



# **EGYPT UNDER PRESSURE**

**A contribution to the understanding of  
economic, social, and cultural aspects of  
Egypt today**

By  
*Marianne Laanatza*  
*Gunvor Mejdell*  
*Marina Stagh*  
*Kari Vogt*  
*Birgitta Wistrand*

Scandinavian Institute of African Studies  
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THE IMAGE OF EUROPE IN EGYPTIAN LITERATURE: TWO RECENT SHORT  
STORIES BY BANW TAHIR ON A RECURRENT THEME,

Under the heading "This is the issue" (tilka hiya al-qaḍīya) the Egyptian liberal philosopher Zaki Nagib Mahmud summarizes the principal question in Egyptian intellectual debate during the last 150 years in the epitome "what should be **our** attitude towards the West" (mādhā yakūnu mawqifunā min al-gharb)<sup>1</sup> The article is provoked by a contribution by Anis Mansur in the daily Akhbār al-yaum, in which he relates an encounter between **some** Egyptian writers, including himself and Ahmad Baha al-Din, and a visiting Russian poet to Egypt in the 1960's. The poet asks them about the issue which has most preoccupied Egyptian men of letters. They were embarrassed by the realization that Egyptian writers (udabā) had no such common matter, writes Mansur. After some hesitation they find no better reply than "socialist realism" (al-ishtirākiyya al-wāqī<sup>c</sup> iyya).

Exasperated by such lack of insight from some of the leading intellectuals of today, Zaki Nagib Mahmud strongly asserts that the issue of how to relate to the West, with all its implications, underlies the great controversies in modern Egyptian political and cultural life. He claims that distinctive dividing lines may be drawn all the way between two main tendencies: on the one hand those who reject the West (and all it stands for), on the other hand those who accept Western impulses, provided they are integrated into the national cultural tradition. A third, westernized (mustaghrib), group is numerically insignificant and without any impact, Mahmud alleges,

so it needs not be brought into the general picture.

Undoubtedly, the "challenge of the West", with all its implications, has been a most central issue in Egyptian intellectual debate. Representing well-ordered, affluent and educated societies, Europe would stand forth as a much-coveted model, a symbol of human progress. On the other hand, the experience with European powers as occupants, suppressors, and exploiters, rendered the relationship with Europe at best a love-hate relationship. Egypt's economic and political survival, as well as the nation's dignity, was at stake for many years. Besides the struggle for economic and political control, there was the struggle for national cultural identity. The "challenge" was responded to in different ways, largely reflecting the interests and orientations of various social classes and groups. Roughly, we may distinguish four sets of responses:

- 1) The conservative apologetic response, unconditionally defending traditional (Islamic) social and cultural structures and values.
- 2) The modernizing apologetic response, claiming that the idea of human progress is inherent in the national (Islamic) culture, and that necessary reforms may be based on this national heritage.
- 3) The liberal modernizing response, aspiring to borrow the best of European civilisation and integrate it into the national culture (as expressed by al-<sup>C</sup>Aqqad: "I may eat an American apple... but in my body that apple is transformed to Egyptian blood" (anā ākul tuffāḥan amrīkiyyan... lākin hādha t-tuffāḥ yatahawwalu fī jismī ilā damrnin misrī))
- 4) The marxist response, aspiring to liberate and produce a new

Egyptian identity imbued with socialist culture.

### **The image of Europe in fictional literature**

The young Egyptian going to Europe, usually for educational purposes, and the cultural conflicts he thereby experiences, is a recurrent theme in Egyptian fiction<sup>2</sup>. It is a drama in which the civilizational conflict between East and West rages on a personal level. The qualities which are usually contrasted in this conflict are the alleged materialism of the West vs, the spirituality of the East, the unbelief and arrogant pride of the European vs. the faith, trust and humility of the Oriental, Europe's human and physical coldness vs. the warm atmosphere of Egypt, the egoism, cynicism and decadence of European society vs, the naive innocence and generosity of Oriental society. But also positive "Western" qualities as education and scientific achievement vs. ignorance and superstition haunting Oriental societies, individual freedom and democracy vs. the burden of tradition and despotism, affluence vs, poverty, are frequently commented upon by some writers, The evaluation of certain qualities may vary: to some the contrastive set of activity vs, passivity as typical of Western vs, Eastern societies, is associated with concepts of energy and vitality vs. inertia and lethargy, to others it is associated with aggressivity, exploitation and sexual promiscuity (especially in females) vs, patience, endurance and (female) modesty, respectively,

The appreciation of these contrastive qualities and the value judgments passed on them by Egyptian writers have oscillated in accordance with shifting political and cultural trends in modern

Egyptian history, as is amply demonstrated by Rotraud Wielandt in her highly perceptive study "Das Bild der Europaer in der moderne arabische Erzähl - und Theaterliteratur"<sup>3</sup>. Roughly summarized, the image of European society as expressed in literary contributions, reflects an awareness of considerable cultural differences. However, up through the first couple of decades in this century, European society and cultural values were not necessarily considered inferior to, nor totally incompatible with, the culture and values of Egyptian/Oriental society. It was rather considered a matter of good and bad aspects of both societies, and contributions often reflect a sense of a potentially useful complementarity of the two cultures. With the ascendancy of an educated Egyptian middle class (as opposed to the predominantly westernized, at least Western educated, upper class intellectual elite of the previous decades), the intellectual climate shifted in the 1930's towards an accentuation of traditional (Islamic) culture and values as superior to Western culture and values. This also reflected a general anti-colonialist (anti-British) political mobilisation in Egypt, combined with the political and economic unrest and desintegration characterizing Europe in this period.

"The return of the spirit" (ʿAwdat al-rūḥ, 1933) and "Bird of the East" (Uṣfūr min al-sharq, 1938) by the prominent Egyptian writer Tawfiq al-Hakim are novels in which the cultural conflict is rendered in an uncompromisingly anti-Western bias. In "Bird of the East" which is said to be based on the author's personal experiences as a young student in Paris in the late 1920's, the Egyptian hero falls victim to the intrigues of a young Parisienne with whom he falls desperately and genuinely in love. She

ruthlessly exploits his feelings and enters into a sexual relationship with him only to provoke jealousy in another man, whom she really wants. She is the prototype of European woman, and a symbol of Europe itself: intelligent and beautiful she may appear, but she lacks spirit and soul, and at heart she is cold and cruel. While European society is imbued with "the poison of utilitarianism", Egyptian society is presented as one in which man and nature live in symbiotic harmony, its people imbued with natural social solidarity (sha<sup>c</sup>b ijtima<sup>c</sup>ī bi-l-fitra)<sup>4</sup>. Fantasy and emotion reign - not cold intellect<sup>5</sup>.

In Yahya Haqqi's novellette "The lamp of Umm Hashim" (Qindīl Umm Hāshim 1944), the cultural conflict is presented in much the same manner, employing the stereotypic contrasts of materialism vs. spirituality, cynicism vs. innocence, egoism vs. communal feeling. However, with its impressionistic and lyrical style, its tone is less aggressive, less crude, and besides, it is more sensitive towards positive aspects of Western civilization.

The central theme is similar to "Bird of the East": The young Egyptian student, Ismail, goes to Europe (England). He becomes involved with a girl, who embodies the standard cliché of the European woman: independent, active, sexually liberated, self-conscious and esthetically educated - qualities which Ismail (and the author) considers admirable and attractive. On the other hand, she exposes herself as an egocentric, cynical and ruthless person when it serves her interests, being emotionally so uncomplicated that it amounts to callousness and moral irresponsibility.

Ismail becomes influenced by Western thinking and values: it is a sophisticated man of science who returns to Egypt after 7 years abroad. The encounter with the poverty, ignorance and superstition of his native environment becomes extremely painful. He is torn between loyalty and disgust, between his old and new identity. Following a deep personal crisis, he arrives at a personal solution, a reconciliation consisting of synthesizing the best aspects of the two cultures: the scientific achievement of the West with the warm spirituality and confidence of the East.

### **The contemporary context**

The young Egyptian intellectual in Europe is the theme of two novels by Bahā' Tāhir published in 1984: "Yesterday I dreamed of you" (Bi-l-ams halumtu bik)<sup>6</sup> and "In an unusual park" (Fī hadīqa ghayr cādiya)<sup>7</sup>.

For many years Baha Tahir worked at the Cultural Programme of Cairo Radio. Following a dispute with the authorities he was removed from his position in 1975. Since 1977 he has worked for various UN organizations, which has brought him to live abroad for several periods, The two short stories are thus based on personal experience of living in Europe, and may be said to represent a kind of exile literature (adab mahjar). However, we should also bear in mind the general political and cultural climate in Egypt during this period, which Baha Tahir as an intellectual is highly sensitive to. Egyptian society in the post-Nasser period is characterized by a process of political and cultural reorientation - moving from a prevailing offensive,

socially progressive nationalist-secularist orientation towards a basically defensive, though increasingly aggressive, islamicizing orientation, notably conservative with regard to inherited social values. The conflict of values, this time perhaps more than ever pronounced in terms of Eastern vs. Western civilization, flares up, vehemently anti-Western. The search for authenticity (aṣāla) and the cultural heritage (al-turāth) are once again key concepts in the political and cultural debate. While the 1960's and early 1970's focused on the economic and political aspects of the East vs. West confrontation, the focus may be said to have shifted to inherent cultural values with clearly apologetic undertones,

The climate thus may be said to favour a relapse into what the Syrian intellectual Sadiq Jalal al-Azm has designated "Orientalism in reverse"<sup>8</sup>. He warns against the tendency among Arab writers to apply the same kind of "metaphysical abstractions and ideological mystifications" which exponents of Orientalism have been heavily criticized for in their studies of Oriental societies: "(They) simply reproduce the whole discredited apparatus of classical Orientalist doctrine concerning the difference between East and West, Islam and Europe, only to favour Islam and the East in its implicit and explicit judgments". This self-assertive tendency to uncritically accentuate "Arab" and "Islamic" qualities as superior, has as its counterpart a tendency to depreciate European society in equally crude terms.

This politico-cultural trend bears a striking resemblance to the dominating trend in the period which produced the abovementioned works of Tawfiq al-Hakim and Yahya Haqqi. We shall now proceed



to Baha Tahir's two contributions and consider how they relate to the tradition and to the contemporary setting.

### **"Yesterday I dreamed of you"<sup>a</sup>**

The protagonist (who also is the narrator in both stories) gives the impression of being an intellectual, sensitive, young/middle-aged (I would guess in his late thirties or early forties) person, reserved of nature, polite and softspoken in his conduct. This is not the tale of the open-minded, naive, unsophisticated young Egyptian to be destroyed by the cynicism and decadence of Western society. He seems to have lost his "innocence", his belief in mankind, well before he left Egypt for Europe. We are brought to suspect that he has a past there that he wants to eliminate from his mind<sup>9</sup>.

In "Yesterday I dreamed of you" the setting is "the big city in the north" (one suspects London, but any North-European city may evoke the atmosphere). The protagonist's everyday life is characterized by isolation and monotony, in fact absence of any form of vitality, energy or enthusiasm. One senses a silent desperation underlying the attitude of resignation, the low-pitched description of the monotony and futility of existence.

We meet two other Arab expatriates: Kamal is a distant friend of the protagonist, he lives in another city, but calls him every evening on the phone. Kamal has settled and married a woman of the country, he has worked in a bank for ten years. However, Kamal is uneasy and unhappy, constantly complaining of the

emptiness of existence, the barrenness of society. He feels as if he lives in a desert, his apartment being a bedouin tent. Long since he has given up getting involved with people. His nervous and psychosomatic sufferances increase. His work at the bank agonizes him - after all, it represents a form of riba (usury or interest on money forbidden by the Quran). In a dream he is thrown in jail by Mu<sup>C</sup>awiya (the first Ummayyad khalif), where he meets Taha Husayn (a prominent Egyptian writer who in the 1930's provoked traditional circles by critically examining the origin and authenticity of the pre-islamic odes, and who otherwise claimed Egypt's adherence to European, or rather, Mediterranean, culture), His whole existence, in real life as well as in his dreams, appears as nothing but a series of defeat and deceit. When we last hear of Kamal, he has resigned from his work in the bank and is preparing to leave for Egypt, to retire to a life of contemplation in the desert, in harmony with the celestial Grace.

The other Arab is **Fathi**, the protagonist's colleague: "We were a group of Arabs employed in an Arab firm, the director and most of the employees were Europeans. Under such circumstances Fathi became involved with sufism (Islamic mysticism)" the author remarks laconically. **Fathi** tries to move the protagonist through his message of opening up one's soul, of the wandering of souls and spiritual contacts, of the beautiful Truth behind the real world. In glimpses the protagonist actually feels both attracted to and frightened by this mystical vision of ulterior forms of contact, he obstinately refuses, however, to become involved, in spite of his colleague's incessant appeals.

The impression of a cold society is conveyed through concrete images and observations: the snow, the frost, the cold weather outside. Cold interiors with glaring white tablecloths and curtains. People turning away, faces kept in rigid, unexpressive forms, unapproachable, reserved, composed. In contrast to this northern European rigidity, glimpses involving people of another cultural background: the easygoing, friendly laughing and joking style of two young Africans, the spontaneous remark from a stranger sitting next to the protagonist in the bus, - "I knew he was a foreigner like myself, because people in this country do not speak to anybody". A general, pervading, usually unspoken, animosity vis a vis foreigners, occasional outbursts of unmasked racism. But also glimpses of friendly concern, of straightforward sympathy.

Significantly, the episodes in which the protagonist is confronted with racial prejudices, involves the older generation, and their ungracious stupidity has a certain pathetic touch. The author appears to be sensitive to the importance of social background for the formation of prejudices and nuances in their manifestations:

There is a scene at a laundry where an elderly, typically working-class woman feels passed over by two young Africans in the line waiting for a vacant washing machine. She then bursts out in an indignant remark about negroes and respect for law and order. The Africans react sharply, and the woman must reluctantly give in to them, after having in vain appealed to the laundry assistant, a young girl, for support. The scene reflects a "poor white" reaction - a conflict-of-interest situation, in

which the old woman's frustration takes an outlet in simple-minded racial prejudice.

This is different in kind from the reaction of the elderly woman of educated middle class background (the mother of the young woman the protagonist gradually becomes involved with, a relationship to which I shall shortly return). She addresses the young Egyptian with a formal, polite curiosity, as a representative of a strange, exotic and backward culture: "From Africa, really? I nodded. She pointed at two Sudanese masks which were suspended on the wall with a wooden cross in the middle, and said: I actually love African handicraft. She pressed her white, wrinkled fingers together and waved her hand, saying: It has such strength. Then she opened up her hand, moving it in undulating movements, and said: And such elegance and grace, Then she asked: And which part of Africa are you from, then? In a loud voice I said: I am from Egypt. She raised her eyebrows somewhat surprised and said: Egypt? I always wanted to visit Egypt. *My* husband travelled to Egypt in ... in ... , oh, I don't remember. We were not married yet, but I still have the pictures. She leant her hand on the table and intended to get up, then she hesitated for a moment: but I do remember my husband told me that in Egypt they are good at sorcery? She nodded, while I tried to laugh, remarking: That was maybe at the time of Moses? Keeping her hand on the table, she said: Oh, my husband did see quite a lot. I said: Perhaps he did,"

Later on she brings out pictures from Egypt - the classical posture with the smiling (British?) gentleman/colonial master/tourist on camelback in front of the pyramids. "In front

of him a man was standing, holding the reins of the camel, wearing a galabiyya (traditional Egyptian man's dress), the lean arm protruding from the wide opening of the galabiyya. I stared at him and at the mustache over his broad mouth, at the sad, gloomy face. He resembled my father."

The superior European fascinated by the "mystique" of the Orient. The protagonist sees "his father" and he sees himself perceived in a folkloristic frame, as the oriental object. Far from the vulgar racism of "poor white", but equally imprudent and demeaning. The old lady's predisposed notions of Egyptians as exotic primitives produces, at the end of the story, a most repulsive accusation of him having used evil magic on her daughter,

The relationship with Ann Mary (or Anne Marie if the setting were not England, but Scandinavia or a German- or French-speaking society) is the central theme of this short story. Ann Mary is a young woman whom the protagonist meets at the bus stop nearly every morning on his way to work. She never looks straight at him, nor does she demonstrate in any way that she recognizes him when by chance he finds her sitting behind the booth at the post office (where he has gone to send a golden-decorated book about Sufism (Islamic mysticism) which Fathi has given him, to his friend Kamal, who has expressed interest in the matter). However, one night they run into each other outside the cinema, she approaches him and wants to talk with him, and they agree to have a cup of tea together in a cafe. In the course of their conversation she exposes herself as a hypersensitive, unbalanced young woman, in mental agony, desperately in search of "the

meaning of life". Apart from her extremely agitated condition, she is also representative of the young generation's alienation from the values of her (Western) society, with its international awareness, though in a vague, unpolitical sense. She wants to go to Africa to make herself useful to poor people, which reflects a sense of commitment (though we suspect it is motivated by a need to "save her own soul" as much as by altruism and righteousness+). Her attitude towards him is devoid of any references to their ethnical differences, and she openly defies the glances from the neighbouring tables at the "mixed couple".

Rather, her interest in him stems from a feeling that he has entered her life to convey something she cannot grasp. He has possessed her mind, she fears him, even hates him, she tells him, Still she feels attracted to him because he may be capable of helping her in her agony. He stays calm and reserved, confronted with this torrent of emotion, but we understand that he is touched by her confidence and closeness, His feelings are, however, devoid of any erotic attraction, as he perceives her as a child rather than a woman,

After a week she invites him home to the apartment where she lives with her mother. In the meanwhile, they have met several times at the bus stop. She has apologized for her very emotional behaviour at the cafe, blaming it on the personal crisis she is going through, and that he somehow reminds her of a young man she loved and who deceived her. But as soon as they are alone in her room, she accuses him of interfering with her life, by constantly entering her dreams in a significant way. She pleads for help, he can only reply that he himself has no illusions, no belief,

that he has no sense or meaning of life to offer her, however much he wants to help her. Desperately she starts taking off her clothes and throws herself into his arms: "Come on, if this is what you want..." But that is not what he wants, he picks up her clothes while she sobs. "How can I help you when I cannot even help myself?" he says. She calms down, and staring out in front of her she says, as if to herself: "I understand".

This is the last time he sees her. She does not show up at the bus stop any more, but she is constantly in his mind, She has triggered a crisis within him, touched the emotions he has suppressed, the lack of sense and meaning in his own life. In a dream he sees her running by the seaside, desperate, in agony. Alarmed at this, he goes to her house only to hear that she has committed suicide. He flees in panic, having been accused by the mother of causing her death through black magic.

At night he is back in bed: "Did I sleep or was I awake when that wing flapped in my room? Was it a falcon or a dream that which I saw? I stretched out my hand. I heard a rustling and I stretched out my hand. Suddenly lights and colors welled out, I had never experienced such beauty. The rustle of the wings all around me. I stretched out my hand. I was weeping silently and without tears, but I did stretch out my hand."

This mystical vision/dream links together several elements in the story. It integrates a dream that Ann Mary had previously, of a falcon beckoning at her window, but which she dares not let into her room. The falcon - al-sagr - is the ancient Egyptian figure of the Sun good (Horus), and thus, by extension, symbol of

vitality, of strength and freedom. Ann Mary perceives it as a threat, she does not let it touch her, he in the end lets himself be embraced by it. Al-saqr is also associated with after-life, as the protector of souls, and directly to the ancient Egyptian myth of Isis/Osiris, in which Isis in the shape of a she-falcon guards Osiris' body<sup>10</sup>. Is it Ann Mary reaching him from after-life? An encounter of the souls, to which Fathi urged him to open his mind through Sufism? He did open up his soul, his feelings, through the relationship with Ann Mary, he did let himself be touched: He now experiences the overwhelming beauty that Fathi mentioned associated with the recognition and experience of the hidden, or ultimate Truth.

### **"In an unusual park"**

In the second story we recognize the same themes, only in a more strictly realistic frame. It is essentially the same main character that reveals himself through the "I" of the story: polite, reserved, sensitive, expatriate Egyptian. Lonely and bitter, he has behind him a broken marriage to a European woman: "I don't believe that a person can really have friends outside his own country. It just isn't so that a man in a foreign country establishes real friendships or really loves someone. Your feelings change. Sorrow feels more heavy, joy rapidly evaporates." Egypt, however, seems no alternative: the protagonist feels like a stranger and a visitor to his home and native environment.

The theme is again the encounter between two lonely people: a pitiable old European woman and the young Egyptian, They



accidentally meet in a park especially designed to accommodate the needs of dogs. He becomes entangled in a rather comical situation: Far from harbouring any affection at all towards dogs, in fact he is afraid of them, he makes up a story that he has lost his dog in a car accident. His intention is not to hurt the feelings of the old woman, to whom it is simply inconceivable that someone does not love dogs, and who, given the dog-like environment, simply assumes he has one. However, instead of representing an easy way out of a conversation which, at the outset, he is not interested in, this lie leads to an unexpected flow of sympathy and pity from the old woman - and ironically an atmosphere of intimacy and closeness grows up between them, a kind of unity from shared grief.

In this short story criticism of European society stands out more sharply: the protagonist's disgust at the grossly exaggerated concern for the well-being of dogs, while children in his own country hardly have enough to eat, Alienated relationships, solitude due to lack of communication. The old woman complains about the emotional distance separating her from her daughter. The loving care for the dog is a substitute for human communication.

Again, our Egyptian is confronted with the simple-minded, blunt racism of the older generation: the miserable scape-goat syndrome which I referred to above as "poor-white" reactions: the old woman's immediate response to being told of the pretended accident which killed "his" dog, is: "How terrible. But what can you expect when the city has become filled up with all these foreigners and their cars." Faced with the fact that this nice

young man is Egyptian, however, she hesitates: "Oh, Egypt. Egypt, of course.. let me see.. you are from Egypt.. when I speak of foreigners, I mean..." He kindly, but sarcastically, helps her out of her embarrassment. And again an instance of the sentimental mystification of "the Orient", combined with ignorance of contemporary Third World realities: Talking enthusiastically of the enchantment of Egypt and its monuments, she exclaims: "Imagine they could carve all that in stone, without utensils. - They must have had utensils. - I mean machines... hoists and such things, She shook her head in wonder, saying: Strange how this people was wiped out. - Who was wiped out? - The Egyptians. - But they were not wiped out. - Pardon? I smiled as I said: We consider ourselves to be their descendants. The expression on her face changed: Oh, really well, of course... If one looks at it that way, I suppose, well, why not?"

Still, our Egyptian tolerates her pathetic bluntness, for the confidence developing out of their conversation is real, a rare instance of true communication between two victims of an inhumane society.

Shortly after they have parted, he finds her lying unconscious on the pavement. She is taken away in an ambulance. And however strong his dislike for dogs, he cannot but accept the silent appeal, the pathetic attachment of the abandoned dog, as it helplessly lingers behind and follows him as he walks away.

### **Lost illusions - and a humanist response**

In these texts by Baha Tahir we discern an underlying criticism of Europe: the traditional concept of a cold, dehumanizing society. The tone, however, is quite different from the earlier contributions by Tawfiq al-Hakim and Yahya Haqqi. Above all, the nearly programmatic cultural dichotomy applied by al-Hakim and Haqqi, is absent in Baha Tahir's text. Baha Tahir, to my mind, reveals intellectual maturity and honesty by not falling into the pitfalls of "orientalism in reverse". The text reflects the Arab "identity crisis", which extends to the Arab community in exile (and which, of course, may be even more acutely experienced there), but the author does not idealize this in terms of East vs. West.

Baha Tahir's main character rejects his Arab friends' escape into Islamic mysticism or literally back to Egypt. And, on the other hand, the European characters are not purely rational, cynical and self-assured persons, but human beings, suffering, like himself, from loneliness, alienation and longing for something else. Some may be inhibited in their outlook by ignorant prejudices and misconceptions, but so are his Arab characters. Glimpses of communication and of sympathy, occur regardless of racial or cultural dividing lines: the European in the drifting snow complaining to the Egyptian about his compatriots's unreadiness to assist others; the young girl in the laundry taking the Africans' side against the old woman's racist accusations; the director of the company who awkwardly employs some poor Arab phrases in order to be friendly (though admittedly with the added motivation of showing off), and who otherwise shows serious

concern about his health condition,

To Baha Tahir, neither a romanticizing of and wholesale commitment to "Egyptian/Oriental" culture and values, à la Tawfiq al-Hakim, nor a harmonizing and reconciliation of different cultures and values, à la Yahya Haqqi, make any sense. I believe this is so because to the author's generation of Egyptian intellectuals Egypt simply has "lost its virtue".

Baha Tahir is associated with a group of writers often referred to as "the generation of the seventies" (gīl al-sab<sup>c</sup>īnāt). Many of them surfaced in connection with the appearance of "Gallerie -68" - an Egyptian underground literary journal which brought together poets, writers and critics on the political left, in a period in which it had become increasingly difficult to cooperate with the institutions of official culture, the literary establishment. They have in common an experience of trauma from what Edward al-Kharrat, prominent Egyptian writer and critic, designates as "the great defeat of hopes" (hazīmat al-āmāl al-kabira). He refers, of course, to the disillusionment resulting from the defeat of nasserite Egypt in the June war of 1967 against Israel, which represented a political turningpoint for most young intellectuals. They grew up with the new regime of the 1952 revolution, were imbued with its slogans of a better future, a just society, of freedom from local and international oppression. The aftermath of the war represented a "moment of truth": the dam of idealism which had held back creeping uneasiness, second thoughts and frustrations over political and social reality in Egypt, was broken. There ensued a crisis - political in nature, but with threatening existentialist

dimensions. Former conceptions of active social and political commitment (iltizām) seemed meaningless, connected as they were with adherence to the policies of the Nasser regime.

The literary trend which had claimed to correspond to the political commitment of cultural life was socialist realism (al-wāqī<sup>C</sup>īyya al-ishtirākīyya): representing the living conditions of the popular classes, with an unequivocal underlying class struggle perspective. The new literature (al-adab al-jadīd), which was called for, turned away from the direct style, the concrete realistic description of class society. It emerged introspective, in search of perspective in an existentialist sense, and using corresponding poetic and symbolic means of expression, techniques as "stream of consciousness" (majrā al-wa<sup>C</sup>y), or short sentences heavily loaded with meaning and association à la Hemingway. It represented a departure from the broad narrative style of realism, with its tendencies of rhetoric, and a breakthrough for "the new sensitivity" (al-ḥassāsiyya al-jadīda). This new style, comments Edward al-Kharrat, is "fluent, light, subtle, masked in the essence of the wording. The logical narrative style is no longer necessary, it is rather the details of this absurd reality which are loaded with significance...."

The very careful selection of words and dialogue is decisive in the style of writing"<sup>11</sup>. This description applies very well to Baha Tahir's prose, He is a most sophisticated and careful writer, with a simple, soft-spoken style, one does observe the poetical precision in the selection of words and symbolism.

Alienation (al-ightirāb) and the sense or atmosphere of

absurdity (al-manākh al-<sup>C</sup>abathī) are central concepts in the presentation of the new literature. The absurd worlds of Kafka and Camus met with deep resonance among the generation of lost illusions. The Egyptian literary critic Sabri Hafiz describes the typical (anti)-hero of this literature as a person who "finds himself submerged in constant surprise and incomprehensibility, This urges him to take refuge to the banks, of fear of disappearing into the whirls of the stream, feeling that he has lost the ability to fight the waves, to the point where he withdraws into isolation, and resigns himself to a very marginal role, in spite of a constant inner refusal to play such a role and an ardent longing to transcend it"<sup>12</sup>.

Baha Tahir's short stories reflect the alienation of man in contemporary society. They describe the loneliness of existence in exile, but also the loneliness of individuals belonging to the other society. Alienation and loneliness seem to be the "condition humaine" of contemporary society. This may imply social criticism of modern Western society, but there is no "Oriental" remedy to deliver it, no safe "Oriental" haven to take refuge to.

However, I believe Baha Tahir in these texts suggests one way of relief from apathy and despair: to open up for empathy, for moments of true human communication. This human touch transcends cultural differences; it does not necessarily eradicate them, but it definitely transcends them.

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by Gunvor Mejdell

**Noter:**

1. Al-Ahrām, 25.2.85
2. See M.M. Badawi: "The lamp of Umm Hashim: The Egyptian Intellectual between East and West", Journal of Arabic Literature 1, 1970 and Issa Boullata: "Encounter between East and West: A Theme in Contemporary Arabic Novels", Middle East Journal 30,1 (1976)
3. Beiruter Texte und Studien, Band 23, Beirut 1980.
4. <sup>٢</sup>Audat al-rūḥ.
5. It should be mentioned, however, that Tawfiq al-Hakim on the other hand produced penetrating and witty criticism of social conditions and bureaucratic practices in the Egyptian countryside: "The diary of a deputy public prosecutor in the countryside" (Yawmiyyāt nā'ib fī al-aryāf, 1937)
6. In the collection of the same title, in the series Mukhtārāt Fuṣūl, 4, The General Egyptian Book Organization, Cairo 1984)
7. In the literary journal Ibdā', vol 2, 12,dec. 1984.
8. "Orientalism and orientalism in reverse", in Khamsin, 8 (1981), pp. 5-26.
9. One key to understanding this attitude of disillusionment, to what he wants to forget, might be found in reading Baha Tahir's earlier short stories from Egyptian context, These also express alienation in human relations, sometimes rather Kafka-esque nightmares of distorted reality. On earlier short stories by Baha Tahir see Sabry Hafez M, Abdel-Dayem: The Rise and development of the Egyptian Short Story (1881-1970), unpubl. Ph.D. thesis at the University of London (School of Oriental and African Studies) 1979, pp 561-3.

10. These associations of al-saqr were suggested to me by Safinaz-Amal Naguib.
11. "Mashāhid min sāhat al-qīṣṣa al-qasīra fī al-sab<sup>c</sup>īnāt", in Fuṣūl 4 (1982).
12. Al-uqṣūṣa al-miṣriyya wa al-hadātha" Gallerie 68, Oct. 1969.