

## A New Oriental Bird with Leaden Wings:

On Saad Elkhadem's *Ajniha Min Rasas*

The passage to Europe has been the subject of many Arabic novels in Egypt and other Arab countries. The impact of Western individualistic and materially oriented civilization on the sensibility of a vulnerable confused Oriental has been traced over and over again, since Tawfik Al-Hakim published his *Oriental Bird* (*Asfour Min Al-Sharq*) in 1938.<sup>1</sup>

Paris, the Latin Quarter, Montmartre, and Montparnasse figured in fiction and memoirs of the thirties and forties, as a brilliant world of art, culture, and easy pleasure, suddenly open before the wondering eyes of a fresh Oriental bird. Other European countries were used by later writers, but their protagonists were generally journalists or businessmen out for short spells of pleasure or on business trips to Italy, Germany, or Scandinavia.

In the fifties and early sixties a new type of Egyptian traveler hit Europe in large numbers. Young undergraduates who had failed to qualify for Egyptian universities were sent at the expense of their families to Austria and Federal Germany, to get a university education they could not obtain more cheaply at home. Those adolescents were even more vulnerable than their predecessors who had mostly been mature graduates or boys of well-to-do families with means and experience.

The muddles and little domestic tragedies in middle-class homes, the bitter failure and wasted youth which resulted from that widespread experience have not yet been fully and artistically represented in Arabic literature. A new novel by Saad Elkhadem gives, to my knowledge, the first artistic treatment of this new brand of Oriental in alien corn. *Ajniha Min Rasas* ("Wings of Lead"), a short novel published (1972) in Arabic by Dar al-Maaref is a highly artistic, almost poetic, rendering of the swift tragic fall of such a bird, who attempts the flight but finally finds that the leaden wings he commands can only carry him back home where he started.

A green adolescent from a lower middle-class family, with very little experience of the world sets out on a voyage to Europe with rosy dreams of studying medicine and becoming a famous surgeon in a few years. The boy is not in the least equipped for the quest. He has never been away from home; the dirty crowded third-class cabin on an old Turkish steamer gives him the first of a series of shocks that attend his luckless voyage. His arrival in Vienna marks the beginning of his disillusionment. The compatriots who meet him at the station are a group of riotous coarse boys, who have obviously lost contact with educational institutions of any kind. They spend their time drinking, cracking dirty jokes, and mocking the rosy dreams of the green lad fresh from home.

The boy discovers many obvious facts he should have known before sailing, if his people had been less ignorant of the requirements necessary for studying in a foreign university. He has to learn the language and pass a number of tests in basic science before he can be admitted to the School of Medicine. Most of his predecessors have already failed these tests and have now joined the crowds of immigrant laborers cheaply and intermittently employed at unskilled jobs. The only one who made good among his acquaintances is Ali Metwally. Ironically this paragon of success, whose name is mentioned with due pride at home, really lives off an old woman, obviously an ex-prostitute. She owns the bar where the uprooted Egyptians meet. He has to marry the old hag to remain in Austria.

"We Egyptians hit Europe with two sacks across the shoulders," he tells the narrator, "one is full of complexes and emotional sores, the other is swollen with wishful thoughts and crazy dreams" (p. 64).

The fall of the protagonist is swift and fateful. Above all, beware of women and wine, his father had warned him. Wine is the most deadly of sins. His first experience of wine is connected with his first encounter with women, the European civilized woman who takes him home and introduces him to her mother and presses him to drink a glass of wine. He disgraces himself miserably, throwing up on the white carpet. The narrator does not give details of his deterioration. An interval of four years is quickly passed over, with a few hints here and there as to the important incidents marking his decline. The boy becomes an alcoholic and when he hits the bottom, the Embassy comes to his rescue. He is flown back home. He flies home on wings of lead: a wreck and a fake; he wants to fly away somewhere, Australia, anywhere, but we the readers know that those wings of lead will never carry him far.

The narrative is short and condensed, all in the form of an internal monologue. The story is told in short rhythmic flashes, through the consciousness of the bewildered young hero. New characters and new scenes are conveyed to the reader with fresh immediacy, just as they make their impressions on his consciousness. Hints from the past are brought in quick flashbacks governed by association of ideas. A friendly Greek student tells him he has to depend entirely on himself, but adds that a girl friend would be a great help in acquiring the language. His father's words immediately flash in his memory "By God, if you come back with a European woman on your arm, I shall break your neck" (p. 34). The line is inserted in the narrative mixed with other thoughts recorded in the monologue, but the reader is at once carried back to the people at home, their wrong conception of life in Europe and their fear as to their son's falling a prey to the devilish snares of alien customs.

The author, naturally, has to select from millions of impressions that make up the consciousness of an individual. Unfortunately this principle of selection is exercised too severely about the middle of the action. There is a gap of four years in which the young man gradually deteriorates from the optimistic lad fresh from home to an utter failure, a disillusioned self-centered egoist and a hopeless alcoholic. The process is not worked out in the narrative. The passage of time, one of the major problems in novel writing, is not convincingly maintained. The author makes up for this by tying up the second part of the narrative closely with the first. Earlier themes recur, characters reappear, and old places are revisited; all are invested with a new meaning when suffused with the glaring light of experience. The novel ends on a note of hope as the hero looks over advertisements from Australia, but most readers would consider the new hope one of many self-deceptions in which he indulges.

The author, an Egyptian specialist in German language and literature, has brought to Arabic fiction a highly sharpened sensibility and a mature poetic vision.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>C.f. Fatma Moussa-Mahmoud, *The Arabic Novel in Egypt 1917-1970* (Cairo: The Egyptian General Book Organization, 1973), pp. 32-33.