Resistance and Revolution in Four Arabic Novels: A Mosaic of Literary Representations

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Abstract

The historical experience of revolution in its political sense of overthrowing a political regime comes as a consequence of a complex interaction between psychological factors that pertain to the human agent, as well as economic and sociopolitical factors that prevail in the community. The transformative and creative powers of the human agent can recreate a new political identity, new national consciousness, and more importantly new structures of power relations. In the modern history of the Middle East, movements of resistance and revolution have been tied up with Western imperialism and the oppressive colonial powers, which cannot be divorced from the East/West dichotomous world views and the idea of Orientalism. However, the current Arab revolutions seem to reflect a newborn ideology of a new generation adamant on mapping out new power relations over interior as well as exterior spaces.

This paper argues that there is a certain historical line of development that can be traced in the interaction between the psychological factors that pertain

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to the human agent, and the economic and sociopolitical factors that prevail in the Arab communities. Hence, the rise of the once-terrorist, aggressive, once-silent, inert Arab who has suddenly come to deserve the applause of the once-denouncing, now-approving, though at times apprehensive, West. Accordingly the paper proceeds to highlight this interaction through the analysis of a number of selected scenes from a variety of literary works. The analysis is carried out on four corresponding axes: the individual versus the collective, and the psychological versus the sociopolitical. The selected literary works include novels written as early as 1954 like Al Ard (The Earth) by Abd el Rahman El Sharqawy to more recent ones that were said to have predicted the January Revolution in Egypt like Mohammad Salmawy's Ajnihat el Farasha (The Wings of the Butterfly).

Keywords:
Resistance, Revolution, Political Regime, orientalism, western Imperialism

الملخص:

تأتي الثورات التي تطيح بنظام مستبد نتيجة لتفاعل العوامل النفسية للعنصر البشري مع العوامل االاقتصادية و الاجتماعية و السياسية السائدة في المجتمع الثائر. وقد يكون لهذا العنصر البشري من قوة التأثير ما يؤدي إلى بناء شخصية سياسية جديدة، ووعي قومي جديد، والأهم من ذلك بُنى جديدة في علاقات القوى القائمة بالفعل. وإذا كان التاريخ الحديث لمنطقة الشرق الأوسط يربط دائماً بين المقاومة و الثورات و قوى الاستعمار الغربي الغاشمة التي ترتبط بالضرورة بالفكر الاستشراقي فإن الثورات التي تنطلق في الميادين و الشوارع العربية الآن تعكس فكراً

جديداً لجيل جديد قرر أن يرسم خارطة قائمة على رؤيته لهذه العلاقات داخلياً و خارجياً.

من هذا المنطلق تقوم فكرة هذا البحث على أساس أن هناك ارتباطاً تاريخياً وثيقاً يربط التفاعل القائم بين العوامل المذكورة قديماً و حديثاً مولّداً ذلك العربي الذي كان الغرب يصوره تارةً على أنه إرهابي متعدٍ وتارةً أخرى على أنه صامت خامل لينال بثوراته العاصفة إعجاب العالم. لذلك يتناول البحث بالدراسة و التحليل عدة مشاهد مقتطفة من بعض الأعمال الأدبية التي تمثل حركات المقاومة و الثورات العربية للتدليل على هذا التفاعل الحيوي. و يعتمد التحليل على أربعة محاور أساسية هي المحور الفردي و الجماعي و النفسي- و أخيراً السياسي الاجتماعي. وتتراوح الأعمال الأدبية المختارة بين ما نشر في فترة الخمسينيات مثل *الأرض* لعبد الرحمن الشرقاوي و ما نشر حديثاً و تنبأت أحداثه بقيام ثورة يناير في مصر مثل قصة *أجنحة الفراشة* لمحمد سلماوي.

الكلمات الدالة:
المقاومة ، الثورة ، النظام السياسي، الاستشراق ، الاستعمار الغربي

Introduction

The most remarkable feature of revolution in the Arab Spring is the fact that it was not led by a particular political leader, faction, or party. The revolutions sweeping along the Arab street are revolutions of the people: rich and poor, young and old, intellectuals and uneducated, religious and liberals. If only great revolutions are believed to be led by great men, all revolutions owe their success to the might of the people, Gustave Le Bon confirms, adding that "if the revolution is to be productive of great results it must always be based upon general discontent and general hopes" (15). Discontent with the prevailing injustices, hardships, privation, constant suffering and humiliation that prevailed in the Arab world should be espoused to a dominating, inspiring hope for

effecting a change and creating a better future. Spring, associated with life and the blossoming buds, lays hope on the burgeoning potentials of the youth whose prompt and wide-scale mobilization owes a great deal to social media and the unprecedented revolution in information and communication technology.[1] In spite of the prime importance ascribed to social media in allowing people to mobilize, to cross boundaries, to interact and to invent highly creative tactics, the power of the human agent reigns supreme. These young people – who are seeking dignity in life, or rather seeking a dignified life that they can build with their own hands, according to their own beliefs and their own potentialities – can do miracles. Human dignity is what actually enhances human progress, and these young people want to make sure that they "are never reduced to mere instruments for the benefit of any utopian goals, ideology or science" (Misztal 119). Given the proper chance, the transformative and creative powers of this human agent can recreate a new political identity, new national consciousness, and more importantly new structures of power relations.

In the modern history of the Middle East, movements of resistance and revolution have been tied up with Western imperialism and the oppressive colonial powers, which cannot be divorced from the East/West dichotomous world views and the idea of Orientalism. Most of the postcolonial political regimes in the Arab world, allegedly West-aligned, were bequeathed the

heavy legacy of modernizing (often misinterpreted and largely practiced as Westernizing) the long-suppressed long-manipulated Arab who is now seeking emancipation. Today with the encroachment of the givens of the era of globalization, and the Arab world being the theatre for many conflicts between various forms of hegemonic control and incessant resistance, the Arab Spring revolutions acquire particular local as well as global significance. The imbrications of the deteriorating economic and sociopolitical conditions in our societies and their impact on the people and their life cannot be considered outside the wider cultural milieu and its diverse warring provisions. This paper, therefore, argues that there is a certain line of development that can be traced in the interaction between certain psychological factors that pertain to the human agent, and the economic and sociopolitical factors that prevail in the Arab communities at large and the Egyptian society in particular. An analysis of various manifestations of this interaction in four selected novels dealing with different historical episodes of modern Egypt is believed to highlight the operative power of the human agent in effecting resistance and revolution.

Crisis, Elites and the Masses

It has been claimed that absolute power corrupts and that the East has long suffered the vagaries of oppressive rulers simply because the people allow for absolute power without the proper forms of surveillance (Himdan 136)[2]. Historically, a

popular revolution led mainly by the people on the street has never been quite successful in Egypt: people, the masses on the street, participate but are unlikely to lead, renowned geographer Jamal Himdan asserts in his seminal work *Shakhsiyat Misr (The Character of Egypt*) (141). In spite of his assertion, Himdan is careful to refute the concomitant charges of the negative attributes of submissiveness, cunning and servility in the face of oppression as being created and propagated by colonial powers and their allies in order to destroy the morale of the Egyptians and their capacity for resistance (135). The prevailing corruption on the political, economic and social levels has often given rise to different, though not very effective, forms of resistance. Samah Selim points out that the incessant discourse on Arab "*nahḍa*" (renaissance) and the modern Arab successive defeats on different levels have enforced on us the "story of brief 'awakening' followed by irredeemable decline and corruption" – a story which is "no longer tenable" after the January revolution (385)

Generally, the Arab Spring revolutions, and more specifically the January revolution in Egypt, altered the long-standing historical paradigms of resistance and revolution in the Middle East. The shift from political elites/leaders as acting agents to the power of the people on the street – to the young ordinary people as political actors who were finally able to bring about the revolution and topple down the regime – marks a new

era in power relations. This era started two or three decades before the revolution: with the Palestinian *Intifadas*, the successive Israeli massacres of the Palestinians in response and the subsequent invasions of Gaza, the West Bank and Lebanon, the Gulf war and the American invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan under the pretext of the "war on terrorism." Leading committed political figures *à la Nasser* (despite certain failures), were no longer available, allowing spacious room for Western calls for imposing democracy and political reform. The long-lasting dissonance and the almost total absence of proper reactions from Arab leaders left the scene for what was termed as "street politics" (Bayat 11). The streets in most Arab and Muslim countries time and again swarmed with indignant masses who would not be pacified and who were usually described as angry violent mobs causing riots and unrest. The street was the locus of the birth or rather rebirth of the spirit of resistance; hence the rise of the once-terrorist, aggressive, once-silent, inert Arab who has suddenly come to deserve the applause of the once-denouncing, now-approving, though at times apprehensive, West. In 2003, Asef Bayat wrote in the *Middle East Report* in response to Western accusations,

> The Arab street is neither "irrational" nor "dead," but is undergoing a major transformation caused both by old constraints and new opportunities brought about by global restructuring. As a means and mode of expression, the Arab street may be shifting, but the collective

> grievance that it conveys remains. To ignore it is to do injustice to both moral sensibility and rational conduct of politics (17).

The current Arab revolutions therefore seem to reflect a newborn ideology of a new generation adamant on mapping out new power relations over interior as well as exterior spaces.

Though the focus of this paper is not the analysis of political events *per se*, the selection and analysis of specific scenes from specific novels have been enlightened by political theory, particularly by a model of revolution developed by Jack Goldstone (1995), an eminent contemporary academic and political theorist. The model is based on the conjunction of three main conditions: the state is in crisis (deterioration, corruption, moral disintegration, etc.); the elites are alienated and in conflict (political, social, intellectual, etc.); and there is a high possibility of mobilizing population for protest. Accordingly revolution in its political sense of overthrowing a political regime comes as a consequence of a complex interaction between these factors. Though not adopted as a framework for the analysis strictly speaking, the model was found to be particularly informing in formulating the argument of the paper in relation to the power of the human agent in resistance and revolution.

Resistance and Revolution in Modern Arabic Literature

Resistance and revolution as a dominant theme in Modern Arabic literature has often been dealt with on a variety of levels including the

socio-political, the purely ideological, the highly intellectual, to that which pertains to the basic existence of the human being. Halim Barakat reflects on this preoccupation of the Arabs with struggle and revolution in an article written back in the seventies,

> Contemporary Arab writers have been preoccupied with themes of struggle, revolution, liberation, emancipation, rebellion, alienation. A writer could not be a part of Arab society and yet not concern himself with change. To be oblivious to tyranny, injustice, poverty, deprivation, victimization, repression is insensitively improper. I would even say that writing about Arab society without concerning oneself with change is a sort of engagement with irrelevances ("Arabic novels" 125)

According to Barakat, struggle, revolution and change in our societies imply life. The prevalent oppression in diverse forms and on different levels would necessarily lead to either struggle or submissiveness. Submissiveness, hardly an option for those who seek liberation, leaves the door widely open for those who carry the burden of struggle. The power of the opponent might lead to suppression; hence the state of exile and alienation or the persecution of the struggling victims. In the case of success revolution and liberation set in motion the desired-for change.

Following are a number of short scenes from four fictional works.[3] An analysis of these scenes is to be carried out on four corresponding axes: the individual

versus the collective, and the psychological versus the sociopolitical. The selected scenes are considered within the wider context of the novels to demonstrate how the organic interactive nature of each work affects its interpretation. The analysis is meant to highlight how the interaction of the three aforementioned conditions in Goldstone's theory along with certain culture-specific provisions can be placed within the more inclusive context of the global situation and of revolution as a natural stage in the development of human society. For the purpose of this paper, the Egyptian novel is considered as representative of Arabic literature.[4] The selected works are: *Al Arḍ (Egyptian Earth)* by Abd el Rahman El Sharqawy, *Assuhul Albeeḍ* (*White Valleys*) by Abd el Hameed Juda El Sahhar, *Ayyam Alinsan Assab'a (The Seven Days of Man*) by Abd el Hakeem Qassem and a more recent novel that was said to have predicted the January Revolution in Egypt by Mohammad Salmawy, *Ajnihat el Farasha* (*The Wings of the Butterfly*).[5]

Egyptian Earth

El Sharqawy's novel gives a wonderful, in-depth account of the life of the peasants in Egypt before the 1952 revolution. Rather distressing, though at times hilariously comic, the novel underscores the inextricable bond between the peasants and the Egyptian earth, which for them is not only a source of dignity but also a source of life. Resistance here springs from this bond that ties them to the earth and from their awareness of the threat of

having this bond severed for the benefit of a strong repressive power. The scene selected from this novel (164-74) describes a fight between Abd el Hady (the main character: a poor, but tough and well-liked peasant) and Diab (a better-off, though less powerful and less popular character) over the water for irrigating their land. The incident takes place after the government, under British Occupation, limited the period of irrigation allotted to the land of the peasants to five days only instead of ten which would ultimately destroy their land. They are left with the bitter and helpless feeling that their land is deprived of water to have an excess to be squandered on the land of the *Pasha*. The feeling of bitterness and alienation among them, writes Halim Barakat, "stems essentially from powerlessness and a preoccupation with their daily bread;" which leaves them vulnerable to "exploitation, domination, humiliation and sickness" (*Arab World* 91). The scene unfolds rapidly as the dual brawl abruptly turns into a more violent scuffle that involves most of the peasants in the village, only coming to a sudden halt when a woman screams that the ox that turns the water wheel (*essaqia*) has fallen into the pit; the lashing arms and the flying cudgels instantly come down and everyone runs to the rescue of the afflicted ox. After an enormous collective effort, it is finally rescued and both Abd el Hady and Diab are happily reconciled like everyone else.

A number of key points materialize here. Oppressed by the unjust decision of the government

and feeling paralyzed and helpless towards the land which is dearer to them than their own lives, the anger and hostility, generated among the peasants, are directed towards a different path: against each other. The hostility, violent though as it might have been and not serving their purpose, transpires to be fragile and short-lived: harmony and mutual support quickly and decisively take over when directed towards a common goal.[6] On the one hand, their individuality is emphasized by the fact that each of them prioritizes his own right; and on the other hand, the prompt and rather abrupt transformation of the action from the individual to the collective level demonstrates a strong sense of solidarity and communal feelings which make the possibility of mobilization significantly high. A strange vivacious feeling of pride that does not suit the abject poverty in which they live manifests itself in the way they ferociously fight, stop and nobly rush to the rescue, affectionately reproach each other, and then graciously and happily reconcile.

Naïve, simple-minded and culturally impoverished with no clear ideological stance, as they might seem to be, these peasants are yet aware of the political events and the direct impact they bear on their lives, aware of their rights and ready to take action and fight for them, even if they do not possess the proper means. They stand up against a British-aligned government and the unpopular People's Party; they boycott the elections, say no to the unjust constitution and are imprisoned

and humiliated for that (88). They relate resisting oppression and exploitation to manliness and submissiveness to an effeminate attitude that belies the very idea of masculinity (66), in spite of the fact that even Wassifa and the other women fight the oppression of the *Umda* (mayor) in a hilariously comic scene while the men are in prison (244-250). Within the obvious imbalance in power relations, any act of oppression might grudgingly pass without the proper retaliation in spite of the anger and the bitterness it incurs, except when it comes to the land (66). The fact that one of them works on, and has his sweat mingling with the earth, even if it was not his own, fosters this inextricable bond and no money or any other means of compensation would make up for its loss (348). Abd el Hady feels as if the whole land of the village belonged to him; appropriating or destroying another peasant's land is tantamount to appropriating or destroying *his* own land (313); defending the land is therefore a nonnegotiable imperative.

Cultural resistance[7] imposes on these peasants an awareness of the nature of Western imperial powers, in spite of their poor education or lack thereof practically speaking. The nostalgic pride they take in the glory of previous acts of resistance – the 1919 revolution and the folk epics that relate heroic acts like el Adham's, and Abu Zeid el Hilaly's (282, 285, 346, 349) – is a sign of their inability to give up resistance even when it seems to be hardly effective. Their resort to folk culture is in itself an act of

resistance that consolidates their national pride in the face of an oppressive imperial power. The folk songs they keep reiterating, simple though as they may sound, reflect their unyielding resistant attitude as much as it reflects their awareness of the exploitative imperial motives of the British:

> Oh Englishman, a thief by all means You stole my barley, my wheat, and my beans (282).

The patently penurious life, the biting hunger, and the heart-wrenching inability to make ends meet make them all the more aware of the manipulative economic policies of the rich Western countries that burn the cotton exceeding their need and throw strategic crops like wheat and coffee into the sea in order to maintain their hegemonic control over world economy (277-8). According to their own simple logic, just like the *Pasha* who stole the water needed for their land, these countries did not and would not do anything except what serves their own interests which incidentally strikes at the very heart of the truth. Bill Ashcroft in discussing this idea of imperial excess of wealth rightly relates it to cultural hegemony and points out that "[i]mperial power expends its excess wealth through war --- to create greater wealth, which is then diffused as luxury;" he then aptly adds that "luxury is ideally exported as high culture --- [which] is an extremely prodigal expenditure of surplus energy accumulated as wealth" (37). The reticular hegemonic nature of the imperial power manifests itself even more in a postcolonial

context which has practically proven that

> the expenditure of surplus energy through cultural hegemony long lasts the 'luxury' of war, invasion and annexation, and maintains the production of wealth which is always distributed centripetally. In other words, cultural hegemony maintains the economy of wealth distribution (37).

The scathing irony of the simple folk song quoted earlier, therefore, is evidently manifest in Ashcroft's proposition of "this trans-phenomenal, trans-discursive movement of energy" (37); he designates this "excess" or "surplus wealth," as "the energy stolen from the colonized world in the first place" (39).

White Valleys

Assuhul Albeeḍ or *White Valleys* is written by Abdel Hameed Juda El Sahhar in 1965 to record the heroic deeds of the popular resistance in Port Said during the 1956 tripartite aggression on Egypt. In this novel the same attitude is reflected towards the inevitability of armed resistance when encountering a relentless enemy who is bent on breaking not only their necks, but also the emerging power of their country and their restored national pride. Abbud at the beginning of the novel is in the camp of the doves: he hates fighting, opposes violence and cannot stand the sight of blood, but he proves to be a diehard militant when it comes to the resistance of an aggressive oppressive enemy during the war. Rassem, Mamoon's Palestinian friend in the resistance, lives for the single hope of going back home and revenging the murder of

his mother. Recounting the atrocities committed by the Israelis in Deir Yasseen when he was only 13, he remembers how he ran to join the resistance telling his mother that he was a man and it was his duty to fight the enemies of his country; crying bitterly and holding on to him when an Israeli soldier drags him, she was savagely stabbed by another in front of his eyes (153). Fanoos (whose name literally means lantern implying a light that guides in the darkness) tells Hassan and Abbud, two of the militant protagonists, after listening to the news of the Feda'een successfully performing operations deep onto the Israeli borders and coming back safely, "your days abound with honorable struggle and heroic deeds. May those days of humiliation that we lived through during the British Occupation never come back! If I were younger, I could have become a Fida'ee now" (157). A little later, Hassan says, "I wish we could have the chance to fight to regain Palestine." And as the idea takes possession of his consciousness, he adds,

> I feel stricken by shame whenever I think that a gang of Jews challenged millions of Arabs, settled in the heart of their homeland and established a State that hustles, disgraces and humiliates them. --- even if we had a million martyrs while fighting them, it would only be a cheap price for washing away the dishonor thathas befallen us. I wish I'd die in such a battle (157).

In spite of the numerous scenes canvassing the gallant resourceful acts of resistance by

the poorly armed yet unyielding Egyptians, the scene selected for consideration here involves the valiant feat achieved by a different kind of character, Jeanette, Tawfeeq's British wife. Though adored by her husband, a feeling that she highly cherishes and reciprocates, she has often been the subject of ungrounded, yet silent, suspicions from others due to her British origin. In this scene (353-4) Jeanette is safely walking in the street looking into the eyes of the Egyptians she encounters, only to read in them deep faith, unrelenting determination, and strength of character. Comparing this to what she saw in the eyes of her own people in London during WWII, she realizes that the Egyptians have proven themselves even more valiant than the British. It suddenly dawns upon her that her own people are raining down fire and napalm bombs on the helpless and unarmed civilians while she is walking unharmed among them without anyone holding her accountable for that, and she wonders what if the situation was reversed: an Arab walking in London while his people were committing these hideous crimes; wouldn't they simply tear him apart?![8] The scene reaches a climax with the raid sirens resounding, followed by heavy shelling and people running everywhere: a helpless child standing alone in the middle of the street, crying. Jeanette, amid the wonder that almost amounts to benign jealousy experienced by the characters involved, swiftly runs to his rescue, holds him in her arms and runs towards a shelter, when suddenly a splinter lodges in

her and she falls, bleeding heavily. In her own bed, with her loving husband by her bedside, she faintly opens her eyes and whispers in a hushed voice before she peacefully passes away, "Resist this oppression!"

The insights that a close reading of this scene yields are invaluable to the purpose of my argument in this paper in relation to the commanding influence of the human agent and the attempt to relate this to the wider global situation. The writer seems to effortlessly take the reader by the hand to cross the troubled boundaries in recent cultural studies between the decidedly political and the particularly humane in the relations between different nations especially in a colonial/post-colonial context that involves oppression and exploitation on one side and struggle and bitter resistance on the other.[9] Earlier in the novel Jeanette unflinchingly speaks out the deep-entrenched Orientalist attitudes on which she had been brought up. She tells Tawfeeq and Mamoon that like many other children in her country, she had been taught that Muslims are enemies; they are "cunning, deceptive, lustful and blood-thirsty; they kill those who refuse to convert to their religion" (41). As a young lady, the ordeal of falling in love with Tawfeeq was a turning point in her life:

> When Tawfeeq proposed to me, all the frightening subconscious ideas took over: I saw myself being dragged to join his *hareem*, I saw sands, tents, and men who are good for nothing except calling for prayers, kneeling and

> prostrating. The picture was so fragmented that on being more closely scrutinized it only increased my confusion. But I ***resisted*** in order not to remain in the grip of such thoughts --- It crossed my mind that Tawfeeq might force me to wear the *hijab*. But I ***struggled*** to tear up the *hijab* that was enforced on my own mind by virtue of a Western culture that taught me to hold in contempt and apprehension all that belonged to the Arabs and to Islam. It was easy for love to eradicate the doubts and the hatred; and I accepted to be the wife of a Muslim (42; emphasis mine).

The importance of this quotation looms large in the context of resistance as it shows that Jeanette was involved in resistance the moment she fell in love with Tawfeeq. Like many Egyptians, and like Said's Orient who becomes "orientalized" by the hegemony of the Western colonizer, Jeanette's mind was colonized, "orientalized" by ideas about the Other, the Orient – ideas that had long and deliberately been cemented to serve colonial motives. Steve Pile rightly argues that "colonial power is partly mobilized through the imposition of a system of values that the colonized must recognize;" this system is based on forms of knowledge that deliberately suppress certain features while magnifying others which "denigrate" them in order to "maintain control" (17). If, as Steve Pile points out, resistance does not occur only on external spaces but must also "engage the colonized spaces of people's inner worlds," (17) then this means that

Jeanette was struggling to set up, to quote Pile yet again, "a garrison within the conquered city of the mind" (24), but in this case it is *her* own mind, an English woman by origin. Without setting up this garrison, she would have never been able to marry the man she loved, and to cross over the border between what Pile calls "resistance to power" and "resistance for power" (24). The Egyptians are struggling against an oppressive power (i.e. resistance to power), in order to gain and maintain power over their land, over their fate (i.e. resistance for power). Many people in the West "resist" the change that has come over Jeanette (the creation of new "inner spaces"), they "resist for power", or rather for maintaining Western power. Jeanette's struggle, however, is, "resistance to power," the power of the hegemony of Western culture, and its inability to form the proper bridges of communication with the Other on account of the bequeathed colonial idea of the superiority of the West. On another occasion, when her British friend Williams laughs heartily at what seemed from one point of view to be political hypocrisy, but in fact serves British interests,[10] Jeanette bitterly tells him that this will ultimately lead to severing all good relations between England and the Arabs and that in order to maintain such relations the British politicians have to understand the real feelings of the new Arab generation (El Sahhar 98). Pile further argues that "the production of 'inner spaces' [in the colonized] marks out the real break point of political struggle" (17), but

Jeanette's case is not simply illustrating the creation of new "inner spaces" on the side of the (post)colonized, but is obviously pointing to the imperative necessity to create corresponding spaces on the other side in order to overcome political struggle. Her final words, "resist this oppression," underscore her belief that the failure of creating such corresponding inner spaces on the part of the Western powers certainly legitimizes the armed resistance of "this oppression." Pile emphasizes the fact that "resistance should seek out appropriate and progressive ways of thinking about boundaries between people which enable difference to be accepted, recognized and even enjoyed," adding that this will ultimately "enable the 'problem' of the boundaries between inner psychic resistance and outer political resistance to be addressed" (29).

The Seven Days of Man

The Seven Days of Man was written by Abd el Hakeem Qassem in 1969. Qassem started his literary career in the mid 1960s; shortly after, he was imprisoned during Nasser's era and then sent to exile in Berlin where he lived until 1985. The novel portrays the conflict between the age-old, well-established serenely undisturbed sense of belonging of the simple villagers and the pathetic failure of Abd el Aziz, the coming-of-age protagonist, to belong either to the simple world of the village where he was born and where he lived for the better part of his life or to that of the city with its promising allurements. The spiritual

alienation experienced by Abd el Aziz, particularly when it comes to his relation with his father, is consciously underlined time and again with the whole village getting totally involved in an act of love and devotion that enhances the strong sense of solidarity and communal feelings that bind them. Preparing for the *mulid* [11] of el Sayed el Badawy in Tanta, they seem to be living, acting, feeling and thinking as though they were all one man, heart and soul, except for him:

> -- Among them Abd el Aziz was always lonely. All the iron atoms are uniformly attracted to this magnetic pole. He is the only one who seemed to be molded from a different kind of metal that does not harmonize (141).
>
> -- I wish to go to the movies Am el Haj.
>
> In the evening all the brethren would gather: Haj Kareem recounting stories and Ahmad Badawy laughing while listening.
>
> These people perceive things in a different way or perhaps their perception is much deeper than his (159-60).
>
> -- Electric wires connect these people, but *he* is a bad conductor of electricity. He looks for a quiet spot in this beehive. Ah! The coffee maker. He found him drowned in the buzzing sound of the little kerosene stove. He wonders as he looks at the coffee pot that, just like himself, it might be full of something black and bitter. The face of the coffee maker is beaming with strange haloes of light. He sat beside him for a moment (168).

It is always "them," "these people," "the brethren,"

"gathering," "pursuing," "connected together," while he is "lonely," "different," "does not harmonize," "is a bad conductor," "full of something black and bitter." Abd el Aziz's attitude here represents what is referred to by Muhsin al Mussawy as the discourse of rejection (*khitab al imti'aad*) that portrays and denounces, in one way or another, the status quo without showing signs of aptitude to make an effective change possible, despite a marked tendency for reform *(Elites* 50). This type of discourse, Mussawy contends, appeared earlier, though in a different vein, in Najib Mahfouz's novels before the 1952 revolution as in *Midaq Alley, Mirage,* and *A Beginning and an End* (50). In such discourse there is always this dichotomous attraction towards the Other (usually represented in the Modern Westernized, and here in the alluring promise of the city) at one extreme and the rich legacy and given realities of one's own local culture at the other extreme (51). By juxtaposing two different states and showing the protagonist's failure to give in to either, alienation and spiritual exile are definitely emphasized. It is the same state of angst, the "simmering tension and doubt" that was portrayed earlier by Mahouz in Kamal Abdel Jawad in the *Triology,* and by Yehia Haqqi in Ismail in *Qandeel Um Hashim (Um Hashim's Lamp) (Islam* 111*).* The attraction to the Other as the desired, to-be-emulated modern, or the only alternative to the rejected status quo with all its cultural, traditional, and frustrating sociopolitical ramifications seems

to repeatedly ensnare the fictional characters that represent the intellectual rebel.

The concept of the intellectual as exile – practically speaking as the author of the novel or figuratively speaking in the sense of being shut out from the communality of the group like Abd el Aziz – is tied up with the feelings of frustration on the part of the intellectual elites on the one hand, and the idea of the role of the intellectual on the other. Edward Said points out that by and large "we have become accustomed to thinking of the modern period itself as spiritually orphaned and alienated, the age of anxiety and estrangement" (137). Qassem and his protagonist, to use Said's words in relation to James Joyce and his hero, Stephen Daedalus, seem to resort to exile in order to "sustain the strict opposition to what was familiar" (145). In a (post-)colonial context when one is still struggling to reconcile oneself with new contentious realities and to establish a strong sense of nationalism, exile in a sense simultaneously becomes a means for and a manifestation of such a struggle. Said explains that "the interplay between nationalism and exile is like Hegel's dialectic of servant and master, opposites informing and constituting each other" (140). If nationalism involves the communal feeling of belonging to a group and being able to share their concerns, exile involves "the deprivations felt at not being with others in the communal habitation" (140). It is more of a spiritual and intellectual resistance, a self-imposed

psychological exile that is believed to allow him to "cross borders," to "break barriers of thought and experience," in short, to have an "originality of vision" (147-8). Whether exile here *is meant to* isolate the intellectual from what Said calls the "mass institutions" (146) and the mass culture with its bequeathed traditions and religious affiliations in order to impose the halo of an elitist perspective remains controversial.

Tariq Sabri criticizes this elitist perspective that alienates the Arab intellectual from the street and advocates a better understanding of the complexity of the masses on the streets, a complexity which, in the wake of the Arab Spring, cannot be ignored any more. The street has become a space for political contention, and the masses on the street have become political actors *par excellence*. Sabri writes,

> There is the epistemological deficit of Arab intellectuals' ceaseless undermining of the 'popular' in Arab cultures. Arab intellectuals' interpretations of culture --- are ideologized and highly elitist. --- The phrase 'Arab street' reflects the elitist stance and its distance from the majority of the population (164).

Though practically belied by the events of the Arab Spring and the January revolution, Sabri's claim remains absolutely valid in academia and scholarly research. Mussawy, however, in *Islam on the Street* contends that the reader of the novel cannot miss out in Abd el Aziz "[a] blend of resistance and acquiescence;" this blend is again more likely to assert the power of mass culture, and

what can be termed "a *nahḍa*-based inner conflict that many intellectuals have gone through, a struggle against tradition as sustained through family and community" (114). In this respect the encroachment of mass culture on the intellectual elites should lead to striking a balance between asymmetrical power relations implied in adopting Western liberalism on the one hand and adopting popular culture, tradition and conservatism on the other.

The Wings of The Butterfly

Dr. Ashraf el Zeini, in Mohammad Salmawy's *The Wings of the Butterfly*, seems to be able to simply, confidently, and practically find his way out of this exasperating quandary, thereby lighting the torch, and setting the path for others to follow. Doha is the well-educated, well-connected, comfortably-off and highly talented fashion designer who, seeking world-wide (i.e. Western) acclaim, flies to Milan for the international fashion show to have her butterfly-inspired dress designs exhibited. Uninterested in politics, her preoccupation with fashion seems to provide a means of compensation for her latent, growing dissatisfaction with her seemingly wonderful life. Her path, however, is compellingly revolutionized during the trip. On her way to the airport, she passes by Tahrir Square where the angry demonstrators have caused the police forces to block the roads. Being concerned only about her flight, she does not even bother to inquire about the demonstrations, their reasons, or the demands of the people involved. With a phone call to her husband, an important

figure in the ruling political party, the blocked road is instantly opened for her. Her detached attitude and her insistence to leave politics for her husband are indicative of a certain elitist alienation that is more akin to that experienced by Abd el Aziz. She can neither interact, nor get involved with the angry demonstrating masses in Tahrir Square; at least, not yet.

In Milan, however, just a couple of days before the show, the growing seeds of rebellion inside her are unexpectedly, though lavishly watered into fruition through two small but significant incidents. The first is inadvertently coming across a book on Egyptian butterflies, while the second is curiously learning the rules of the game through Dr. Ashraf's architectural designs:

> She looked at the sketches on the table, while listening to Dr. Ashraf say, "The designs combine ancient Egyptian architecture and Islamic architecture in a modern shape that goes well with the purpose of the building." She looked more closely at the sketches and was taken by their magnificence. The Italian professor said, "I suggested to Dr. Ashraf to present this original design to be awarded the international Agha Khan prize in architecture. It is an exemplar of modern architecture that is inspired by cultural heritage." His wife remarked, "You Egyptians are geniuses" (96).

At the outset she is unaware of the change that has come over her. Plagued with a terrible headache, she retires to her hotel room where she reconsiders the frustrations of her life. Her actions are well

thought out, prompt and decisive. She cancels her part in the fashion show, putting it off for the following year, to give herself the chance to work on better, more exquisite designs that are more expressive of her identity, or rather, her new-found sense of identity. She calls her brother over the phone, bitterly recounts the untold miseries of her marriage and insists on getting divorced. Back in Cairo, Doha is arrested during one of the protests against the regime. She is no longer alienated from the people. She learns to belong, to share, to feel for others, to have a free opinion and a clear stance, to act freely and fearlessly, to have a well-defined identity with clear-cut boundaries; in short, she becomes a revolutionary.

The implication of Doha's development is twofold. First, it has to do with the imbrications of the political and the personal in one's life, even if one is unaware, or rather unwilling to admit it. Second, it has to do with the privileging of the global over the local at one point without understanding, or, to quote Pile, "prior to an understanding of specific spatializations of domination and resistance involved in any conflict" (14). In the first part of the novel, prior to this change that has come over her, Doha's attitude towards her personal life is obviously more negative than positive. The secrets of a marriage, that is unfulfilling and psychologically draining in spite of a splendid outward appearance, remain a virtually concealed part of her life. Instead

of resisting and fighting back to get her rights, she remains silent and gives herself over to the world of fashion as some sort of compensation. Her insistence that she is not and will not get involved in politics in spite of the fact that her husband is an important political figure is also indicative of an escapist attitude that exposes the vulnerability of the female self especially when unable to possess a well-defined sense of identity. The trip to Milan and her relationship with Dr. Ashraf offer her some of the keys that would eventually provide her with the proper access she needs to a stronger hold of her life. Tahrir Square is a space of resistance that she had to pass through before realizing what kind of conflict she is involved in. The fact that she passes over the demonstrating crowds in Tahrir Square just before flying to Milan might not have triggered a conscious response on her part, but, resistance being contagious, certainly ignited a spark in her, and when she is back, her character transformed and enriched through the experience, she decides to take an active part and join the demonstrating masses.

The second point relates to her realizing the fact that seeking global recognition prioritizes a solid and firm consciousness of the distinctiveness of the local. The hegemony of Western culture might lead one's sense of the uniqueness of the local to subside or even worse to dissolve if one does not possess the proper means of resistance. With no distinct and strong sense of her own identity, and with the common equation of

the global with the Western, she initially proceeds to make her designs according to the dictates of Western tastes. However, as she develops a better awareness of her identity and better means of resistance, she discovers that these designs are mere copies; they do not represent her. She realizes that 'Egyptian,' 'Islamic,' 'modern,' and 'function' are keywords for her.

Postulating cultural heritage as an essential constituent of cultural identity has been emphasized by many theorists of culture as well as many eminent scholars of history and sociology. In an interesting study on the sociology of adaptation and resistance, Mahmoud Ouda cites a large number of Arabic and foreign studies that may be considered authorities in the field to prove that the Egyptians possess a unique cultural makeup that came along through a complex historical process of acculturation and accumulation of diverse historical and sociopolitical factors. This character tends to manifest contradictory features interwoven into a magnificent tapestry that might verge on the surrealistic for the unaccustomed eye. The most important of these contradictions has to do with a harmonious and simultaneous coexistence of the old and the new (46-7). Jamal Himdan also argues that the Egyptians' reluctance to dispose of the old has been inimitably characteristic since Pharaonic times. In discussing what he calls the continuities and discontinuities in the Egyptian character, Himdan elaborates on the exquisite phenomenon of "dynamic-static equilibrium"

which creates a sort of "civilized moderation" built on the cumulative continuity which modifies, develops and constantly adds to the old in a steady, deliberate but ceaseless process (231-2).

Conclusion

The four novels selected for examination reveal an indisputable preoccupation with the themes of struggle, resistance, and revolution on different levels, as pointed out by Barakat in relation to contemporary Arabic literature. A close reading of each of the selected scenes elucidates different aspects of a complex medley that stands for what might be termed the multi-layered, diversified cultural identity of the Egyptians. It is not only this rich diversification that empowers the Egyptian model as representative of the Arabs at large, but also the fact that the Egyptians are accustomed to leading, not to being led – which means that the relation between the people and their rulers is a determinate factor for either their progress or their deterioration (Himdan 139). The nexus of human relations so vibrantly portrayed throughout the novels, especially in Sharqawy's and Sahhar's novels, shows the true colors of the Egyptian character. The power, diversity and complexity of the human agent as exemplified in this character, therefore, act as a decisive factor in the interaction between the various economic and sociopolitical conditions both on the local and the global scenes. It is a dialectic fusion of thesis and antithesis that make up a unique mosaic. The major motif in this

mosaic is that the notion of identity, both in the national and cultural sense, is historically bound up with the concept of resistance and revolution. Reading into the cultural scene of the Arab world today to contextualize the work of the four novelists and their ideological bearing as reflected through a close reading of the selected scenes, we find that asymmetrical power relations still govern and control the production and dissemination of "culture." At one extreme there is pro-Western liberalism, where 'beauty in the eye of the beholder' transforms the Other into the one and only available alternative to the bitter frustrations of a near oppressive past and the harsh realities of a given unsatisfactory "present" – it is discontent with this present and hope for a better future that caused the January revolution in the first place. At the other extreme, there is anti-Western conservatism, often and probably wrongly associated with religious groups, fundamentalists and those who came to be known as 'Islamists' (as distinct from 'Muslims', they are often defined as those who seek political reform through Islam). The problem with these groups, from a Western perspective, is the fact that 'pro-Islam' has almost come to be equated with 'anti-West.'[12]

Based on a long history of misconceptions, misrepresentations and misinterpretations, on the one hand, and the negative impact of the bitter struggle with the oppressive colonial powers on the other hand, the relationship between the Arab Islamic world

and the West has been moving along a convoluted path that has often resulted in a blurred vision precluding the desired mutual understanding, and the hoped-for cooperation, despite the existence of a few moderate exceptions. In an article entitled "The Strange Career of Radical Islam" Timothy McDaniel warns the West against the idea of an Islamic revolution in the Middle East: "[t]he combination of Islam and revolution is one of the major threats to human rights in our time, as dangerous in its own way as was communism" (169). This is because, he argues, Islam is ultimately based on the idea of "submission to the will of God." The idea in itself is "an alien and politically and economically dangerous stance from the point of view of cultural materialism prevalent in the West;" accordingly, the political empowerment of the contemporary Islamic movements would lead to a religious regime that is "totalitarian, insensitive to the priority of a set of inalienable individual rights over and above any social and political vision" (169). This might ultimately lead to what Huntington famously termed the "clash of civilizations." In a survey research, Mark Tessler warns that such analyses are in fact grounded in biased ideology which posits "Islam not only as a stimulus to aggressive and anti-Western sentiments, but also as the principal reason democracy has not taken root in Arab and many other Muslim-majority countries" (176). Tessler adds that figures from surveys and polls reveal that the attitudes of young Arabs and Muslims towards Western society,

though "complicated and shaped by changing conditions" (180) are generally more positive than negative, and that the more negative ones are "for the most part a response to perceptions and judgments regarding U.S. foreign policy" (181).

Of paramount importance at this crucial stage is the creation of new "inner spaces" as demonstrated by Jeanette in El Sahhar's novel, and also, on a different level, by Doha in Salmawy's novel. Considering the rich diversification in our societies and the cultural pluralism on the contemporary global scene, the creation of the proper "inner spaces" can promote mutual understanding nationally and internationally. The concept of "mutuality," advocated by Wolfgang Iser as a means of bringing diverse cultures closer, is a close variation on the same tune. Iser emphasizes the importance of understanding and mutual cooperation for dispelling misconceptions and effecting closeness. Mutuality, both as stance and regulator, works to resolve intricacies not only intra-culturally but also inter-culturally because, he explains, it "is marked simultaneously by an insurmountable difference between cultures and an interminable drive to build bridges" (301), adding that "a cross cultural discourse requires a certain amount of self-effacement, perhaps a suspension of one's own stance, at least for a certain time in order to listen to what the others are trying to say" (302). The principal objective in the creation of these new "inner spaces" or advancing mutuality should be

respecting and promoting human dignity.

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Notes

(1) This paper was first presented in the Eleventh International Symposium on Comparative Literature: "Creativity and Revolution" November 13-15, 2012. Department of English Language and Literature, Cairo University

(2) E.g. Jeffrey (2012), Rodenbeck (2011), Shahine (2011). The ICT revolution as a global revolution inevitably brings in winds of change worldwide. Revolution in human society usually follows a basic pattern that recurs in the natural development of societies from one stage to another, occurring probably to different nations at different periods according to the place they occupy in the world geographically and historically. The development proceeds usually from the rural to the capitalist industrialist and finally to the global. Political revolutions in the history of modern Egypt coincide with this socioeconomic pattern. Rural societies, rather conservative, stable and resistant to change, tend to observe traditions, rely on popular culture and exhibit a strong sense of solidarity and communal feelings. Stability and communality impose a rather slow temporal pace on rural societies. The industrialist capitalist society is more dynamic, energetic with a much faster temporal pace. As opposed to the traditional rural society, it celebrates modernity; encourages individualism, creativity and personal initiatives; and is highly dependent on mechanization, mass production and the flow of capital. The global brings in, or is rather the consequence of, vast strides in the development of means of producing and acquiring knowledge which makes it possible for people on one side of the globe to follow the news of those on the other side of the globe in the 'real time' of the event (Yasseen 58). In this sense revolution meaning change is the natural order of things. Moving from one stage of

development to the other, however, change in the Egyptian society (a rural society geographically and historically), is never consummate as it always retains aspects and features that become indigenous to the people.

(3) Jamal Himdan's argument in relation to Egypt is based on the premise that the Egyptian people have fallen into the habit of venerating their ruler since the time of the Pharaohs when everything in their life depended on a central government that could impose order on the flooding Nile that was a source of life and of chaos as well (22).

(4) Fiction, for the space it allows the writer, is critically considered as the most suitable genre for portraying the sociopolitical conditions prevalent in a certain society and well as being commensurately pertinent for psychological realism.

(5) The limitation imposed by space and the need to narrow down the scope of the paper technically impose such restrictions, but there are other more important reasons referred to in the conclusion.

(6) Though two of the novels are translated into English (Egyptian Earth, translated by Joseph Norman Bele (Cairo:GEBO, 1989) and The Seven Days of Man translated by Desmond Stewart with a forward by Robin Ostle (London: Saqi Books (1962) 1990), all references are made to the Arabic versions listed in the 'Works Cited', and the English translations of all quotations are mine. This applies to all the Arabic sources used in this paper.

(7) In the January Revolution the situation is reversed, though the significance cannot go unnoticed. It was only in the first 18 days of the revolution, when all the demonstrators had one grand common goal unifying them (leave: irhal) that they were acting

as one entity, conforming to the dictates of the common goal regardless of the diversity of the affiliations of the different groups and the different social classes involved. The magic works. Demand granted, goal achieved, conformity gives way to the diversity of groups and social classes with their different demands, which, though minor, cannot be achieved as easily because their unity is broken up, and conflict with its disconcerting consequences plagues the revolutionary scene.

(8) It is common knowledge that during the British Occupation many Egyptians especially from the middle and lower classes refused to speak or even to learn the English language or be involved with the British culture as a means of cultural resistance.

(9) El Sahhar's awareness of the difference between the Egyptians and the British and of the nature of the relation between the East and the West makes Jeanette's thought more like a predictive reading of the aftermath of 9/11 when an Arab simply came to be equated with a terrorist and being of an Arab origin in the West would be enough reason to open the doors of hell on you regardless of any other irrelevant circumstances.

(10) Even though back in the fifties the situation involved more directly pronounced hostilities, today it is not as different as it might appear at first sight as has been recently demonstrated through Western attitudes to the Arabs and Islam on more than one occasion (e.g. attitudes towards hijab in France, the burning of the Quran by an American clergyman, the offensive Danish cartoons, and the equally offensive American movie in relation to the Prophet PBUH and to Islam, the barbaric slaughter of innocent people like

the Egyptian woman Marwa El Sherbini in Germany, etc.).

(11) The reference was made to the politics of Nuri el Said in Iraq and Ben-Gurion in Israel.

(12) 'Mulid' as a religious celebration is part of mass culture that holds sway among many Egyptians; in spite of the spirituality and communality manifest in such celebrations in Egypt, sometimes there are some practices, especially in the countryside, that verge on popular culture more than religious rituals proper.

(13) The barrage of events in the last few decades (the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Block, the 9/11 event and its aftermath, followed by the American war on Iraq and Afghanistan, etc.) is believed to have invigorated in the post-cold-war period a not-quite-new paradigm for warring interests "in which Islam was set up as the 'new enemy' for the modern liberal Western democracies" (Shah 65).

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