

Saad Elkhadem

THE PLAGUE / AL-TA'UN

A Bilingual Edition. Trans. & Intro., Saad El-Gabalawy

Fredericton: York Press, 1989. Pp. 35 (English) & 29 (Arabic). \$6.95

Reviewed by Janeen Werner-King

Over the past two decades, Saad El-Gabalawy's translations of Saad Elkhadem's fiction have, in a most sustained way, brought our attention to experimental forms and techniques in modern Arabic literature. In addition to their formal interest, the translated works foster a spirit of cultural internationalism. The recent bilingual edition of *The Plague* is notable because it combines Elkhadem's latest Arabic novella, in which his mature stream-of-consciousness style is evident, with an English translation and introduction by El-Gabalawy, who is intimately familiar with Elkhadem's contributions to the canon of Egyptian fiction. This volume graphically portrays the political and social milieu of Egypt during Nasser's reign of terror, and its form compels readers to explore human emotions and frailties that transcend national borders.

In *The Plague*, Elkhadem plays a variation on one of his favorite motifs, the journey. As El-Gabalawy notes in his critical introduction, the novella is "based on the pattern of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, which begins with the flight of ten people from plague-stricken Florence" (3). Elkhadem's protagonists, seven men and three women, happen to meet in a visa office as they attempt to flee from the endemic oppression and brutality that plagues Egypt under Nasser's tyrannical regime. The range of characters—an engineering student, a teacher of French, a young bride, a businessman, a journalist, an actress, a naive young man, an academic, a housewife, and a commander of a military prison—creates a cross section of Egyptian society. These men and women chat about themselves as they wait to receive their exit visas, just as Boccaccio's characters recount tales to pass time. However, the autobiographical stories presented in *The Plague*, unlike the tales of the *Decameron* or the recollections of Elkhadem's protagonists in *From Travels of the Egyptian Odysseus* and *Ulysses's Hallucinations or the Like*, are told before, not after, the characters leave their homeland. Thus, hope, anxiety, and fear pervade and infect the speeches and thoughts of Elkhadem's most recent protagonists as they anticipate the prospects of self-imposed exile.

The author emphasizes the isolation and alienation of individuals by having each character present his or her dramatic monologue in a separate chapter. Moreover, the chapter number assigned to each character also marks the parenthetical stream-of-consciousness passages which constantly interrupt the well-edited, spoken accounts of each individual's life and future plans. This system of numerical identification is a most welcome innovation in Elkhadem's development of the interior monologue as a form of narration. It assists the reader in distinguishing and joining fragments of individual reflections to create complex character sketches. And from interwoven thoughts about bureaucratic corruption, systematic intimidation, rampant inflation, religious

fundamentalism and intolerance, and organized indoctrination, a picture of the society from which these characters intend to escape comes into clearer and sharper focus.

The dark political atmosphere and the bleak mood of alienation are redeemed, partially, by occasional moments when a speaker's words or actions trigger an empathetic thought in his audience. Umm Khayriya, listening to Muhammad Isma'il notices, "oh, my poor boy, his hands keep trembling; ... he must be happy to be traveling abroad and afraid they might stop him ... all the youth of the country, poor things, want to leave." (11). Nevertheless, such tender thoughts remain unexpressed, graphically isolated from spoken words by their enclosure within parentheses. Although emotional isolation of people within the private prisons of their minds is an almost commonplace theme in modern literature, the tormented alienation of Elkhadem's protagonists is heightened by their experiences in a hostile, totalitarian environment. Fear of intelligence agents and the threat of persecution make these characters extremely cautious about how they present themselves to each other. Their controlled self-portraits stand in sharp contrast to the pent-up cynicism, frustration, disillusionment, and ill will that explode in the form of coarse language within their interior monologues. Profanity and invective recreate the intensity of these characters' emotions, and convey their individual responses to a tyrannical and brutal period of Egyptian history with a good deal of dramatic immediacy.

The theme of appearances versus reality is also closely related to both the limited vision of Elkhadem's characters and cosmic irony. By means of an omniscient chorus, whose speech is marked by asterisks throughout the novella, the writer reveals the ubiquitous shortsightedness of his characters. For example, the reader knows that when Magdi is informed that his departure has been approved, he is oblivious to the possibility that he will be unable to cope with unemployment, poverty, and loneliness in Canada, and that this will necessitate his return to Egypt. The chorus also exposes Khayriya's mother's worry that her Christian son-in-law will not welcome her into this Texas home as a projection of her own unfounded prejudice. And we see that the torturer, Safwat, deludes himself because of his desire to live. He hopes that he will be lucky and that he will escape the revolutionary code of violence by living quietly in England, rather than becoming a scapegoat whose life is offered to appease the anger of groups who have suffered cruelty and brutality at his hands. The prophetic voice of the chorus, however, discloses revolutionary fanaticism as a force that knows no boundaries, as one that hunts down and preys upon its own fervent supporters. Although the chorus provides the reader with insights about the myopic vision of these characters and their tragic inability to alter their fates, the reader's experience of reading a fragmented and chaotic text suggests that all human perception is limited. Thus, *The Plague* is of both regional and universal significance.

This novella augments El-Gabalawy's earlier translations of Elkhadem's avant-garde Egyptian fiction. "Pigs," from *Men and Pigs* as well as excerpts from *Wings of Lead and Experiences of One Night in Modern Egyptian Short Stories* (1977); "From Travels of the Egyptian Odysseus," in *Three contemporary Egyptian Novels* (1979), "Ulysses's Hallucinations or the Like," in *Three Pioneering Egyptian Novels* (1986); and, *The Ulysses Trilogy* (1988) indicate El-Gabalawy's commitment to convey Elkhadem's experimentation with political

satire and stream-of-consciousness techniques to the English-speaking world. Scholars of comparative literature will appreciate the latest volume as it manifests Elkhadem's mastery of modern narrative devices, his development of the journey motif, and his graphic portrayal of the theme of emotional isolation in a fascist world. As one of his most accessible works, it will also be of interest to first-time readers of his fiction. It is most appropriate that such a significant work appears in a bilingual edition.

David Grossman

SEE: *UNDER LOVE*

Translated from the Hebrew by Betsy Rosenberg

New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988. Pp. 458. \$22.00

Reviewed by Robert DiAntonio

While it is universally accepted that the trauma of the near destruction of East European Jewry defies explanation or description, an ever-increasing number of young writers seem compelled to deal with it as a literary theme. One such writer is David Grossman, the author of *The Yellow Wind*, the critically acclaimed reportage of the Palestinian dilemma.

In *See: Under Love* Grossman creates a beautifully written epic novel that is as disturbing as it is challenging. In the vein of Gunter Grass's *The Tin Drum* or Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, it brings a magical vision to historical events. However, its scope goes beyond an analysis of those events evolving as a multi-faceted exploration of the nature of evil and the power of love.

In the work's first section, "Momik," the reader comes to know and is charmed by a precocious nine-year-old Israeli boy, Momik Neuman. Momik has few friends and spends most of his time with his aged parents. The year is 1959 and the atmosphere of the era is directly integrated into the novel's flow: "All three of them are deaf to the hooligans, because they hear only their own secret language which is Yiddish, which soon the beautiful Marilyn Monroe will understand because she married Mr. Miller, a Jew, and every day she learns three new words, and these hooligans, let them drop dead, amen."

Grossman is one of a new generation of writers who finds a great sense of loss in the vanishing of the Yiddish language and the fading values of *Yiddishkeit*: a devotion to cultural values associated with what Irving Howe calls "one of the most vibrant and humane of modern cultures." Momik's parents are Holocaust survivors, as are their friends. They are all as guarded about their past as they are protective of young Momik who tries hard to piece together their stories of what happened "Over There:" "Over There, a place you weren't supposed to talk about too much, only think about in your heart and sigh with a drawn-out krechtez." Momik keeps notebooks and attempts to create his own Nazi beast in their basement, believing that he will then be able to tame it and free his family.

While symbolism is a strong component of the novel's first chapter it is the moving story of Momik's attempt to understand his family's past that will