

Political Satire in al-Khādim's *From Travels of the Egyptian Odysseus*

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Sa'd al-Khādim has been widely acclaimed by critics and reviewers in Egypt and North America for the avant-garde experimental techniques which permeate his earlier novels, *Wings of Lead* (1972) and *Experiences of One Night* (1975). In his most recent work, *From Travels of the Egyptian Odysseus* (1978),¹ he plays striking variations on devices of the interior monologue and stream of consciousness, breaking with the conventions of mimesis designed to capture the illusion of surface reality. The central character, who appears to suffer from schizophrenia, is confined to a hospital in Philadelphia, where he thinks aloud and addresses himself constantly, recording the atoms falling upon his mind at a heightened moment of crisis. Through hallucinations which often amount to "bouts of marvellously silly paranoia," he conveys deeply-rooted prejudices and frustrations, hopes and fears, outcries and mutterings. This narrative mode of expression is highly functional in releasing suppressed emotions and vivid recollections without fear or inhibition.

The novel is thus cast in the form of a soliloquy of one paragraph without any formal divisions or logical sequence, tracing the protagonist's life and relationships from schooldays to his middle-age dilemma. His mental pilgrimage represents a labyrinthine pattern which embraces a wide range of political and personal scenes in Cairo, Athens, Munich, Montreal, Toronto, and Philadelphia. It has been recently observed that the pivotal character's mental confusion "aptly reflects the state of mind of a shipwrecked society, helplessly caught between the rocks of imperialist aggression and the cliffs of poverty and underdevelopment in a quagmire of incompetence and petit-bourgeois deceit and self-interest."² Precisely. But the "shipwrecked" Egyptian society is not portrayed in a grave or somber manner; it is predominantly depicted through the medium of militant satire.

Roderick McGillis has perceptively classified the novel as "comic/absurdist," maintaining that it "will be familiar to readers of English literature because of its strain of bizarre, if not black, comedy."³ The comic element emanates in large measure from the protagonist who, as persona or second self, represents the author's satirical approach to major political scenes in modern Egypt. In effect, al-Khādim's humorous, sometimes hilarious, portrayal of the national milieu in the last decades, confirms the view that important events in history appear first in the form of tragedy and secondly in the form of farce. In this respect, he seems to follow the tradition of Gogol, adopting the literary device of the enchanted mirror which selectively distorts and magnifies, to make absurdity more absurd and illogicality more illogical.

¹Sa'd al-Khādim, *Min Rihlāt Odysseus al-Misri* (Cairo: Matba'at al-Dār al-Misriyah, 1978). The English translation is included in *Three Contemporary Egyptian Novels*, translated and edited by Saad El-Gabalawy (Fredericton: York Press, 1979). All citations refer to this edition. Page numbers are inserted parenthetically.

²Samar Attar, *Three Contemporary Egyptian Novels*, *World Literature Today*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (Winter 1980), p. 165.

³Roderick McGillis, "Despair, Madness and Political Tyranny in *Three Contemporary Egyptian Novels*," *IFR*, 6, No. 2 (1979), 157.

With a sharp eye for the rich potentialities of comedy, al-Khādīm designs a mosaic of anecdotal and satirical episodes. This is manifest, for instance, in his dynamic picture of anti-British protests by students in the 1940's, which displays the irrational element in the turmoil and uproar of the masses. The demonstrators, delighted to have a "patriotic" day of truancy, march triumphantly to the English School in a suburb of Cairo, where they start to hurl stones, while their shouts and profanities become increasingly boisterous. The headmaster, a tall and muscular Englishman, arrogantly looks down upon them from the terrace, his eyes glowering with rage and resentment. When he threatens to seek the help of the British military police, the crowd is suddenly shrouded in silence, as if "the man were a magician or hypnotist" (p. 28). Step by painful step, the students retreat from the school fence until they are safely remote from the "red giant," then make obscene gestures towards him, clamoring vehemently: "That is the idiot. That is the idiot. Why are you angry, sweetheart? Why are you mad, your mom's pet? God damn your mother's father" (p. 29). Gradually losing interest, they disperse aimlessly, still shouting their stereotyped platitudes and hackneyed political clichés.

The students' rhetoric reveals them as dithering buffoons jerked into activity by a desire for idleness. Their frivolous behavior during an allegedly patriotic demonstration reduces to absurdity the lofty goal of ending the British occupation. In his sarcastic description of the scene, al-Khādīm relies mainly on parody as a vehicle of satire. Paradoxically, he faithfully portrays reality, while blatantly distorting it. As one of the most deliberate literary techniques, parody searches out, by means of subversive mimicry, any weakness or pretension in its original, thus exposing the discrepancy between appearance and reality. It should also be noted that analytic mimicry usually verges on caricature which is basically deflationary and farcical. The novelist's parodic imitation of the students' demonstration relies to a great extent on humorous exaggeration and selected distortion of events. The Egyptian reader gets the impression that he has visited a strange, absurd, but surprisingly familiar world, which prevents him from taking the political episode seriously. Through a process of reduction, events which seem important or momentous fade into insignificance.

Likewise, al-Khādīm brilliantly weaves political anecdotes into the fabric of his satirical exposé of Nasser's Egypt. Many of them succinctly recreate the atmosphere of the period, even its tragic aspects, more effectively than could descriptive narrative. In the writer's absurd universe, no historical events are immune from comic and irreverent treatment. It is, however, an error of aesthetic judgement to regard his humor as essentially entertaining or trivial. For this is often a black humor that treads the brink of tears, especially when it serves to accentuate the catastrophic effects of tyranny on a simple and ignorant people, led blindly to the ignominy of crushing defeat. The tragedy here but needs a slight shift of perspective to disclose the element of farce. The peculiar dualism of comedy and tragedy in the novelist's satire leaves the reader with the incompatible feelings of mirth and horror. The psychic tension created by these conflicting emotions enhances aesthetic pleasure, as we experience political realities which are simultaneously absurd and incongruous but ugly and pathetic.

There is a hideous mockery in al-Khādīm's description of the first day of the war with Israel in 1967, making us continually aware of the sinister humor of cruelty and the cruelty of humor. The macabre comedy of the situation is superbly communicated through snatches of conversation among passengers on a bus in Cairo:

The crisis is over . . . America is scared and Israel is wetting its pants out of fear. The Vice-President is traveling abroad to explain everything. A masterstroke, no doubt. These are people who can only understand the logic of power. They say that the Minister of National Guidance speaks twelve languages, including six African dialects. The Egyptian missiles can destroy the heart of Israel in minutes. But the man [Nasser] is reluctant to use them, only because he is afraid to hurt the Moslems living there. May God protect you, bighearted one. Montgomery himself said that the Egyptian soldier is the best fighter in the world. No, sir, excuse me, it was Hitler who said that. Brother, we are people brought up on a staple diet of horsebeans and lentils, unlike those weaklings who eat macaroni, potatoes, and boiled vegetables. (pp. 35 f.)

In no other situation in the novel do incident and dialogue so recklessly and effectively walk the tightrope of tragedy over the depths of bathos and absurdity. The whole military conflict is presented as a mock-heroic travesty, characterized by grotesque and ludicrous incongruity.

Al-Khādīm never comments explicitly on the action, avoiding any authorial intrusion which often diminishes the effect of satire. Through a random selection of suggestive details, he depicts the situation in Cairo on a fateful day, where anarchy becomes the pattern. When the bombing of the city starts in earnest, high officials attempt to reassure the citizens that "it was nothing more than a military maneuver to terrify the enemy and remind it that the Egyptian forces constitute the strongest power in the whole area" (p. 43). As people listen to the communiqués announcing the "incredible" number of Israeli fighters shot down, they express their delight and elation "as if it were the greatest feast" of victory; the children are jubilantly dancing in the streets and chanting the national songs to celebrate the glory of Egypt.

Amidst the prevalent chaos, the authorities, represented mainly by self-proclaimed security agents, issue incoherent and ridiculous instructions that serve only to enhance the impression of anarchy. Pressured into action, the bewildered citizens are almost paralyzed by confusion when clear orders fail to come through. In the atmosphere of fear, suspicion and hypocrisy created by the autocratic regime, people scramble pathetically in the display of patriotism by rushing here and there, without any sense of direction or purpose. The novelist further intensifies our feeling of absurdity through gratuitous details and inconsequential arguments (a favorite technique of Gogol), deliberately introduced as a device of satirical deflation. By juxtaposing the sublime and the trivial, by reversing the normal sequence of cause and effect, he underlines the sad disarray of values and unmask the irrational nature of the whole situation. As mentioned earlier with regard to the students' demonstration, the satirist relies here again on comic exaggeration, so that he selects significant details and blows them out of proportion.

The reduction of events to pure farce does not dilute the gravity of the political predicament, but makes it all the more poignant, if we bear in mind the tragic sequence of blunders that led to the staggering defeat of Egypt in a matter of hours. The historical distance enables the reader to perceive objectively the true dimensions of the disaster masked by the transparent veil of satire. Behind the farce there is harsh ethical condemnation of tyranny, with its destructive impact on human values. The sheer deception of the dictator, constantly feeding the people with cliché-ridden lies and dominating them by fear, is implicitly suggested as the main source of social disintegration, causing the ultimate catastrophe.

The writer dwells on the climate of moral decay and drug-induced apathy following the defeat, when people "got tired of prayer and gave up hope of any mercy" (p. 63). As Victor Ramraj has aptly noted, "the protagonist sees his disgraceful life as a parallel to that of Egypt."⁴ In a mock-heroic spirit, he conveys a grandiose view of himself as "a member of a revolutionary suicidal organization": the "organization of progressive hashish addicts" (p. 63). There is a hilarious description of a police raid on its "headquarters," located on the roof of a house in Old Cairo: "All members of the gang were arrested while preparing a tightly-knit plan to preserve the status quo, by means of practicing hypnotism, sweeping the yards of mosques, and making highly explosive charms . . . The national security agents found a great quantity of jokes and rumors, ready to be exported abroad." The paraphernalia of drug-smoking is regarded by one of the senior officials as "part of a great devilish plan to make the people indulge in laughter and encourage them to adopt an attitude of total tranquillity and apathy" (p. 63).

Presumably, the Western reader can discern and enjoy the tone of mock-seriousness which constitutes the comic element in this episode. But it requires an intimate knowledge of Egyptian society to appreciate fully the nuances of satire in the anecdote. The writer here makes a subtle reference to religious superstitions as the hypnotic which prevents rebellion, thus suppressing any attempt to disrupt the status quo. Besides, with their flair for ridicule and cynicism, Egyptians often tend to cope with disaster and despair through sarcastic jokes, so that they water down feelings of anger and frustration. Once they have recognized the absurd, common people keep it alive by maintaining a state of mockery against the certainty of defeat, this being their only means of achieving self-fulfillment and of transcending the tragedy of their existence. They are also great rumormongers who thrive on political gossip, usually transforming fact into fantasy. Further, drug-addiction, not uncommon in Egypt, helps them escape from reality and "indulge in laughter," leading to "an attitude of total tranquillity and apathy." In this respect, it is not fanciful to assume that hashish is one of the major allies of the dictator.

However, these inherent attitudes are not the only ways out of the tragic predicament. Due to intense feelings of disenchantment and humiliation, al-Khādīm's protagonist decides to leave the country altogether, hence the travels of the "Egyptian Odysseus." In a perceptive analysis of the novel, a prominent Egyptian critic describes poetically the exodus of many intellectuals after the events of 1967: "They emigrated as homeless, wandering souls, mustering the remnants of life in them and leaving behind a heap of broken dreams, charred fields and waste lands. They were hollow men, the winds wailing in their bosoms, devastated by events that perverted all their values and dreams . . ."⁵

Whereas this critic adopts images of barrenness from T. S. Eliot to define and illustrate the dilemma, the novelist can find in it a target of trenchant satire. In his strife to get an exit visa, the pivotal character has to make the unholy pilgrimage, day after day, to the offices of bureaucrats who specialize in making things seem impossible. The process involves for him the degrading ritual of "kissing all hands and licking all kinds of shoes" (p. 48), a chronic symptom of despotic regimes. As might be expected, the almost insurmountable obstacles lead him to the simple discovery that the only way out is bribery. In the delineation of prevalent corruption in government circles, the writer recounts, with a delightful sense of humor, an episode of mistaken identity, where the surface reality intensifies the character's anguish in his quest.

⁴Victor Ramraj, *Three Contemporary Egyptian Novels*, *ARIEL*, 10, No. 4 (1979), 105.

⁵Alī' al-Dīb, "al-Arwāh al-Hā'ima," *Sabāh al-Khayr* (Cairo), 27 Nov. 1980, p. 62. My translation.

The misunderstanding occurs when a friend takes him to the office of an authoritative employee who would accept a bribe in order to grant him the exit visa. The protagonist sits alone in the empty room, waiting for the official whom he has never seen before. A few minutes later, a huge bald man enters the office, "his big paunch bulging with illegal money," or that is what the character thinks at that moment. Under the false impression that this individual must be the bribable employee, he starts awkwardly to explain the problem, while slipping an envelope stuffed with pound bills in his pocket. The man darkly asks him to await his return, only to come back after a little while, "followed by a crowd of security men and top officials" who drag him into another room and crucify him with questions and charges of corruption. There is a remarkable display of honesty and integrity as a result of his ludicrous blunder. "However, some kindhearted people of good will interfered on [his] behalf and the investigation was closed" (p. 49).

It is pertinent here to indicate the element of irony which plays an important role in al-Khādim's satire, serving primarily to elicit an intellectual response and reinforce the theme of the absurd. The situational irony in the above episode depends almost entirely on the sequence of events as they are interpreted by the reader. The victim here experiences life's irrational contradictions, remaining innocently unaware of impending doom until it strikes suddenly. Not only that. But he gets unwittingly involved in a process of self-betrayal, so that his actions prove to be self-defeating. In attempting to escape his fate, the protagonist behaves in such a way as to seal it inexorably for the moment, thus reversing his own expectations. Irony also exploits the clash between appearance and reality, as the unaware victim's confidence is shattered by adverse circumstances and totally unexpected events.

Examples of such irony abound in the novel. Perhaps the best instance in this respect is the behavior of the masses in Cairo during the six-day war. Their pathetic blindness is revealed through expressions of ultimate joy in the heart of defeat. The illusions of victory eventually collapse when the truth dawns dramatically upon their minds. As an ironist, the author consistently assumes the posture of a remote observer who disguises his true feelings and so achieves narrative distance. However, the protagonist clarifies and accentuates the irony of the situation by means of a textual allusion to lines from Ahmad Shawqi's classical drama, *The Fall of Cleopatra*: "What a parrot with its brains in its ears/ Filling the whole world with applause for its murderers!" (p. 34 f.). The allusion provides an appropriate comment on the attitude of the multitudes, vehemently cheering Nasser who led them to the degradation of abject defeat.

The novel also includes topical allusions often designed to juxtapose opposites that ironize each other and, at the same time, enhance density and aesthetic balance. For instance, the protagonist makes a fleeting reference to a demonstration in Cairo to salute King Farouk, followed immediately by "To Ankara, Son of a Bitch" (p. 32), which ironically echoes one of the slogans used against the monarch, who was Turkish in origin, during the turbulent months before his abdication in 1952. Similarly, there are such statements as "Shit, shit, don't step down! Hell, hell, don't resign!" (p. 35), which evoke associations of the calls of the masses upon Nasser to stay in power after the debacle of 1967. The satirical effect is here derived from the ironic juxtaposition of "shit," "hell," and "Nasser," to describe casually the political circus and to deflate the false aspirations of Egyptians in those bleak days. It should be observed that the pivotal character here and elsewhere tends to be the *iron* himself, in a sense a dissembler who brings conflicting and contrasting elements together in sharp

focus. His mental confusion, accentuated by the novelist's tactic of free association, is highly organic in the use of irony as a device of satire. The seemingly meaningless hallucinations help the reader perceive ironic relationships between disparate experiences.

In this study, I have concentrated exclusively on one aspect of al-Khādim's complex and sophisticated novel: the satirical approach to the national milieu in Egypt, revealing what he calls, "politics of the absurd" (p. 31). The absurd political climate is highlighted by the protagonist's schizophrenic world, whose ludicrous incongruities and ironic contrasts reinforce thematic content and bolster aesthetic unity. As we have seen, the writer's major techniques of satire are: avant-garde stylistic devices, grotesque humor, caricatural parody, subversive mimicry, comic exaggeration, mock-seriousness, and ironic juxtaposition. Through these techniques, he presents a fragmented and chaotic political environment devoid of reason and harmony, based on pretention, deception, hypocrisy, and fear. The book demands of its reader a continuous alert responsiveness, a readiness to laugh at the ridiculous without losing sight of serious and tragic elements.