

Re-Writing History and Exorcizing Haunted Selves in the works

of Radwa Ashour

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Abstract: The present paper examines Radwa Ashour's life writings and attempts to exhume some of the never finalizable traces the texts unfold. Through her vehement endeavour to rewrite herstory, the macro and micro levels of history intertwine bringing to the fore an interminable chain of seemingly disconnected temporo-spatial allocations of events where personal, national, and continental dimensions are neatly interwoven. Through a spectral reading to Ashour's life writings, the concept of trace is reconnoitred where selves are haunted by other selves and texts by others giving some line of direction to reading Ashour as a creative writer, a critic and a relentless activist.

Keywords: Radwa Ashour, life writing, History, Spectral Reading.

المخلص:

تتناول هذه الدراسة كتابات حياة رضوى عاشور إذ تسعى لاستتطاق بعض الآثار والاطياف اللامنتهية بطبيعتها . من خلال سعي الكاتبة الحثيث لإعادة كتابة الذات، تتشابك المستويات الكلية والجزئية للتاريخ لتبرز سلسلة من الإحداثيات الزمنية المكانية للأحداث التي تبدو منفصلة في حين تتشابك الأبعاد الشخصية والوطنية والقارية بدقة. من خلال قراءة طيفية لكتابات حياة عاشور، يتم استطلاع مفهوم الاثر او الطيف حيث تطارد الذات ذوات اخرى والنصوص مسكونة بأطياف نصية اخرى مانحة مصفوفة لقراءة عاشور ككاتبة مبدعة وناقدة متمرسة وناشطة شرسة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: رضوى عاشور, كتابة الذات, التاريخ, الكتابة الطيفية

1- Introduction:

This article is a spectral reading of Ashour's life writings attempting at sketching out the itineraries hinted, alluded, or bluntly expressed in the collection of the life writings Ashour engulfed her critical, creative and activist project with. Reading the life writings of Ashour, that is the writings that textualize the self, in this fashion, one is led to assemble the puzzle pieces that would constitute a matrix of the ever-volatile picture of the fragmented self or rather the haunted self (ves). Through her textualization of the self we are granted a tricky road map or a coded manual to reading not only her life writings as a mere idiosyncratic personal account but rather to better contextualise the stations of her life within the bigger framework of history from the perspective of an Egyptian Muslim third world woman.

It is worth mentioning that the spectrality in her texts does not take the conceptual and often symbolic connotations only, the literal presence of the ghost, nevertheless, is a recurrent apparition throughout.

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The concept of the ghost, spectre or trace postulated by Jacque Derrida can be described as a deconstructive figure to notions such as the coherent and self-sufficient subjectivity, and that we are but a reservoir of spectres that signifies the openness of the text to other texts or to the 'Other' being marginalised, silenced or having a lesser vantage point.

I argue that conjuring up the ghosts that haunt Ashour we are led to track down a ventriloquizing process resonant throughout her texts ranging from life writings, novel writings, and critical writings creating, thereby, a germane matrix. Her familial background, for instance, the early life formation of hers constituted an incubating milieu for the later choices and itineraries be them personal inclinations, political/ideological affiliations or literary choices she undertook which are fraught or rather haunted by ghosts. Ashour, thus, "... reads, acts, writes with ... her ghosts, even when one goes after the ghosts of the other" (Derrida, 1994, p. 139).

This article aims at answering the following: in what way conjuring the specters that haunt Ashour's life writing can forward a germane matrix that (con)textualize Ashour as an author, critic, and relentless activist? How does life writing as a genre help map out the project of Ashour?

2- Spectral Reading, (Con) Textualizing the Self: A Theoretical Debate:

Derrida's *Spectres of Marx* is a rereading and a reappropriation of Marx's inheritance; the inheritance owes a literal connotation of a return from somebody who died or disappeared (Macherey, 2008, p.17). The very grammatical formula of the book's title *spectres of Marx* fuses both subjective and objective of the genitive case: the spectre comes pluralised to imply that it is not only the spectre of Marx which is haunting us, or the capitalist world in a more relevant context, but even the spectres that haunted Marx are further evoked. Spectres, like in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, roam in a purgatory-like realm where even the very spectres are further haunted by other spectres forming an endless chain of haunting. For Derrida Hauntology is oxymoronically 'the science of ghosts' or 'spirits'.

It is worth noting that inheritance is not to be bequeathed in its raw state as a final product but rather it is passed on through a process of re-appropriation. In order to track down the spirit of Marx, Pierre Macherey argues, one is not to reiterate its formula in a machine-like fashion as if it were over and done with, but rather to reiterate dynamically its significance which is in turn never finalizable. This act is carried out through a process of interpretations, which conjure up or in other words exorcise the ever-generatable living parts of the spirits. Spectrality demystifies the established 'certainties', and reorients the focus into the sites of crossings, divergences, convergences, and borrowings. The fixed temporal-spatial coordinates are yet to be interrogated giving room for potential traces of Other beings, times, and spaces creating thereby an ever volatile matrix of individuals, communities, cultures, ... etc. Hauntology extrapolates the idea of texts' interconnectedness, recognition of 'Other' identities and the presence of their haunting absence.

Through his 'hyper critique' or rather deconstruction, Derrida unearths the endless chain of ghosts in that 'already there are too many' (1994, p 138). and the emergence of which is to debunk already demarcated dichotomies: Spectrality, then, transcends such dualities such as objects and subjects of knowledge "the sharp distinction between the real and the unreal, the actual and the inactual, the living and the non-living, being and non-being" (1994, p. 11).

Textualizing the self poses fundamental questions as to the very validity of such an endeavour. Since textualizing is via language, the nature of language as being a sign system in which signifiers and signifieds are correlatives remains a problematic. Even though the representational nature of language exists without the actual thing to which it signifies, the luring illusion of referentiality holds strong and all natural as might be reckoned as the prime nature of language as a human system of communication. The immediate unavailability of its referent renders it liable to mendacity; life writings make no exception for that matter for it is but the work of subjectivity in its conditioned spatial and temporal coordinates.

The reading practise of such a genre is highly complicated since the author is an imposing ghostly figure throughout the text and around which questions such as truth and accuracy, memory and history, objective and subjective truth revolve (Spicer, 2005, p. 2). The tension is made more conspicuous in the official academic settings in literature departments in the 1970's during which New Criticism and Deconstruction reached their momentum; the authorial intention was debunked and the blunt Roland Barthes's statement "the Death of the Author" was preached for fervently. Autobiography studies invested tenaciously in the heated theoretical debate.

Theorists such as Paul de Man and James Olney forwarded two different and even polarised stances, and if juxtaposed, informed insights are to be constituted. Paul de Man reckons language representational faculty as an impossibility and that reality could never be represented "accurately"; he goes too far to question even the very theoretical possibility and validity of the genre altogether. Olney's stance asserts that the endeavour of subjective disclosures is made possible through autobiography despite the translucidity of language- "The unique psychic configuration" is vehicled through textualising the self of the author. Olney considers autobiography as the "fascination with the self and its profound, its endless mysteries and, accompanying that fascination, an anxiety about the self, and anxiety about the dimness and vulnerability of that entity that no one has ever seen or touched or tasted" (Olney, 2014, p. 23).

Paul de Man complicates the matter when questioning the very premises of the representational faculty of language and more particularly autobiography as a genre " does the referent determine the figure, or is it the other way around: is the illusion of reference not a correlation of the structure of the figure, that is to say no longer clearly and simply a referent at all but something more akin to a fiction which then , however, in its own turn , acquires a degree of referential productivity?" (Paul de Man, 1979, p. 69).

The vexing nature of the referent/figure relationship is further accentuated by De Man in that the reversible causality of which is/causes which is to puzzle the generic *raison d'être*: can the author be an extratextual entity or, on the contrary, the very centre around which revolves all such scepticism? De man seems to doom such attempts to absolute failure. Furthermore, Philippe Lejeune expressed his severe dubiousness even further:

We indeed know all this (that one is fooled if one believes "in the transparency of language, and in the existence of a complete subject who expresses Himself through it ", etc); we are not so dumb, but, once this precaution has been taken, we go on as if we did not know it. Telling the truth about the self, constituting as a complete subject- it is a fantasy. In spite of the fact that autobiography is impossible, this in no way prevents it from existing. Perhaps, in describing it, I in turn took my desire for reality; but what I had wanted to do, was describe this desire in its reality; but what had wanted to do, was describe this desire in its reality, a reality shared a great number of authors and readers (Lejeune, pp. 131-32).

The im/possibility of a world that exists beyond language- often held by poststructuralists- is accentuated by the genre that by its very nomenclature yields itself to truth, accuracy and genuine referentiality. Readers with their underlying degrees of engagement with the process of reading such texts, thus, are left to be bewildered as to the nature of the text they are reading. For Lejeune, what hold a central attention vis a vis the relationship between (presence of) the author, reader and the text if anything at all is but a mere fantasy. The fantasy Lejeune refers to is not about the unconscious working of the mind where unintelligible forces are the very site of desire; rather, is a conscious type of desire where a recognition of the belief in the impossible coexist with limitations of attaining reality. For Lejeune, however, the seeming

overlap between the name of the entity of 'author' and the main character around which the whole experience revolves around is what bestows upon such texts the label autobiography.

In "The Death of the Author" Roland Barthes, too, asserts that nothing can guarantee the truthfulness of a text, nor would anything stand behind the label "author." For Lejeune, thus, it is not the figure of the author per se that would retain the status of the real, what does, instead, is the desire for the self in its completeness, language in its transparency, and the figure of the author as an undeniable imposing figure. And if the author is to fade away, the fantasy would not; thus, autobiography abjures and simultaneously avows the presence of the author as a textualised subjectivity.

Jakki Spicer in her essay 'The Author Is Dead, Long Live the Author: Autobiography and the Fantasy of the Individual' made a pertinent analogy to the cut drawn between autobiography/fiction and narrative in book form/storytelling proposed by Walter Benjamin. (2005, p.393). The high status the storyteller used to enjoy in the agrarian society was to be relegated and doomed to insuetude after the introduction of the book industry in the modern era. The book technology, then, is both the psychological and physical divide between the novel and story.

Many autobiographies aim to connect readers with authors; such mode of writing provides the reader a sense of intimacy and access to the inner truths of authors, as if the reader were getting to know the author on a personal level. In this sense, the personal narrative is a mirror for the reader to look at herself in the other—to consider herself as the author of her own unique document—but it cannot satisfy that need since it merely returns readers to the same impossible procedure of trying to communicate their own distinct individuality.

3- Haunting History and Haunted Selves: Egypt/Palestine Historical Mishaps and Personal Predicaments Overlapped:

In her non-linear semi- autobiographical novel *Spectres* as qualified by the writer herself (Ashour, 2000, p. 91). The dichotomy of fiction/fact is extrapolated through the juxtaposition of life writing as a personal history and the macro-history recorded by mainstream historians. She noted that:

In 1980 I embarked upon an autobiographical project. I wrote pages on my life's experiences in the years between 1946 (the year when I was born) and 1956. I discovered that the threads which made up the consciousness of a ten-year-old girl, and those which wove the history of that period, were tighter and more closely interwoven than that which I was capable of writing on. I found myself stumbling when writing about the relationship between the personal and the general which were interlocked to a degree that made it difficult to distinguish one from the other. (Ashour, 2000, p. 91).

In *Spectres* (2010), the ghost motif manifests not only metaphysically or rather metaphorically but is physically sensed by the woman introduced in the first chapter. Shagar, the twenty-five-year-old woman, is a widow, we are made to understand, and she constantly hears the voice of her husband and her two brothers, who died while digging the Suez Canal in the mid-nineteenth century (2010, p.7). The ghost of a 'slain girl' (2010, p.6), Shagar's daughter whom she beats and found stretched motionless on the ground, roams erratically. The ghost daughter remains with Shagar until her death. Ashour, in a metafictional exclamatory question, poses 'Why Shagar?' (2010, p. 10). The divergent intrusion of fictional Shagar into Ashour's attempt at textualizing herself would converge later with the intrusion of another Shagar whose great-great-grandmother is the old rural Shagar, and who happened to be born on the very date Ashour was born. "What happened? Why did I leap so suddenly from Shagar the child to middle-aged Shagar?" (2010, p.16). The imposing characters, phantoms so to speak, seem to irritate Ashour and made her feel the urge to erase whatever she had started to write, "Matters could come to a decision to erase what I've written, and begin instead by setting down my own story directly" (2010, p. 17). Once a character is inscribed, however, the attempt

at undoing it is doomed to failure. The character's ghost is, thus, to haunt persistently throughout leaving the readers to re-examine the nature of question asked by Ashour as to 'why Shagar?' the question, if properly contextualised within Ashour's life writings, would sound more like a rhetoric question that paves the way to a more fluid process of writing.

The schoolgirl Shagar's fascination with history started when a new teacher of history, professor Kamal Ramzi, was introduced to teach her in a radically revolutionary pedagogy. Instead of lecturing by stating events bluntly, as might be expected from a history class, he encourages the students to reexamine already established 'truths', such as what history is, and the students would present their own understating and illustrative examples after scrutinizing search at home, so the class would become a heated ring for debate. After growing a zealous interest in ancient Pharaonic Egypt history, she turned her focus to the history of a then contemporary Egypt and Palestine. 'The Massacre at Deir Yassine' was the topic Shagar wanted to work on in her PhD thesis; yet, it was declined as "not a topic for a history research paper", but "a topic for a newspaper article or a political analysis" (2010, p. 62). Instead, the board accepted a topic related to the digging of the Suez Canal as a subject worthy of historical research. Her interest did not vanish completely as she writes a book about the massacre at Deir Yassine later when she became a teacher of history at the university entitled *Atyaf, Specters* in English which coincides with the title of Ashour's book. The book was a counter-discourse to the pro-Zionist version of history writing. In a postmodernist fashion, the book followed a different methodology of how history books were supposed to be written; Shagar deconstructed 'History' as a normative 'truthful' explanation of past events through incorporating eyewitnesses' stories. Reconstructing the villagers' stories is to make up an utterly different version of the story propagated by mainstream historians. The picture drawn by such historians reflects the submissiveness of the villagers towards the attack, a thing that was debunked by Shagar when historicising their unyielding resistance. A flagrant parallel of the villagers' resistance and dislodgment is to manifest between what Shagar endeavoured to render visible and the experience of Radwa and her husband, the renowned Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti, from 1970 to 1990s.

It is worth noting that Shagar's interest in history can be viewed as a psychological projection of Ashour's fervent inclination of pursuing a career in history. From the haunting past of Pharaonic Egypt, Shagar can be seen as an imposing specter that haunts Ashour. In *Specters*, the notion of Ka is introduced as 'the creative energy which accompanies a person from the moment of his or her birth to the afterlife in ancient Egyptian myth'. Shagar, the intruding fictional character, is considered as Ashour's Ka; the recurring metafictional questionings of its *raison d'être* is process of exorcism Ashour performs to conjure up her double, so to speak. In her critical essay (2000) 'Eyewitness, Scribe and Story Teller', which entails an autobiographical self-critique tone, Ashour reiterates the process of conjuring up: 'To challenge the dominant discourse (a challenge, in my case, mounted from the triple periphery of nation, class and gender): to attempt to give history visibility and coherence, to conjure up unaccounted for, marginalized and silenced areas of the past and the present, this has been my endeavour.' To use Spivak's term the subaltern is endowed with a mission when articulating his/her art, an art that is any thing but for its own sake.

The debunking gesture is a tenacious process of conjuring up, such a process if ever to occur, the subaltern is not to address personal spectres only, national, and even across continents ones should be simultaneously targeted. The mission is so intricate and fraught with multiple hegemonic discourses; Ashour indicates that 'The material that I was dealing with was not just personal experience, but also the history of the nation, and I stopped, feeling ill-equipped and fearful'.

4- Granada Haunts Differently: To Each His/Her Granada

An insisting question seems to preoccupy and even disturb Ashour when she intended to write a novel about Granada: What is Granada for Ashour? She draws a strong parallel with Louis Aragon, the French poet, in the *Le Fou D'Elsa* wherein Aragon, in a metaphorical epiphany, states 'to each his Granada'. The inheritance of such a past carries with it a plethora of spectres that manifest differently for each one. Aragon, Ashour quotes, emphasised the status of history in one's life: "It is history. It has always to do with history," (2000, p. 91). The dynamics of history can be considered as both a communal and a personal inheritance; an inheritance that is endlessly omnipresent as a background canvas for discursive narratives, in other words a palimpsest. Pierre Macherey coheres with what Derrida forwards as to the dynamics and the nature of inheritance he states that:

In fact one does not inherit only from the past of the past and it must even be said that, from that which is dead once and for all and cannot return, there can be no inheritance. Rather, one inherits from that which, in the past, remains yet to come, by taking part in a present which is not only present in the fleeting sense of actuality, but which undertakes to reestablish a dynamic connection between past and future (2008, p.19).

Ashour, however, acclaims the bad reputation historical novels enjoys, a thing that does not undermine the importance of history in general and more particularly for Arab writers, let alone women writers. Historical novels are ill-reputed for pursuing a line of propaganda that would render such attempt to mediocrity. Ashour, nevertheless, as writer/critic, expressed her motivation behind investing in Grenada. Far from romanticising Muslim Andalusia, the past then is not to substitute or an allegory for the present; instead, it delineates the spectres that haunt our present, subsequently our future. Ashour self-consciously acclaims:

To me Granada was the Granada of the Moriscos, defeated men and women whose resistance was doomed to failure. It was a correlative of my experience of the bombing of Baghdad, a bombing which brought with it the 1967 bombing of Sinai, the 1982 bombing of Beirut, and the persistent bombing of Southern Lebanon (2000, p. 91).

Ashour opens Grenada describing the downfall of Muslim Spain, rather than depicting its full grandeur and wealth, which could be measured by its major loss. The story, nevertheless, spends very little time delving into what was lost. Thus, Ashour aims to remove the reader's preconceptions of Andalusia, which are made up of disasters and defeats for Muslims, Ashour refers to them, in the text, as Moriscos. Granada opens with three incidents, which the community perceives as an omen for misfortune. First, an unclothed ghostly-like maiden passes by Abu Ja'far's workshop, he offers his cloak to cover her body before she disappears. The next day, everyone in town talks about Musa bin Abi al-Ghassan's death, who was considered as a defiant because he did not accept the Castilians' treaty to seize Granada.

Musa's tragic death leaves the whole community fearful and anxious about what is to come for them. Shortly afterwards, a dead body of a strange, beautiful lady appears floating on the river. In a total despair and confusion, the community perceive these incidents as a bad omen, especially Abu Ja'far who thinks that the end of his community is very soon (2003, p. 20). This chapter concludes with a last warning to the Muslim community in Granada from the Catholic Monarchs of Spain (Queen Isabella of Castile and king Ferdinand II of Aragon) whose ultimatum was clear, whether a complete surrender and submission (including converting to Christianity) or exile. This ultimatum has aggravated the already prevailing sense of despair amongst Muslims in Granada.

Radwa Ashour begins her novel Granada with an imagery that summarises the whole text, a naked woman roaming in and around Granada. From a historiographic point of view, this nude woman symbolises the beginning of the Muslims' downfall in Granada, because the majority of the Moriscos women follow the teachings of Islam which tell them to cover themselves. Therefore, the Muslim community in Granada, especially in Albacín, consider the

figure of the naked woman as a pure embodiment of a forthcoming ruin and loss to their conserved Muslim community.

The Andalusians believed in maintaining a Muslim society that is out of any impurities in their region. This view, nevertheless, gradually started to fade before it completely vanished when the treaty was officially signed to indicate a shift of power from Muslims to Christians. This event, eventually, results in the expulsion of Muslims from the region towards an unknown future.

Ashour immediately presents Granada without introducing a narrative voice, creating a setting, or proving an ideological perspective through which the events that follow must be understood. In these respects, Granada departs from the typical realist form which earlier works in the genre follow, although it is widely considered as a historical novel. In addition, Granada deliberately avoids the geographic and ethnographic descriptions which are essential to novels of self-development, most notably the *bildungsroman*; these novels often begin by describing a condition, whether of a character's social or internal standing, which then experiences a metamorphosis throughout the narrative. On the other hand, in Ashour's piece of work the point of crisis happens immediately, depriving readers from the chance to familiarise themselves with an event that would be agitated later. Ashour refuses to create the idyllic world foreshadowed by the novel's opening events. And, by encasing the whole work in the extraordinary landscape of approaching disaster, Ashour raises concerns about the ability to change one's mind under difficult circumstances. Ashour deconstructs the desire for an allegedly flawless society in which no self-development is required.

She also claims that the Castilian invasion of Granadan society halts the potential of self-transformation through time. Her disregard for a chronotope at the opening of the novel prevents her work from partaking in the building of a national imagination, which is typical in both Arabic and Western historical novels. While Jurji Zaydan, the most well-known author writing historical novels in Arabic during the twentieth century, disagrees and believes that writing about history in novels, with a creative touch of literature, is the finest approach to encourage people to learn more about history and to seek its knowledge, implying a standpoint of the historical fiction as a medium of national development by an assemblage of historically oriented readers. Whereas Ashour depicts an apparent lack at the spot where the foundations of a nation are supposed to be.

Third, the unpleasant and frightening landscape Ashour creates from the start of the novel, and which spreads through gossips. These gossips demonstrate the absence of a credible narrative about the accumulation of events to the Moriscos in Granada: The existence of the Spanish is perceived as indiscriminate, nonverbal brutality, and the leadership of the Arabs is too scattered to offer insight and direction. The absence of the latter, however, increases a lot of speculation about the already existing displacement and reinforces it. However, rumours also serve to bring the Moriscos together through an auditory process rather than visual mode of communication, one that is rhizomatic which connects the community randomly rather than serial or synchronous, in other words, nonlinear networking. Rumours provide a means for persecuted and unprivileged societies to maintain a relatively small communal environment and shared identity. In Albacín, although, people are aware of the forthcoming jeopardy which was clear in the treaty discussed between the Muslim commanders of the region and the Spanish representatives, they were utterly impotent to respond adequately at this particular juncture.

The spread of rumours amongst the community empowers them to mark and uphold their communal life and shared beliefs through their perception to these incidents. The misfortune of the Moriscos and the foreboding tone of the novel provide an understanding of the current political changes, wherein reality entrenched over the course of more than eight hundred years has no influence and becomes a simple historical event.

Rumours about foreboding events could provide an insight on any current situation and make people aware of the upcoming danger. Thus, they will be ready and prepared to abate such risks beforehand. In Granada the Castilians are portrayed as violent oppressors who use

their powers in order to displace Muslims from Andalusia. They are depicted in such way merely because of their greed to seize Granada using force and brutality against unarmed Muslim characters in the novel, for instance the execution of Musa bin Abi al-Ghassan because he refused the proposed treaty by the Spanish authorities.

The Castilian aggression against Muslims starts immediately with the opening of the novel by capturing the castle of Alhambra, which is an Islamic landmark in Andalusia, they also urged Muslims to convert to Christianity clearly and openly in front of the community, furthermore, they seized their books and burned them in open spaces which saddened Abu Ja'af immensely, especially because of his passion for books and his profession as a bookbinder. In addition, in the neighbouring city of Malaga, the Spanish imposed a costly tax to be paid only by Muslim individuals, otherwise they would be sold as slaves; they also sealed every single Hammam (steam bath) owned by Muslims in Andalusia. Additionally, the Castilians banned Muslims from calling to prayers (Adhan) and made it illegal, they also banned Islamic clothing such as hijab (veil worn by Muslim women to cover their heads) adding to that if anyone caught speaking Arabic in public, or even secretly, would be severely punished because it is illegal (Ashour, 2003, pp. 21, 46–47, 87, 88, 105, 122, 166).

Notwithstanding these accumulated bombshells, Abu Ja'far has managed to conceal his rich and fruitful collected series of books which he piled up over the years as an owner of a local bookstore and as a bookbinder. This collection has been passed from a generation to another: first from the collector himself, Abu Ja'far, to Salima, his granddaughter, who enriched this collection with plenty of medical books and journals following her studies and work in the medical field, before she passes them to Maryama, who later passes them to Ali.

This book collection is not only a set of manuscripts but rather a glimpse of hope, despite being very scarce, to Abu Ja'far, his family, and to the whole Muslim community in general, due to its value and importance, because it holds a huge number of manuscripts that mark, explain, and preserve their history, heritage, and knowledge concerning various topics such as Islam, science, Andalusia and even their community in Albacín forming an encyclopaedia that serves the community.

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How to cite this article by the APA style:

Mustapha AISSAOUI, Fatiha KAID BERRAHAL (2022). **Re-Writing History and Exorcizing Haunted Selves in the works of Radwa Ashour**. *Social Science DevelopmentStudies*. 15 (01). Algeria: Djelfa University. 31-39.