncomfortably ambiguous (Krstovic 11-16). Scholarship surrounding the novel situates it within postcolonial, socio-political, and experimental frameworks that interrogate identity, power, and representation in contemporary Cairo. Maha Elsaid argues that the novel's portrayal of the relationship between Noor and the boy from Shobrakheit serves to "reconstruct power in the chaos of Cairo," exposing class disparities that survived the 2011 revolution (65). Elsaid argues that the shifting power dynamics between the American woman and the boy from Shobrakheit reveal the novel's interrogation of both Western and Egyptian ideological assumptions. Through disparities in class, education, and cultural capital, the characters' interactions expose the underlying inequalities shaping their relationship. These interpersonal tensions mirror broader societal disillusionment

after the revolution, especially in the characters' conflicting interpretations of history and authority. Elsaid's reading emphasizes the novel's ability to reveal the complex intersections of identity and political upheaval.

Arkan Naser Hussain examines the novel's form through Lyotard's concept of the *petit récit*, the "little narrative" that privileges the local narrative over universalizing colonial structures. Hussain argues that the novel's alternating perspectives reflect the protagonists' fragmented identities and enact a critique of Western epistemologies that seek coherence and dominance (1). The shifting narrative voices foreground the importance of local experience and resist colonial hegemony by refusing to present a single authoritative version of events. According to Hussain, the structure itself becomes a postcolonial intervention that mirrors the instability and multiplicity of post-revolution Cairo (2). The structure as intentional distraction forces the reader to confront their epistemic dependency on Western academic frameworks to understand Egyptian reality (Mignolo and Walsh 210).

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said states that the Orient is a European invention, "since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes" (1). According to Said, the Orient is an othered imagination based on the Western experience and relationship to the East through colonial rule and representation. Noor's "return" to Egypt is a return to a false reality. She seeks a Cairo that only exists in her imagination where she can validate her own authenticity as the child of Egyptian immigrants in America. Said's concept of imaginative geography—the way a space is perceived through art or texts—is shown as the protagonist projects her psychological needs onto the boy from Shobrakheit, treating him as cultural currency. Mignolo and Walsh argue that even after physical colonization ends, *coloniality*, or the mindset and power structure of colonialism, remains (4). Coloniality in novels is visible in the centering of English as the medium through which the experience of subaltern is told. The question intrinsic to the title, *If an Egyptian Cannot Speak English,* addresses Mignolo and Walsh's theory head-on. Likewise, the structure of the novel and the revelation that the first two parts of the novel are Noor's memoir enact coloniality. If an Egyptian

lacks access to a voice on a global scale, i.e. cannot speak English, his existence is effectively erased from the global archive. At the end of the novel, the boy from Shobrakheit remains an unnamed person defined by his location. His perspective is only known to the reader through Noor's reflection, offering a blurred vision of Egypt and the subaltern's experience.

bell hooks describes the epistemic violence of the center in "Choosing the Margin as the Space of Radical Openness":

> [n]o need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still colonizer, the speaking subject and you are now at the center of my talk. (22)

The subaltern is silenced by exclusion from the center—the space of the colonizer's power. They do not have the access to speak on their own (Spivak 26). When being forced into the margins, the oppressed is only allowed into the center when it is useful for the oppressor. Although she has Egyptian parents, Noor occupies the center when she is in Egypt. Her wealth and privilege allow her to dictate the relationship between her and the boy from Shobrakheit and to control his narrative.

At the beginning of the novel when she is first entering Egypt, she notes her appearance and her bald head at odds with Egyptian culture: "If I was a white girl with a shaved head, they probably wouldn't have cared. But because I was an Egyptian girl with a shaved head, they wouldn't let me forget it" (Naga, *If An Egyptian* 4). In the United States as she and the other Egyptians board the plane, no one minds her appearance. But when the plane lands in Egypt, "[t]hey glared openly at me and muscled past in the aisle, suspicious all of a sudden" (4). As she gets her passport stamped, she stumbles over words in her poor Arabic and the officer calls her an American. As much as she wants to, she cannot refute due to her inability to speak Arabic, marking her as an outsider in Egypt. In the United States, she exists under white

supremacy, forced into the margin, but in Egypt, her appearance marks her as an American, changing her position in the social hierarchy. She does not have an Egyptian passport nor ID card; what makes her Egyptian in America does not make her Egyptian in Egypt. She uses the boy from Shobrakheit to gain social markers and "prove" that she is Egyptian not only in Egypt, but in the United States.

The language barrier between the boy from the Shobrakheit and Noor appears in the formatting of the first part of the novel, which features alternating chapters titled by questions between the two characters, written in distinct styles but without speaker markers. The boy from Shobrakheit's sections employ short sentences, mimicking the style of Arabic (Hussain 5). Noor's chapters are longer than the boy's in the beginning, narrating her journey to Cairo and struggles with adjusting to Egyptian life. The boy from Shobrakheit does not speak English and Noor only speaks very poor Arabic, and so the reader must learn the "language" of the novel to understand the story, just as the two characters learn each other's languages and the Cairo they each inhabit.

Layers of Cairo are built upon one another, formed by each person's experience in the city. Henri Lefebvre, in *The Production of Space*, proposes three elements to space: perceived space ("things in space"), conceived space ("abstraction and signs as such are…. truth"), and lived space ("space and things are reunited" in social reality) (218). Cairo's perceived space is the physical city, while Noor's conceived space is the city that she thinks she knows. The two clash in the lived space, the reality the boy from Shobrakheit inhabits, as seen through Noor's narrative. In the beginning of the novel, Noor inhabits the conceived space of the expat; she lives in neighborhoods like Zamalek, which historically are colonial sections that function as neighborhoods for Western NGOs and researchers (El Sawy). This is a sanitized space of Cairo, untouched by poverty.

However, as per Tally's theory of literary space, Naga creates a fourth Cairo. In part two, the format of the novel shifts and includes footnotes on Egyptian culture. Both the narrator and the author are communicating to the reader. Noor is communicating to her classmates, and Naga is creating spaces for the reader, depending on their background. Hussain notes

that the footnotes in the novel "are recounted to the girl by the boy and, thus, most of them, as Egyptian readers can easily spot, are blatantly inaccurate" (6). The footnotes create two layers of meaning. The Egyptian understands the joke and the unfamiliar reader falls into the trap laid by Naga. The first footnote included reads: "Despite their efforts to blend in, government informers in Egypt are always recognizable by their state-mandated painter's mustaches" (Naga 89). Footnotes mimicking academic annotation give context to unfamiliar culture; however, the inconsistency and errors in the footnotes show that the way Egypt is perceived is not always the truth. The literary space is broken by Naga as she reaches out of the novel to relay that the narrative of Egypt is determined by the writer and is prone to bias and inaccuracies. This move refutes the Orientalist fantasies of Egypt.

In her essay "Romance and Liminal Space in the Twentieth-Century Cairo Novel," Naga refers to the global image of Egypt as "often relegated to the category of the postcolonial, the Oriental, the marginal" and that it is positioned against Western narrative, instead of centered in its own right (131). In the novel, the boy from Shobrakheit's story is placed against that of Noor's and her story is formed through the inclusion of her perspective and understanding of his world.

In a section from Noor's point of view that begins, "Question: If you are competing to lose, what do you win if you win?," Noor describes the boy from Shobrakheit. (Naga, *If An Egyptian* 37). He tells her of the village of Shobrakheit and she describes his appearance:

> the hems of his pants were frayed, strings dangled from his vest like lines of saliva, yet he wore a perky bow tie [...] [he] wore black leather sandals with socks, but one of the soles was loose, flapping like a bottom lip when he walked.

Noor realizes Egypt through him, thinking,

> [m]ore than anything, what binds people here to one another here is the pointless struggle for quality of life. I'm learning slowly that having money and the option to leave frays any claim I have to this place.

This reflection illustrates that her relationship with the boy from Shobrakheit is a learning ground for her privilege that she never had to confront before this relationship.

But both characters use each other as tools for their desire. Noor notes, "The boy from Shobrakheit will die never having crossed a border." Noor is his connection to the world outside of Egypt and his only way to travel. She is America and an experience that he will never be afforded.

Shobrakheit is not merely the boy's hometown, but it is a lived space that stands in opposition to the conceived space of Cairo. The novel opens with a question from the boy from Shobrakheit: "Question: If you don't have anything nice to say, should your mother be punished?" (Naga, *If An Egyptian* 3), narrating the family's struggle with the description of his mother slicing a peach in four sections for dinner. To create a compelling backstory and propel the boy from the countryside and into Cairo, it is revealed in short sentences that the boy's grandmother shoves the peaches into her ears and then climbs into the stove to commit suicide. When Noor co-opts the boy from Shobrakheit's history for her memoir, she ignores the material reality of Shobrakheit, including its lack of infrastructure, the agrarian struggle, and the specific local histories of resistance. Instead, she "Orientalizes" the village, turning it into a myth of authentic Egypt as a form of geographic erasure. By the time the boy from Shobrakheit is in the neoliberal city of Cairo, he is a displaced person whose rural knowledge is useless, yet that same knowledge is what Noor seeks to extract and translate into her English-language memoir. In a way, he reaches America, but it is a version of himself that did not exist in his reality, as his story is only derived for consumption.

In rewriting the boy, Noor rewrites herself. The boy is relegated to the side of her Cairo self-discovery story. In the United States, Noor is in the margin, but the boy from Shobrakheit is placed below her in the cultural hierarchy as a commodity. Just as he is silent for the duration of the novel, only voiced through Noor, Noor is silenced in the memoir workshop. Her classmates use her story for their own gain—the pain of the Egyptians, mimicking the experience of the boy from Shobrakheit. This shows the power of colonization and coloniality in different contexts. In the workshop, Noor's classmate, Minnie, questions the accuracy of Noor's story, "Minnie: [...] Obviously, I'm not trying to tell you about

your own culture, but I googled a few of them and—" (Naga, *If An Egyptian* 164). The memoir scene is not a conversation between writers. It relegates Noor's story to the margins of her classmates' understanding of Egyptians.

Placing the story outside of the novel as an object shows how the postcolonial narrative is a publishing commodity. Authors and stories are seen. Readers come to the pages with their own ideas. Why does someone pick up a novel? The answer rests in the space that the book occupies. The novel's epigraph, a quote from an Instagram caption by Hana Gamal, an Egyptian photographer, begins this conversation of seeing and being seen: "I am not what you think I am. You are what you think I am" (Naga, *If An Egyptian* 1). The novel's cover features yellow capitalized letters of the title, the author's name in the same typeface in white beside the word "speak," over an orientalist painting of a young man. In the painting, the man's gaze is positioned towards the title, his eyes looking towards "speak." The cover engages the unwitting reader in complicity with the colonial narrative that bars the Egyptian from agency, denying them the right to consent even before the first page. Why do they pick up this novel? Is it the author's name? Is it the hope of an authentic story?

The background of the cover is an 1872 painting titled *Bishari, Bust of a Warrior* by Jean-Léon Gérôme, a French painter, sculptor, academic, and Orientalist (Jean-Léon Gérôme). The Bishari tribe is one of the groups indigenous to Northern Sudan and Southern Egypt. Gérôme's paintings captured his view of the East during his travels, but although he employed a realistic style, his paintings "were instead carefully crafted fantasies, where the boundary between reality and fiction was meticulously blurred" (Olsen and White). They contributed to a false, exoticized narrative of the East. With this painting placed as the cover, the Egyptian narrative is framed as a consumable product whose story is determined by the observers with power. It distorts the subaltern, and mimics Gérôme's gaze on one who cannot "speak English."

Naga uses English to enact the coloniality she critiques, showing how language is a border the boy from Shobrakheit cannot cross. As the boy cannot speak English, he is denied the right to narrate, and his story is domesticated to satisfy

Western tastes, as is Noor's in the workshop. The novel operates as a panopticon for the characters, as the watchful eye of the reader polices their stories. The counter-hegemonic struggle of the subaltern is shown through the colonizer's viewpoint in that the center dictates how the Egyptian will be presented, even if the Egyptian does speak English. Power and privilege shift depending upon space, but the subaltern remains lowest. This epistemic violence defines the postcolonial experience: stories are defined and made palatable by others. As this novel is a purchasable good, Naga is selling a "translated" version of the subaltern for a global market. Her ability to publish this novel and tell her perspective as an Egyptian relies upon the privilege that the subaltern cannot access. If an Egyptian cannot speak English, then only those who can speak English are able to tell their story. Power belongs to the speaker rather than the subject. This spacio-cultural distance cannot be closed by a book and can only be acknowledged as a site of ongoing struggle.

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