

The Myth of Modernism Revisited: Gertrude Stein as the Symbol of Modernism in Contemporary Fiction

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Abstract. Gertrude Stein (1874–1946) was one of the most important figures of Modernism. Her texts, as well as her personality, attracted the attention of her contemporaries and continue to inspire researchers and authors. The aim of the article is to outline the steps of revisiting the myth of Modernism (Gertrude Stein). This article focuses on two contemporary novels that discuss the life of this significant modernist author: Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt* (2003) and Hassan Najmi's *Gertrude* (2014). Both novels directly and indirectly relate to Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1932). The social context of the contemporary novels is based on the theme of the "otherness," a significant issue in the Stein-Truong-Najmi paradigm, which involves the readers in the game of allusions. Both contemporary authors pay tribute to Gertrude Stein, her literary salon and her "myth" by emphasizing the importance of Stein's influence on modernist culture. Literary, historical and social determinants that have been chosen for this comparative analysis provide the discussion points on the effect of modernism on contemporary fiction, which very often displays rather turbulent coexistence of different cultures and civilizations.

Keywords: modernism, contemporary fiction, transtextuality, modernist culture, Fact-Fiction paradigm

Introduction

With the development of postmodernism, the concept of intertextuality plays an important role in different spheres of art, especially in fiction when any text demonstrates, to a greater or lesser extent, the reoccurrence of earlier texts. The historical and social determinants of intertexts make contemporary writing the iteration of other texts, and also re-iteration or re-writing which foregrounds the trace of the various texts it both knowingly and unknowingly places and displaces. Contemporary fiction, no matter what label may be attached, often relates

to the modernist tradition, revisiting famous authors and their works. The aim of this article is to trace instances of the transtextual relationship found in three novels that represent different literary periods and cultures, American European, Asian American and Moroccan: Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1932), Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt* (2003) and Hassan Najmi's *Gertrude* (2014). Apart from the exploration of transtextual links, this article discusses the themes of the "otherness" and different types of exile – voluntary and forced.

The continuous influence that one of the major American modernists, Gertrude Stein, has had on the writers of different generations and nationalities demonstrates characteristic aspects of transtextuality. "Encounters" with Gertrude Stein and her works in contemporary fiction may appear as both entertaining and challenging, while close intertextual/transtextual links to Stein's life and texts provide the readers with additional insights into the Modernist era, its atmosphere and representatives. However, intertextuality refers to far more than the "influences" of writers on each other (Chandler 2003, 1). Since its first introduction in the late 1960s by Julia Kristeva, the term "intertextuality" has strengthened its position as a defining feature of postmodernity. Gérard Genette (1992 and 1997) proposed the term "transtextuality" as a more inclusive term than "intertextuality," listing the following five subtypes: *intertextuality* (quotation, plagiarism, allusion when citing another text is an explicit intertextual relation); *paratextuality* (the relation between a text and its "paratext" – that which surrounds the main body of the text, such as titles, headings, prefaces, epigraphs, dedications, acknowledgements, footnotes, illustrations, etc); *architextuality* (designation of a text as part of a genre or genres or framing by readers (in Chandler 2003, 8)), which, according to Rune Dalgaard, spans from critical texts (comments, reviews) (Dalgaard 2001, 6); *metatextuality* (explicit or implicit critical commentary of one text on another text); *hypotextuality* (Genette's term was "hypertextuality" (Chandler 2003, 8)) the relation between a text and a preceding "hypotext" – a text or genre on which it is based but which it transforms, modifies, elaborates or extends (including parody, spoof, sequel, translation). According to Genette (1997), the defining features of transtextuality might include the following: reflexivity (how reflexive or self-conscious the use of intertextuality seems to be); alteration; explicitness; scale of adoption; structural unboundedness (to what extent the text is presented or understood as part or tied to a larger structure). Considering the above-mentioned determinants, the term "transtextuality" has been chosen as the one that best discloses the intertextual relationships discussed in this article.

The essence of transtextuality lies in interpretative relations, explorative connections and configurative affects. Following Michael Worton and Judith Still, intertextuality presupposes that “a text [...] cannot exist as a hermetic or self-sufficient whole, and so does not function as a closed system” (Worton and Still 1990, 1). The concept covers all different forms of the relation of a given text to other texts, since no literary text is read in a cultural vacuum (Vitoux 1998, 105). If a literary text is characterized as belonging to a certain genre and may be further subdivided and classified, this can be used as a starting point for tracing transtextual relationships between the texts. Rune Dalgaard proposes the notion of “embedding,” which can deal with the overlapping categories as presented in Genette’s typology (Dalgaard 2001, 7). Analysing transtextual links requires not only knowledge of the texts, but very often factual information on the events and people described in the works of fiction.

Monique Truong (born in Saigon, 1968) is the Vietnamese American New York-based author of three award-winning novels: *The Book of Salt* (2003), *Bitter in the Mouth* (2010) and *The Sweetest Fruits* (2019). Her first novel *The Book of Salt* demonstrates transtextual links to Stein’s autobiographical novel *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1932) and focuses on different interpretations of the theme of exile and “otherness” during controversial periods of time. The novel takes the reader on a strange journey, from Indochina to Paris, as the fictional Vietnamese cook for Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas tells his own story, echoing the one as related by Gertrude Stein in her autobiographical novel. Both “autobiographies,” one an explicit one in the form of a novel, the other a covert one, written in the narrator’s voice of Alice B. Toklas, open up with the same structure: Stein’s novel is divided in the chapters, the structure and content of which is echoed in *The Book of Salt*: “Before I came to Paris,” “My arrival in Paris,” “Gertrude Stein in Paris, 1903–1907,” “Gertrude Stein before she came to Paris,” etc. The theme of arrival and departure is important in both novels, as it represents the concept of “otherness” – a significant element in both novels. Thus, the central character of *The Book of Salt*, the fictional Vietnamese cook, is an implicit someone from Stein’s novel.

The Book of Salt employs the postmodern characteristics of eclecticism and aleatory writing (Cuddon 1992, 734), fragmentation and prophetic pessimism, as suggested by Nicholas Zurbrugg (Zurbrugg 1993, 163). Although the novel is based on an uncertain event (hiring a cook), it is a perfect example of the re-iteration of true events in Gertrude Stein’s novel. Moreover, the

format, style and structure in Truong's novel imply a "true" sequel to its precursor, which likewise follows "the course of memory rather than chronology" (De Koven 1983, 125). Following Rune Dalgaard, it is possible to state that Truong's postmodern novel is "embedded" in the modernist one, written by Stein (Dalgaard 2001, 7).

Hassan Najmi (b. 1959), a well-known Moroccan author, published his first collection of poems in 1982. Since then, he has established himself as a poet. He worked for many years as arts editor of a newspaper, was President of the Moroccan Union of Writers from 1998 to 2005 and currently is director-general of the Book and Publications Department of Morocco's Ministry of Culture ("Hassan Najmi"). He has published collections of poems and essays. *Gertrude* (2014; original publication in Arabic in 2011) is his only novel in which Najmi revisits the Modernist era by reconstructing many episodes in Gertrude Stein's life. Because of strong transtextual links to Stein's biographies and her autobiographical novel, Michael Lackey ascribes Najmi's novel to biofiction (Lackey 2021, 385).

Three works of fiction, Truong's *The Book of Salt*, the English translation of Najmi's novel (translated from Arabic by Roger Allen) alongside Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, are the objects of this research. As Truong's and Najmi's novels strongly relate to Stein's life and personality, some biographical facts will be inevitably considered in this article.

Gertrude Stein – the Mother Figure of International Modernism

Gertrude Stein (1874–1946), a significant and shocking modernist figure in Paris during the first half of the twentieth century, is known for her strong influence on modernist literature and art. Moreover, in many of her works she steps across the boundaries of modernism and becomes an early postmodernist. An American, who lived most of her life in France, she took an active part in the modernist art movement. As soon as she settled in Paris, following her brother Leo's recommendations, Stein started collecting paintings of Cezanne, Renoir, Matisse, Picasso and other modernist painters.

The Stein apartment was a famous gathering place for avant-garde artists and writers from Europe and the United States of America. In her writing Stein often departed from conventional word order and coherence, repetition of many forms and nuances being her popular stylistic device (Žindžiuvienė

1997, 77). For her influence on the movement of Modernist Art, Gertrude Stein is often called the “Symbol of Modernism” or the so-called “Mother of Modernism” (Stendhal 1995, x). Stein’s writing and theories about literature liberated language from the nineteenth-century traditions, and moved literature from romanticism and naturalism to abstract styles (Stendhal 1995, ix). Her life-time companion was Alice B. Toklas, an American, who arrived in Paris in 1907. They started living together in Stein’s apartment at 27, rue de Fleurus in Paris in 1910 (Stendhal 1995, 58).

In 1932, Stein wrote the novel *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, which is, in fact, her own autobiography as if seen through the eyes of her friend and which can be dutifully renamed into “American in Paris.” The novel falls within the boundaries of an “autobiographical novel” for the precision with which it represents the time, place and people (Cuddon 1992, 68). However, both the chronology and the voice of Alice B. Toklas are manipulated in this autobiographical novel (Copeland 1975, 126). As Carolyn F. Copeland states, “the manipulation of time is, of course, related to the manipulation of the narrator” (*Ibid.*). Sorina Chiper observes that in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* the “hard core of concern” is “the imbedded theory of identity” (Chiper 2006, 9). In the mode of modernist painters, in this “self-laudatory” autobiography Gertrude Stein was actually creating a portrait of herself (*Ibid.*). This “portrait” is similar to the ones created by Truong and Najmi. Besides the issue of transtextuality that is significant in the discussion of Truong’s and Najmi’s novels about Stein, another theme stands out – namely, the theme of “otherness” or a feeling of being an outsider.

Gertrude Stein’s life is an example of a voluntary and a reversed type of exile – the early twentieth century in the United States of America is known to have been the period of intense immigration from Europe (Hodgson 2006, 34). Gertrude Stein, on the contrary, settled in Europe in 1903 and, although she had not lost her American identity, she considered herself to be more European than American both in everyday life and in her writing. In fact, she indulged in the idea of being characterized as different. However, the theme of “otherness” is strongly expressed in the fictional characters in Truong’s and Najmi’s novels, who are rather self-conscious of being different or are like outsiders in Gertrude Stein’s intricate environment. Both contemporary authors, Truong and Najmi, disclose Stein’s phenomenon, which characterizes the atmosphere of the Modernist era.

Echoes of Steinian Myth in Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt* and Hassan Najmi's *Gertrude*

Monique Truong's novel *The Book of Salt* has two narrative lines. In the first, Binh, a Vietnamese cook, talks about his life at 27, rue de Fleurus, Stein and Toklas's home in Paris, and the details of how he got there. In the second, Binh reaches back to his Vietnam days and recounts the reasons that made him leave for Paris. The novel opens in Paris in October of 1934. Binh has accompanied his employers, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, to the train station. His own destination is unclear: will he go with "the Steins" to America, stay in France, or return to his family in Vietnam? ("Interview with Monique Truong" 1). Before Binh's choice is revealed, he takes the readers back to his youth in the French-colonized Vietnam, his years as a sailor at sea, and his late-night wanderings in Paris.

Monique Truong seems to be looking for the answers to the particular question – "What led each of the 'outsiders' (Stein, Toklas and Binh) to live far from the land of their birth? What, if anything, could bring them back home again?" ("Interview with Monique Truong" 1-2). As Monique Truong explains, "the answers to these questions are found in Binh's memories, thoughts, observations, and possibly lies – all of which are continuously asserting and interrupting one another" (Ibid.). Binh's stories are told via his internal voice. Binh is shown as a man living in a foreign land, and working for employers whose languages are foreign to him. He struggles with their words, and they win the confrontation every time. Limited and silenced, Binh has only his memories and imagination to keep him company. Gertrude Stein was also stuck to her native language, English, and obstinately did not use French (although she could speak and read in French; she used French to communicate with her friend Picasso and other French artists and writers), because she said that "there is for [her] only one language and that is english [sic]" (Stein 1966, 77). This idea of retaining one's identity makes the characters of these two novels look similar: the Vietnamese cook cherishes his memories of the native country, Vietnam, while Stein enjoys her Sunday American rituals.

Monique Truong has stated that when she was in college, she bought a copy of *Alice B. Toklas Cook Book* because she was curious about certain recipes ("An Interview with Monique Truong" 1). In that book, which was rather a memoir than a cookbook, Toklas wrote about two Indochinese men who, actually, cooked for Toklas and Stein at 27, rue de Fleurus and at their summer house in Bilignin

(Ibid.). One of these cooks responded to an advertisement placed by Toklas in the newspaper that began "Two American ladies wish" This advertisement is included in Truong's novel: "Two American ladies wish to retain a cook – 27, rue de Fleurus. See the concierge" (Truong 2003, 11). In the novel, Binh responds to it and the Steins take him in; Binh is immediately called by Stein "Thin Binh" and becomes a permanent fixture at their place. The apartment at rue de Fleurus is called by Binh "a temple, not a home" (Truong 2003, 23), while in Stein's text (the plot commences in 1907) it is "the home of [...] of a tiny pavilion of two stories with four small rooms, a kitchen and bath, and a very large atelier adjoining" (Stein 1966, 10). As the cook watches the famous lesbian couple host tea parties and entertain the Parisian and foreign intellectuals – many rituals described in detail in Stein's novel – Binh narrates their everyday life. Truong explains the title of the novel as follows: "Salt – in food, sweat, tears, and the sea – is found throughout the novel" ("An Interview with Monique Truong" 2). The main character, the Vietnamese cook, discusses the meaning of salt: "The true taste of salt – the whole of the sea on the tip of the tongue, sorrow's sting, labor's smack" (Truong 2003, 212); "salt – what kind? Kitchen, sweat, tears, or the sea. Madame, they are not all the same. Their stings, their smarts, their strengths, the distinctions among them are fine" (Truong 2003, 260–1). As the author states, the title is also a nod toward the Biblical connotation of salt, in particular to the turning of Lot's wife into a pillar of salt for looking back at her home, to the city of Sodom (McFarlan 2003, 162, 257). That story, Truong explained, tells that the Catholic God, whom the cook is so wary of, disapproves not only of the activities of the Sodomites, but also of nostalgia. Binh is a practitioner of both. According to Hall, "for Binh, salt has always had many meanings, especially, the salt of the sea which represents his separation from home, his beloved mother and a culture where he was not an outsider" (Hall 2003, 1). Truong acknowledges that the novel was inspired by the departure, the loss of home, the act of refuge-seeking – all of these experienced by the author herself.

Binh's memories of his childhood in Vietnam slowly outline the reason for his forced exile. He is the last of four boys born in the family with an abusive father and a subservient mother. In fact, the father of his brothers is not his biological father. His father was most probably a teacher, a white man working at a school close to his mother's home. This issue complicates the understanding of his identity. Moreover, when he comes of age, Binh and his family discover his sexuality – he is gay. Thus, these circumstances force him out of home.

Contrary to Binh's unsettling experience of being an outcast, Stein does not assume the role of an exile. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, she appears to be completely and openly satisfied with her position of a voluntary exile, for she enjoys life in Paris and does not dream of living anywhere else, admiring her private life of "the other": in both novels, she indulges in a close relationship with Alice B. Toklas, entertains quests from all over the world, travels extensively within Europe, meets interesting people (writers, painters and journalists) – in other words, indulges in Parisian/European life. She seems to have dismissed any thoughts about being different or belonging to "the other."

As Hall observes, Truong's depiction of "Postwar Paris with the Mesdames and their salon at the center of artistic Paris is fascinating, and the inside look at the famous Stein-Toklas relationship is also a treat" (Hall 2003, 1). Binh observes Stein-Toklas relationship with fascination: "They both love GertrudeStein. Better, they are both in love with GertrudeStein. Miss Toklas fusses over her Lovey and her Lovey lets her. GertudeStein feeds on affection, and Miss Toklas ensures that she never hungers" (Truong 2003, 71; "GertrudeStein" as in the original). As Binh watches Stein and Toklas together, he possibly detects the irony of his situation.

Even more interesting is Binh's life as an outsider in Paris where his broken French is "the language that [he] dip[s] into like a dry inkwell ... that has made [him] take flight with weak wings and watched [him] plummet into silence" (Truong 2003, 9). There are no other Vietnamese in Binh's life, so his mother tongue is "trapped inside [his] mouth... and taken the pallor of the dying, the faded colors of the abandoned" (Truong 2003, 117). For all of his years in Paris, Binh wanders around trying to reconcile his past with his present. Although he has no fond memories of Vietnam, he is too aware of his social status and the colour of his skin in French society. Binh is shown as an outsider, a young gay man who "still clings to the hope that some day his scholar-prince will come" (Truong 2003, 80).

According to Homi K. Bhabha, "dislocation – psychic and social – speaks to the condition of the marginalized, the alienated, those who have to live under the surveillance of a sign of identity and fantasy that denies their difference" (Bhabha 2004, 63–4). Sometimes a range of culturally and racially marginalized groups readily assume the mask or the position of the minority, not to deny their diversity, but audaciously to announce the important artifice of cultural identity and its difference (Ibid.). Likewise, Binh takes up the role of the minority; however, Stein is the complete opposite of this notion: she enjoys being different and willingly accepts the role of the outsider.

Binh understands himself as being different from other people: he thinks his body marks him, announces his weakness, displays it as yellow skin (Truong 2003, 152). He is well aware of the fact that as soon as people look at him, the very sight of him “dictates to them the limited list of whom [he] could be. Foreigner, *asiatique*...Indochinese” (Truong 2003, 152). It is this explicit identity that makes Binh long for a busy Saigon marketplace: “There, I tell myself, I was just a man, anonymous, and, at a passing glance, a student, a gardener, a poet, a chef, a prince, a porter, a doctor, a scholar. But in Vietnam, I tell myself, I was above all just a man” (Truong 2003, 152). People whom he sees around him in Paris are “very French in its contempt and cruelty for those who are not” (Truong 2003, 69).

Although two different types of immigrants are described in the novel *The Book of Salt* (“The Steins” and Binh), both types of the immigrants retain their national character. In this way, Binh remains a Vietnamese and the Steins, as Binh says, after all these years spent in France, are still Americans. The Vietnamese cook feels an outcast (and behaves like one) in Paris; Stein rejects the role of an outcast in showing-off as being different but is often misunderstood by the Parisian society. Binh refers to himself and the Steins for whom he worked as travellers whose hearts have “wisely never left home” (Truong 2003, 247). However, Binh remains an immigrant, who always looks back at his past; while, Stein represents an immigrant group who, probably, never looks back and is happy with a newly acquired country.

Contrary to Stein and Toklas, who are not disturbed by the issue of personal identity, Binh spends every day questioning his identity. In fact, he admits that he has acquired another identity: “In this way, I am afraid, I am very French” (Truong 2003, 39). At the end, Binh remains a lonely figure in the crowd of people boarding a transatlantic boat: he has accompanied his employers, who are going to the United States, to the pier to see them off. During this final episode he is an extremely pathetic figure, with a nagging question on his mind: “What keeps you here?” (Truong 2003, 261).

In an analysis of the metaphysics of modernism and postmodernism, the existential issues related to displacement, exile and identity appear as the most urgent problems. Following Michael Bell, modernists were concerned with the question “of how to live within a new context of thought, or a new worldview” (Bell 1999, 10). Furthermore, literature of the twentieth century was influenced by such events as wars, migration and technological development; thus, many

modernist writers were almost obsessively concerned with history and with the issues of “what the characters felt as individuals and the category of the individual” in the changed world (Bell 1999, 13–5). As Randal Stevenson observes, the twentieth century was marked by migration and contacts between foreign and native elements of speech and culture (Stevenson 1996, 196). The feeling of exile was common to many writers and was a stimulus to write about the issues of identity in different cultures. However, the issues of culture migration and revision of “hierarchies of values” are significant features of postmodernism (Green 2005, 20). As Jeremy Green observes, while modernism tends to differentiate itself from mass or commercial culture, postmodernism is being shaped by various kinds of cultural experience (Green 2005, 21). In this aspect, the relationship between the two novels, modernist and postmodernist, demonstrates strong links, similarities and differences between these two epochs.

In a similar manner, in the novel *Gertrude* Hassan Najmi recreates episodes from Gertrude Stein’s life, relying on many of her works, especially Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. A multi-fold narrative tells the life story of Muhammad, a Moroccan, who had met Gertrude Stein during her stay in Tangier and who on her invitation later visits her in Paris and even lives in her apartment. As in the case of Truong’s fictional character, a Vietnamese cook, Najmi chooses Muhammad, a Moroccan, who is introduced first by a few “bald, dry, trivial, and cold sentences that Gertrude devoted to him in her autobiography written in the name of Alice Toklas” (Najmi 2014, 50). This is how Stein refers to her stay in Tangier that becomes the core of Najmi’s novel:

We had taken on a guide Mohammed and Mohammed had taken fancy to us. He became a pleasant companion rather than a guide and we used to take long walks together and he used to take us to see his cousins’ wonderfully clean arab middle-class homes and drink tea. We enjoyed it all. He also told us about politics. He had been educated in Moulay Hafid’s palace and he knew everything that was happening. He told us how much money Moulay Hafid would take to abdicate and just when he would be ready to do it. We liked these stories as we liked all Mohammed’s stories (Stein 1966, 177–8; spelling and absence of punctuation as in the original)

Although the spelling of the name in both texts is slightly different, it is not difficult to trace allusions to a person mentioned in Stein's autobiographical novel.

The narrator of Najmi's *Gertrude* is researching Muhammad's life (under the latter's request at the moment of dying) to tell the story of Muhammad and Gertrude:

I could almost smell Gertrude's breath, so close did I feel to her, to her origins, to her family history, to her spirit, her writings, her education, her friendships, and her travels. Muhammad from Tangier now became simply one point in a vast, surging sea of Gertrude. I started to understand what it was that had hit Muhammad that simple mountain boy who had touched an electric body and got his fingers burned. He had ventured into a very deep location and brought his eyes close to walls on fire with the revolutions of entirely new colorations. (Najmi 2014, 48)

Hassan Najmi, following the opinion of many readers and critics, seems to acknowledge the vastness of Gertrude Stein's world and her influence on many modernists, artists and writers. In addition, what Najmi seems to suggest is that Stein was equally influential in her relationships with everyone who surrounded her. This aspect is employed in Najmi's novel, especially in the fictional account of Stein and Muhammad's relationship, their correspondence, Stein's invitation to visit her in Paris and, finally, Muhammad's stay in Stein's apartment.

It is interesting to notice that Najmi recreates different episodes and people in Stein's apartment in 27, rue de Fleurus and echoes Stein's own account in her autobiographical novel or well-known biographies. As if following Stein's description of people (or "portraits of people"), Najmi creates an exact portrait of Gertrude Stein:

He took a look at the epic body, which demanded complete attention, at her almost circular face, and at the hair on her head, carefully arranged to look like a royal crown. Her little white dog, Basket, was playing around her legs. It was then that he noticed how clear her forehead was, although her eyelids looked a bit puffy, maybe from lack of sleep. (Najmi 2014, 66)

The above description can be considered as an allusion not only to self-description in Stein's novel, but also to Pablo Picasso's well-known portrait of Gertrude Stein, painted at the start of their relationship, in 1906. The latter allusion is emphasized even on the front cover of Najmi's novel, where a small reprint is included just above the title of the novel. In this way, transtextuality, a significant element in the novel, consists of two types – intertextuality and paratextuality. The famous portrait is mentioned several times in Najmi's novel: it symbolizes a special atmosphere of Gertrude Stein's salon – full of paintings by modernist artists and dominated by Picasso's portrait of Stein. In Najmi's novel, on Muhammad's arrival, while the room is being prepared by Alice (Stein's companion) and Hélène (a house maid), Muhammad and Gertrude sit "close by the fire and under the paintings by Cézanne, Renoir, and Matisse hanging on the wall next to Picasso's portrait of Gertrude" (Najmi 2014, 72).

Dutifully drawing on the research of many scholars, Najmi recreates the bustling atmosphere of Stein's salon: in the manner of Stein's style in her autobiographical novel, Najmi lists all the famous people who frequented the apartment, describes gatherings in detail, pays tribute to Stein's entertaining behaviour, analyses lively discussions that made many artists and writers search for new methods and strive for artistic mastery. Often the narrator of the novel indulges in detailed accounts of Stein's apartment either listing the major works of art ("twenty paintings, drawings and sculptures by Picasso alone, seven by Juan Gris, and two by Sir Francis Rose" (Najmi 2014, 89)) or simply summarizing those descriptions: "The walls were covered with paintings of all sizes, whether on the apartment side of the studio, which had been turned into a kind of exhibition hall" (Najmi 2014, 89). By doing this, Najmi demonstrates in-depth knowledge of the Modernist era as well as an understanding of Stein's sophisticated life style and writing and her influence on many famous people of the time.

On the other hand, intentional detailed accounts of Stein's soirées are contrasted with Muhammad's continuous feeling of loneliness or being out of place. Although in Najmi's novel Muhammad is accepted by Stein and Toklas and is included in all the activities of their household, "No one who frequented Gertrude's apartment could possibly tell whether Muhammad the Moroccan was a friend, servant, driver, or keeper of the studio" (Najmi 2014, 103), he understands that he needs to become "a different persona" (Najmi

2014, 79). His French education starts with Stein's discussions of art and literature; in addition, he starts reading the works of French authors and tries to better understand works by Modernist painters. If, at first, he likes an idea of acquiring "new tastes" (Najmi 2014, 79) and being included in Stein's circle ("Muhammad himself had by now become a distinct daily feature all along the rue de Fleurus and throughout the quarter" (Najmi 2014, 99)), later he understands that he "has become part of furniture" (Najmi 2014, 99). Gradually, Muhammad admits that "he turned into a malleable piece of dough, a blank sheet of paper" (Najmi 2014, 102). This continuous feeling of standing out from the "crowd" turns into a feeling of being an outsider: "It was as though he had lost his own spiritual compass; he was no longer rooted" (Najmi 2014, 105). Despite experiencing a different and rather overwhelming environment and novel relationships, Muhammad feels that, even though he had left Morocco, it is as though "Tangier kept following him to Paris" (Najmi 2014, 85): "He had told himself he was running away to escape from it, and yet now Tangier was invoking all its images to impinge upon his mind, all kinds of places, every single face" (Najmi 2014, 85). Muhammad seems to be lost in his search for identity, everyday noticing something that reminds him of Morocco.

The multi-fold narrative in Najmi's novel emphasizes Stein's multi-fold life style: different types of relationship, everyday activities, writing style and, certainly, many different people who frequented her salon. Although the suggested intimate relationship with Muhammad has been described in detail in the novel, at some points humoristic elements help to relate to Alice's views in Stein's autobiographical novel. Moreover, the implied intimate liaison between Stein and Muhammad emphasizes and, at the same time, questions the Fact-Fiction paradigm and invites the reader to look for the answers to the question "What if...?".

Najmi's novel is transtextually embedded not only in Stein's autobiographical novel, but also in her biographies (Stendhal, De Hoven and others) and in her other works: for example, the mention of her first novel *Three Lives*, which is referred to in the title of Chapter 10 in Najmi's novel, contains a strong reference to an implied meaning of the French idiom "ménage à trois." In addition, close references to works of art, fiction and poetry, create an exceptional transtextual entity which helps the reader to "relive" or "re-experience" the Modernist era anew. The latter aspect is the fundamental characteristics of Najmi's novel, while the issue of the "Other," employed in the novel, helps to set out distinct features of the Modernist period and its representatives.

Conclusion

Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Monique Truong's novel *The Book of Salt* and Hassan Najmi's novel *Gertrude* can be considered captivating examples of transtextual relationship between modernity and postmodernity and provide different types of the narratives about immigrants and different treatment of exile, voluntary and forced, questioning the reasons for the person's displacement and its effect on the person's identity. However, the issue of life in exile, both physical and emotional, helps to better illuminate the Modernist environment presided over by Gertrude Stein. For Monique Truong it is emotional exile that has a more far-reaching impact on a person's life, as it implies different possibilities of understanding oneself. In a similar manner, Hassan Najmi speaks of the main character's estrangement and the feelings of being an outsider in the very centre of the Modernistic bastion.

Contrasting different types of life in exile, Truong and Najmi analyse human identity and question the self-concept. In these contemporary novels, Gertrude Stein, however, functions as an image of a voluntary exile, who focuses on its positive rather than negative aspects. Having chosen Paris during the Modernist era for the setting of the novels both contemporary authors created similar and, at the same time, different spaces for describing different forms of exile. Implicit and explicit parallels found in Truong's and Najmi's novels and Gertrude Stein's novel help the reader to consider the global aspects of the search for identity. In addition, certain elements and forms of transtextuality present in contemporary novels disclose an engaging turn to Modernism, inviting the readers to relive this exceptional period of the twentieth century. It is possible to conclude that both contemporary authors, Monique Truong and Hassan Najmi, build intentional transtextual links to the Modernist era to confirm its fundamental relationship to the urgent issues of today.

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