

Tormented Selves in *Three Contemporary Egyptian Novels*

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The works included in *Three Contemporary Egyptian Novels*¹, though strikingly dissimilar, share certain tragic elements in their delineation of the central characters. While evoking the Egyptian ethos vividly, they focus preeminently on the bedlam of thoughts and feelings in the inner world of the individual. Through disparate techniques, which range from the conventional to the modernist, they explore the tormented souls of their protagonists in their agonizing struggle with despair in the face of inexorable social, political, and emotional forces beyond their control. The three novelists accentuate man's predicament in his futile combat with actively malign powers, which are hostile, ruthless, and capricious. The essence of this plight, they seem to suggest, lies in the notion that man is lifted up only to be dashed down, so that his self-made threads of aspiration only serve to entangle him in the recognition of his utter helplessness.

Sa'd al-Khâdim's avant-garde work, *From Travels of the Egyptian Odysseus* (1978), reflects the spirit of adventurous experiments which permeates his earlier novels, *Wings of Lead* (1972) and *Experiences of One Night* (1975).² He plays brilliant variations on devices of the interior monologue and flux of consciousness in order to record the resonant and subtle vibrations of human experience. The central character in *Odysseus*, who appears to suffer from paranoia and schizophrenia, reveals the total isolation of the individual in an alien and hostile world. Confined to bed in a Philadelphia hospital, he thinks aloud and addresses himself constantly, recording the atoms falling upon his mind at a heightened moment of crisis, which serves to expose his prejudices and frustrations, hopes and fears, outcries and mutterings. The novel is cast in the form of a long soliloquy without any formal divisions, tracing the protagonist's life and relationships from schooldays to his middle-age dilemma. The inward drama of agony and turmoil involves a process of self-revelation, conveying his distorted views of events, his excuses for conduct, his account of human contacts and their impact upon him.

This technique leads inevitably to strong emphasis on the essential loneliness of the pivotal character, who seems keenly aware of his isolation: "Here you are alone again. You were always alone. You will stay alone for ever" (p. 66). His unique and isolated self is reminiscent of the "Naipaulian little man," striving for relief and release. It is clear that the public gestures imposed upon him by alien environments in Egypt, Germany, Canada, and the United States never correspond to his real inward needs. These conventional and mechanical gestures inflict a crude standardization on the infinite complexity of his private world, so that he is condemned to live in the prison of his own incommunicable consciousness. If he tries to give out signs of the turmoil of his real self, these signs are bound to be misunderstood by those around him due to misconceptions and preconceptions, racial and cultural prejudices, as well as emotional and psychological barriers, which

¹*Three Contemporary Egyptian Novels*, translated and edited by Saad El-Gabalawy (Fredericton: York Press, 1979). All citations refer to this edition. Page numbers are inserted parenthetically.

²Al-Khadim's latest novel, *Ulysses's Hallucinations, Or the Like* (1985) will be released early in 1986.

hinder true human contact. With remarkable insight and sophistication, the novelist underlines the relation between the self's need for privacy and the self's need for genuine communication and communion.

The conflict of emotions, seeking release, is enhanced by al-Khâdim's virtuoso use of the formal second person "you," an idiosyncratic technique, adopted by such writers as Michel Butor in his novel *Second Thoughts* (1957). The employment of such a rare device is further complicated by the fact that the pivotal character occasionally assumes the role of a writer narrating an objective story through the third-person point of view. In his capacity as an author, he dwells at first on student demonstrations against the British occupation and King Farouk in the 1940s and on the oppressive government bureaucracy in Egypt, which calls to mind works by Orwell and Kafka. The protagonist then proceeds erratically to portray aspects of tyranny in the Nasser era and the 1967 war with Israel. In this way, he attempts to objectify his neurosis, delineating historical events which had direct effects on his life.

Victor Ramraj aptly observes that "[al-Khâdim] has his protagonist shift among first, second and third persons when talking of himself. On the surface, the main function of this technique is to convey the disjointed and disturbed thoughts and feelings of the hospitalized protagonist who, apparently dying of a brain tumor, strives incoherently to review his life. But there is an aesthetic method to this seemingly erratic and eccentric variation of persons. The protagonist is obsessively self-regarding, seeing himself as his own lovable hero in an Egyptian *Odyssey* . . . When he regards himself in this light, he uses the distancing but narcissistic third person. When he reviews the errors of his life and is censuring and reprimanding himself, he addresses himself in the second person. And now and again his pent-up, spontaneous, sincere feelings surface in the first person."³ Precisely.

These shifts are functional in exposing basic divisions in the pivotal character's psyche, accentuating his paranoia and schizophrenia as well as megalomania. Here is how he betrays delusions of greatness as he conceives of his role as a writer recording momentous events in modern Egyptian history: "These different drugs and countless tranquilizers blur your clear thinking and hinder your capacity for concentration. But sleeping pills are extremely delightful: A fountain of dreams, melodies, and images. Why don't you start with a description of the events in Egypt during the last five decades? Wars and upheavals, trials and jails, slogans and national songs. Letters to my two sons. From the memoirs of an expatriate. This letter will thus become Egypt's immortal epic" (p. 23f.) This is one of his best moments of euphoria when he floats and soars heavenwards on the invisible wings of drugs.

Sometimes he has a sure sense of humor, with a sharp eye for the absurdity and incongruity of human beings, as they indulge in self-defeating behavior. Take, for example, his account of a conversation on a Cairo bus on the first day of the 1967 war: "He kept watching the faces around him and listening to snatches of the conversation between the driver and a number of passengers . . . The crisis is over . . . America is scared and Israel is wetting its pants out of fear. The Vice-President is traveling abroad to explain everything. A masterstroke, no doubt. These are people who can only understand the logic of power. They say that the Minister of National Guidance speaks twelve languages, including six African dialects. The Egyptian missiles can destroy the heart of Israel in minutes. But the man is reluctant to use them, only because he is afraid to hurt the Moslems living there. May God protect you, bighearted one. Montgomery himself said that the Egyptian soldier is the best

³Victor Ramraj, *Three Contemporary Egyptian Novels*, *ARIEL*, 10, No. 4 (1970), 105.

fighter in the world. No, sir, excuse me, it was Hitler who said that" (p. 35). The first part of the novel abounds with such marvellously silly talk, which conveys an accurate picture of Nasser's political brainwashing in those bleak days which culminated in the crushing defeat of the Egyptian forces.

Then there are frequent moments when the protagonist sinks into the abyss of dejection and despair, so that his anguish pours forth in violent eruption, betraying deeply rooted feelings of persecution and nostalgia. His severe paranoia manifests itself in the overwhelming fear that his handicapped wife Elizabeth is plotting with the doctors to kill him. The protagonist is also haunted by the notion—real or imaginary—that he suffers from terminal cancer. With striking concentration, he watches closely the process of decline: "Your body has weakened in the last months. You hardly eat anything. Murderous headache and killing pain. Drop by drop. From the bottle to the cylinder, then from the cylinder to the tube, from the tube to your hand, from your hand to your blood, and from your blood to your heart. Drop by drop" (p. 37). Such close attention to minute details of his disease typifies the compulsive psychosis that dominates his whole being, without any hope of self-renewal.

This naturally leads to obsession with death, which surfaces again and again throughout the work: "If they refuse to perform the surgery, you must go back to Egypt immediately. Here I am back home. Back home exhausted after long, long travels. If the Egyptian doctors fail to remove the tumor, you will die in your country and be buried beside your father. Everything in Egyptian graveyards inspires thoughts and feelings of death, dissolution, and nothingness. Not a tree and not a flower; no shade and no shadow. Sand, heat, and intense light . . . they will place you in a tightly closed coffin. And you will be late as usual . . . The hero will not die alone in the hospital, far away from his people and relatives" (pp. 24, 34).

When the hero's travels take him to Canada, he sometimes focuses on his suffering and frustration in this "cold and desolate country." In this regard, the protagonist exemplifies the trauma of many Oriental immigrants who come to North America, full of false hopes and great expectations, only to become exiles, facing racial discrimination and psychic homelessness. There is the futile search for jobs, which dehumanizes and demoralizes them in the "land of opportunity": "Don't you remember the despair and humiliation you usually felt after your weekly trip to the Manpower Department to inquire about a job of any kind whatsoever? And through an advertisement in a daily paper, you found work at one of the adult shops selling pornographic books and obscene magazines. The owner of the store was surreptitiously selling obscene pictures and movies which come under the criminal law. He gave you a raise when you agreed to carry the stuff yourself to some of the customers" (p. 58). The experience exposes the Egyptian Odysseus to the irresistible stimulation of sexual seduction, which drives him to "the verge of insanity out of loneliness and emotional dryness" (p. 58), so that he ends eventually in the arms of whores. The conflict between Islamic principles and Western permissiveness adds a new dimension of guilt and shame to his anguish. The clash of cultures and traditions intensifies his psychosis, which endows his life with a nightmarish quality of incoherent images and delusions.

In his exploration of the ramblings of this tormented protagonist, al-Khâdim adopts the form of a journey through life, hence the title of the novel. The hero's Odyssey takes him through a long series of wanderings from birth to the verge of death, from "the first bed to the last one." But, as Ramraj notes, "he is no Ulysses returning to a waiting Egyptian Penelope; he is more . . . the wandering Ishmael."⁴

⁴V. Ramraj, p. 105.

With a deep sense of imminent doom, the protagonist embarks on a mental pilgrimage, conveying remote recollections and hidden emotions without inhibition. Thus he starts out to face his ordeal, the progress of which provides the whole sequence of action for the ensuing episodes. In foreign countries, which are alien to his sensibility, he is isolated by barriers of language, culture, and ethnic background. As an exponent of highly disturbing, sometimes shattering, experiences, he generally faces a labyrinthine pattern of action, which gradually unfolds in the dramatic episodes attending his predicament. The pilgrimage has its ups and downs, its dangers and resting places, which represent the strangeness, the adventurousness, and the sinuous forward movement of the protagonist's inner life. The long road and the physical handicaps match the conflicting motions of a soul in anguish.

The dilemma of the tormented self is also a thematic motif in Najib Mahfûz's *Al-Karnak* (1974), a relentlessly political novel, representing in a conventional form the trend of committed social realism. The author, one of Egypt's leading literary figures, focuses on the trauma of totalitarianism in Nasser's days, which inevitably created an atmosphere of prevalent fear and suspicion, of moral disintegration and intellectual prostitution. The so-called "Revolution" is exposed as a corrupting process, thriving on torture and teachery, violence and oppression, humiliation and degradation. It is not unreasonable in this respect to suggest that Mahfûz, while depicting the Egyptian milieu accurately, may have taken as his primary model Isherwood's Germany, Solzhenitsyn's Moscow or even Orwell's Oceania.

The totalitarian nightmare unfolds through the human tragedy of the central characters, Ismail El-Sheikh and Zeinab Diab, who are supposedly "children of the Revolution." These young lovers have known each other since childhood and planned to get married after graduation from the university. It is likely that the novelist intends them to incarnate the spirit of "purity and innocence" before the fall. Ismail and Zeinab regard the advent of the Revolution as the new dawn of freedom, equality and justice. There is strong emphasis in the first part of the book on their revolutionary idealism, based on blind faith in Nasser as the savior of the nation from poverty and bondage. In their eyes, Egypt is, so to speak, the phoenix that will rise from its ashes in the freshness of youth.

But the Revolution starts to prey upon its children, particularly the intellectuals who may pose a menace to the new regime. Ismail and Zeinab are among the early victims, dragged barefoot and blindfolded by the secret police from their beds in the middle of the night and thrown in dark prison cells, where they are stripped of all dignity. He describes, with passionate intensity, his first moments in the dark: "Stretching my arms and groping around, I walked very cautiously. The cold floor chilled my feet and I found nothing but the walls. There was absolutely nothing in the room, no chair or mat or furniture whatsoever. Nothing but darkness and emptiness, bewilderment and terror" (p. 99). The guard would take him out once a day to relieve himself and "would hardly close the door behind me when he would start shouting: 'Hurry up, you son of a bitch! Are you going to stay there all day long, son of a bitch?'" (p. 100). Ismail also recounts how he was led to one of the cells to visit his closest friend: "I saw a bizarre scene which I couldn't assimilate at first, as if it were a surrealist picture. Then I was able to distinguish Helmi Hamada hanging by his feet, totally silent and motionless, unconscious or dead" (p. 104).

Thus the young idealists suddenly find a serpent in the cradle of the revolutionary paradise. In the novel, the brutal chief of the secret police, Khaled Safwan, seems to embody the spirit of evil, leading to the fall of "innocence and purity." Such symbolism is strongly suggested by Mahfûz's description of Safwan's encounters with Ismail and Zeinab, where his actions are pathologically sadistic and venomous. With the young man, he uses emotional blackmail to extract a confession

that he is a Communist: "Can't you visualize what may happen to this innocent girl if you insist on silence?" (p. 104). Despite the fact that he has never joined the Communists and has always asserted his allegiance to the Revolution, Ismail desperately signs the confession in order to protect Zeinab from torture. There is striking irony when Safwan starts to reiterate mechanically the hollow slogans of the Revolution: "We are protecting the state which has liberated you from all kinds of slavery" (p. 102).

His sadism culminates in a scene of sheer horror when he "decided to watch a thrilling, delightful, and most unusual spectacle!" (p. 117). Zeinab is raped by one of Safwan's thugs in front of his eyes, in order to crush her pride and dignity, reducing her to nothing. Her sense of innocence and harmony is suddenly shattered by new awareness of evil. She is stunned by the incredible outrage, by the blight of intolerable pollution, by the deep feeling of contamination and irrevocable loss. Mahfûz displays effectively the plight of the victim facing unpredictable and uncontrollable circumstances. It is a diabolical trap which leaves the victim alive but in torment and without hope of release or even relief. For Zeinab, it is a dilemma with no possible resolution in satisfactory human terms; its only surcease lies in the merciful coup de grace of death.

Though considering for a moment the notion of suicide, she is resilient enough to defeat the death wish and accept her stain. No only that. Both Zeinab and Ismail, overwhelmed by grief and despair, are forced to work as informers, suffering constantly the pangs of betrayal. Safwan warns him: "I'd like to remind you that we are a power that has everything; nothing can be hidden from us. We reward friends and crush traitors" (p. 105). In the face of such degeneration, the reader becomes intensely conscious of the annihilation of values caused by ruthless dictatorship. The young lovers, step by painful step, drift apart as a result of the agonies of shame and guilt, of humiliation and degradation. Perhaps the most terrifying aspect of Zeinab's life after the fall is her bizarre form of atonement. Crucified by guilt, she starts to sell her body: "I kept repeating persistently, I'm a whore and a spy! . . . I refused to make a false pretence of honor and decided to live as a woman without dignity" (pp. 118-19).

This is not only atonement but a perverse and cruel punishment which she inflicts upon herself out of self-hate. In this regard, Zeinab adopts a strange kind of logic: "I'm a child of the Revolution and, in spite of everything, haven't lost faith in its essence. I'm therefore responsible for it, and must carry the full burden of this responsibility. Implicitly, I'm to blame for what happened to me" (p. 119). The novelist reveals here a deep insight into the psychology of revolutionary idealism, which calls to mind a similar perception in Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* (1941), where the old Bolshevik Rubashov confesses to crimes he had not committed and willingly accepts the guilty verdict and execution as a last service to the party to which he had dedicated his whole life.

The young idealists are, however, shocked into awareness by the military defeat of 1967. For them, disillusionment is enlightenment, so that they acquire a clear vision of the devastating effects of tyranny. Zeinab says bitterly: "I think we have become a nation of perverts. The cost of living, the staggering defeat, and the intense anxiety are crushing all values" (p. 120). Asserting that her faith in the Revolution has collapsed completely, she adds: "I strongly believed that the whole thing was a castle on the sand" (p. 122). Nevertheless, after a long period of blindness and apathy, she is afraid of freedom. It is a frightening effect of the despotic regime that people gradually derive a sense of security from bondage and try to avoid the responsibility of liberty.

Mahfûz thus reveals how the political atmosphere, with its ominous ramifications, can separate friends and lovers, undermining human relationships. *Al-Karnak*

involves a process of reduction and annihilation, with hardly any hope of renewal. We may apply to this tragic novel the words of W. B. Yeats in his portrayal of fascism as the new era of darkness: "Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world/ The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere/ The ceremony of innocence is drowned."⁵ The dark force of dictatorship entails rejection of sublime values, leading to ultimate chaos. In the tempestuous fury of tyranny which has engulfed Ismail and Zeinab, their innocence of mind and purity of spirit have left them vulnerable and defenceless against the insidious power of evil, so that they suffer psychic disruption which leads to their moral disintegration and destroys their hopes for love.

Likewise, the theme of despair plays a central role in Ismail Waly al-Din's *Hommos Akhdar* (1973). He is one of the most promising young writers of the new generation in contemporary Egyptian literature. In his novel, he experiments with conventional modes of narration as well as modernistic techniques of allusion, inner monologue, stream of consciousness, evocative imagery and elliptical expression. But, unlike al-Khâdim who leads us to the waste land of modern Egypt, Europe and North America, Waly al-Din takes us back in a spirit of nostalgia to exotic areas of Old Cairo, thus providing a fascinating intermarriage of tradition and modernism.

The protagonist, Badi'a, is an aging lady of the upper class and a cultured writer of Islamic history. After the death of her adopted son, she leads a dismal life, facing the void and sense of nothingness, which drive her to the edge of despair. Stifled by the snobbery and propriety of her aristocratic class, she craves for freedom and fulfillment, love and passion. In a desperate quest for renewal, Badi'a "wants to embrace the human body . . . naked . . . full of freshness and vitality . . . wants to experience all the pleasures she heard about . . . to live an exerting, riotous, dissolute life. Tomorrow, life will surrender her to the dust" (p. 147).

Out of sheer dryness and loneliness, she develops an intimate relationship with Fathi, a poor young undertaker in the cemetery, "a spring-winter love affair." He is thoroughly corrupt, opportunistic, insensitive, and vulgar, but she blindly clings to him as her last hope for happiness and self-realization. The writer superbly explores the pathetic life of an older woman who indulges in self-deception in her futile struggle to attain fulfillment through a love affair with the lowest of the low: "He gives me life. The drops of love falling in my throat satisfy my hunger, quench my thirst, and make me taste something sweeter than honey" (p. 135). In spite of her awareness that she is "weak and degraded" by passion, Badi'a enjoys the anguish recurrently inflicted upon her by the scoundrel.

Fleeting sexual moments water her dry body, but they lack any element of permanence, thus consistently leading to a sense of defeat and frustration. The young rogue exploits her emotional and carnal needs, preying on the woman as a source of wealth and luxury. She strives pathetically to possess his body and soul, while he is ruthlessly demeaning her. The ephemeral moments of ecstasy which she attains with him become almost addictive, lingering in her memory and engendering constant yearning. In recording the vibrations of her inner turmoil, the novelist conveys a haunting sense of the utter discrepancy between love and lust, between physical consummation and true fulfillment. The relationship is, indeed, drained of all human meaning.

In a highly perceptive analysis, Roderick McGillis notes that the novel "presents us with a world inimical to human values. In *al-Karnak* love exists; the tragedy is

⁵"The Second Coming," pp. 4-6.

that it constantly suffers defeat. Here, however, there is no love; only exploitation and falsity. The world of *Hommos Akhdar* is a world in ruins; shades of the prison house have darkened into the shadow of death.⁶ It is significant that death looms over the whole experience of the novel, making a mockery of human aspirations. This is accentuated by the fact that the action takes place mostly in the graveyard, which evokes associations between the inner landscape and the outer landscape. The heroine's climate of feeling, reflecting the overwhelming desolation and sterility of her life, is again and again conveyed through images of graveyards and tombs, of dryness and dust. There are scenes of Badi'a and Fathi making love against the background of graves, of a wedding taking place beside the burial chamber, of men smoking hashish over the bones of the dead. The writer conveys detailed description of tombstones, shrines, coffins, corpses, shrouds, and funerals. He uses the environment of the cemetery as a strong determining force in the characters' lives, so that the setting becomes almost a participant in the action.

Perhaps the most powerful part of his novel is the final episode, where the heaven of rapture and the hell of torment are juxtaposed in terms of striking contrast. Out of greed and opportunism, Fathi finds it convenient to marry Badi'a, who reaches a climax of ecstasy while preparing for the wedding: "She was talking, with happiness becoming more and more intense in her eyes, almost raising her above the level of ordinary humans" (p. 179). Waiting for his return from Alexandria to celebrate "the day of great joy," she becomes increasingly anxious, with a vague sense of impending doom. Her eyes fixed on the clock, she has a haunting premonition of the ultimate end. In this context, the author underlines the destructive power of time, leading to mutability, decline, and decay.

When Badi'a receives the news that Fathi has been killed in a car accident, her first reaction to the shock is disbelief, a defence mechanism by which people attempt to delay intolerable pain. Then comes her withdrawal from reality and descent into insanity, with nightmarish delusions, reminiscent of the Egyptian Odysseus's hallucinations in his acute moments of paranoia. Having exhausted the relief of words and tears, the protagonist finds in madness her sole refuge: "The ghosts move towards her. They put her to trial . . . take her to task . . . pull her hair . . . throw her down . . . feel her forehead . . . grasp her neck. What do you want? My lover is coming . . . I hear his footsteps in the street . . . he'll knock on the door, then the agony will be over. She utters screams of horror, which echo everywhere, but nobody hears her" (p. 184).

Thus Badi'a experiences life's irrational irony, remaining unaware of the imminent catastrophe until it strikes suddenly. Through her futile and barren love affair, she gets unwittingly involved in a process of self-betrayal, so that her actions prove to be self-defeating. In attempting to escape her fate, the protagonist behaves in such a way as to seal it inexorably. In fact, she is a myopic character very similar to us, with our limited vision and incomplete knowledge of the truth. She tries to build a false world for herself, an illusory shelter where she expects to exorcise suffering. Her fantasy world is a mental phenomenon, showing the irrationality and absurdity of man's attempts to turn the wheel of time backwards, to create his own version of reality, to change the facts of life.

Generally speaking, the novels examined in this study share a mood of basic pessimism and a tragic view of life. Their central characters are mainly exiles, who suffer from alienation and fail to find their spiritual home in society, for reasons beyond their control. They are perpetually cheated of their aims and mocked by

⁶Roderick McGillis, "Despair, Madness and Political Tyranny in *Three Contemporary Egyptian Novels*," *IFR*, 6, No. 2 (1979), 158.

ruthless powers which take no heed of their hopes and fears. The writers seem more inclined to protest against the inadequacy of human existence than to extol its fullness, so that they lead their readers step by step into the heart of darkness, revealing a world full of maladjustment, disillusionment, cruelty, perversity, and frustration. Their protagonists approach each other to destroy and to be destroyed, never to attain plenitude of being. They are isolated by insurmountable barriers of illusion, apathy, prejudice, preconception, irrational hostility, or pure evil. Their tragic nature stems in large measure from their inability to change their conditions. The source of these characters' torment may be psychic homelessness, feelings of exile, delusions of persecution, racial discrimination, political tyranny, lack of fulfillment, or emotional thirst. But, above all, they seem to live in a realm of blind necessity and inexorable law, where they face inevitable anguish.