

## Arabic Literature in Exile: *The Plague* by Saad Elkhadem

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It has long been recognized that modern Arabic literature has undergone part of its development outside its national and geographical boundaries, and that this in itself is not a characteristic that is unique to it, but one that is shared with many other literatures. For historical, personal, or political reasons, writers through the ages have been forced to leave their countries of origin and to settle, either temporarily or permanently, in other lands. Whether or not they adopt the language of their host countries, these exiled writers are always aware that their tongue is in the last instance their firmest and most profound link with their native culture. Any contemporary poet, novelist, or dramatist living in a country other than that of his or her birth would subscribe to the well-known words of the Austrian writer Joseph Roth: "The homeland of a true writer is his tongue."

Of course, the tongue is not everything. Many changes are brought about by physical and intellectual distance. There is a new vision, a different perception, of what has been left behind. It may well be that some things are forgotten, but it is certainly true that practically everything is reconstructed. There is a re-vision (in the most literal sense) of a distant reality that returns to the accompaniment of new echoes. The Lebanese poet Adonis wrote the following lines in his country of residence, France: "C'est la lecture de Baudelaire qui m'a fait découvrir Abû Nuwâs. C'est la lecture de Mallarmé qui m'a dévoilé la langue poétique d'Abû Tammâm. La lecture de la critique française contemporaine m'a préparé à découvrir l'originalité de Jurjâni."<sup>1</sup>

Something similar happened to a group of men originating in Syria and Lebanon who emigrated to North and South America in the first few decades of this century, and produced there a literary form known as "*Mahjar* literature" (that is, "emigré literature"). They wrote not only in Arabic but also in English, Spanish, and Portuguese, breaking many of the canons established in the past by the creative traditions of the Arab world. Jubrân Khalîl Jubrân, Ilyâ Abû Mâdî, and Mikhâ'îl Nu'yamah, to name just a few, wrote a kind of poetry that went beyond the rigid patterns of traditional Arabic verse, freeing the Arabic language from archaic structures and turning it into an instrument that could effectively express the new vision of man and his world. Naturally, this does not mean that the literary and intellectual modernization of the Arab world was entirely the result of outside influences from those "lands of emigration." The same problems were debated within the Arabs' own culture, giving rise at the same time to a rich and powerful literature which soon found an enthusiastic readership.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Adonis, *Introduction à la poésie arabe*, trans. Bassam Tahhan and Anne Wade Minkowski (Paris: Sindbad, 1987) 108.

<sup>2</sup> For a general survey in Spanish, see Pedro Martínez Montávez, *Introducción a la literatura árabe moderna* (Madrid-Granada: Ed. Cantarabia-Universidad de Granada, 1995). See also Saad Elkhadem,

Now, at the end of the twentieth century, we appear to be witnessing a new modality of that first *Mahjar*, though with very different characteristics. For a number of years, Arab writers, intellectuals, and teachers have been living, working, and creating in both Europe and America, for reasons which are many and varied (although one of the foremost is political exile). There is as yet no overall study of this Arab intellectual exile, but it is possible to conclude from a brief survey of the best-known names that literary activity tends to be concentrated in Europe (France, Great Britain, Belgium, and Germany), whilst North America attracts above all professors and scholars working in the field of the social sciences, understood in its widest possible sense. The recognition and esteem in which their works are held by Arab readers varies considerably. I shall give one literary example. There is no comparison between the wide reputation enjoyed in his native Morocco by a writer like Tahar Ben Jelloun (despite the debates provoked by the idea of an Arabic literature written in French), and the scant attention received in his homeland, Egypt, by the novelist Albert Cossery, who also uses French and has been living since 1945 in a small hotel in the Parisian district of Saint-Germain-des-Près.<sup>3</sup>

The ultimate aim of this long preamble is simply to provide a broad framework within which to view the literature of the Egyptian writer Saad Elkhadem (b. 1932; also transliterated as Sa'd al-Khâdim), who since the sixties has held a professorship at the University of New Brunswick's Department of German and Russian. Elkhadem's work covers literary criticism and translation (his Arabic versions of Brecht's *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder* and Dürrenmatt's *Herkules und der Stall des Augias* were published in Cairo in 1967 and 1969 respectively) as well as creative writing. He is the author of two volumes of plays, a collection of short stories, and ten short novels or "micro-novels," eight of which have been translated into English by Professor Saad El-Gabalawy.<sup>4</sup>

In this article, I shall focus on a number of the more outstanding features of the work entitled *al-Ta'ûn* (*The Plague*; 1989),<sup>5</sup> which could provisionally be classified as a political novel, though I have some lingering doubts about this choice of adjective. *The Plague* is the same sort of political novel as, for instance, *Our Gang* (1971) by the American writer Philip Roth. In both novels, the irony and sarcasm pervading the descriptions of events and the actions of the characters fulfills a similar role: that of dismantling official history, deflating the transcendent gravity with which every political leader (whether democratic or not, although we naturally associate the characteristic more with undemocratic ones) appears before his public and proclaims his message. For they—presidents, kings,

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*History of the Egyptian Novel: Its Rise and Early Beginnings* (Fredericton: York Press, 1985); and Sabry Hafez: *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse: A Study in the Sociology of Modern Arabic Literature* (London: Saqi Books, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> One of Cossery's finest novels, *Mendiants et Orgueilleux*, was turned into a film a few years ago by the Egyptian director 'Usamah al-Bakri. It was shown at cinemas in Cairo for only one week, and was almost completely ignored by film critics.

<sup>4</sup> For a complete list of Elkhadem's creative works, as well as a list of articles and book reviews that deal with his fiction, see "The Author and His Work," in his *Five Innovative Egyptian Short Stories* (Fredericton: York Press, 1994) i-iv.

<sup>5</sup> Saad Elkhadem, *The Plague / Al-Ta'ûn*, a bilingual edition; trans. with a critical introduction by Saad El-Gabalawy (Fredericton: York Press, 1989). Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text.

and dictators—do not mind being feared or hated, but they cannot bear to be caricatured or laughed at.

It is the sixties, and Nasser is in power in Egypt. In the claustrophobic and anxiety-ridden setting of a visa office in Cairo, ten characters are waiting for a visa that will allow them to leave the country and escape from the horror which, for various reasons, Egypt has become for them. The ten characters take turns to speak, briefly introducing themselves and summarizing the motives for their planned trips abroad. Each one is assigned a number (from 1 to 10) in order to allow the reader to identify the source of the comments (presented as interior monologues) that are periodically inserted in between the words of the current speaker. Moreover, there is also a nameless eleventh character, marked with an asterisk, who is without doubt the most unsettling of all: a sort of Big Brother who knows the past, the present, and the future of each of the ten protagonists. Thanks to him, we learn the reasons behind their lies, the truth about their family problems, and their professional and political difficulties, and the destiny that awaits them in the countries they are trying to get to. Whether their stories are to end in happiness or misery, none of them can shake off the inexorable fate that marks their lives.

Professor El-Gabalawy has convincingly pointed out the structural similarities between *The Plague* and Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron* (1349-1353). In both cases, the action takes place in an enclosed space where ten people are trying to escape from the disease that is scourging their country. In doing so, they use the word as a means of warding off the deadly epidemic. Nevertheless, there are also clear differences between the Italian work and the Egyptian one. The first—and probably the least interesting—is the deliberate literary reference to Boccaccio's novel that Elkhadem permits himself in swapping the ratio of sexes among the protagonists: the seven women and three men of *The Decameron* become three women and seven men in *The Plague*. Such a proportion is required for a representation of the Arab social milieu. The second difference, far more important in my opinion, lies in the role played in the two novels by the word, the language in which the characters express themselves.

The young Florentines of the fourteenth century choose to seek refuge in a country house outside the city, in order to flee from the menace of sickness and death. They start to tell each other stories—amusing, imaginative, and spicy—as a way to escape from the horror that lies around them, well aware as they are of the liberating virtues of the word. If we cross over to the Arabic-Islamic cultural universe, we may recall that the stories told to King Shahriyar by Sheherezade in *The Thousand and One Nights* (anon., 14th-16th cent.) have the same purpose: the young bride saves herself from death, and saves all the other women at the same time, thanks to the magical suggestiveness of her words. This is the exact opposite of what we find in *The Plague*. In the Egyptian novel, the characters are unable to express themselves freely because speech represents an immediate risk, clearly fraught with danger. So conscious are they of this that the words which they speak in public order to introduce themselves, describe their personal situations, and justify their visa applications are brief, concise, neutral, and banal, as though they were all repressing themselves for fear of saying more than they should.

The counterpoint to this type of language is represented in the novel by the words given in parentheses. These correspond either to the true thoughts of the person who is speaking at that moment, or to the comments arising in the mind of one of the other nine speakers, or that of the obscure character identified by an asterisk: "Sa'id al-Mikili ... traveling to London for medical treatment . . . (5- he seems to be one of the unbalanced kids of today; ... maybe he's a Communist, or a Muslim Brother, or a follower of Ahmad Husayn ... a bunch of crazy kids ... soon Nasser will finish you off, whoresons!) . . . for recuperation and study ... to get a masters degree in economics . . . in London ... from the University of London at Oxford . . . (stop shaking and talking like an idiot . . . please God, give me the visa and I'll get out of here right away)" (26).

Thanks to this subtle game whereby the linearity of the discourse is constantly interrupted, the novel acquires the structure of a jigsaw puzzle. It establishes a rhythm which, while halting, is also agile and dynamic, immediately trapping the reader inside a complex labyrinth or gallery of self-reflecting mirrors. By the time we reach the end of the book and manage to find the way out of this labyrinth, we have reconstructed all the biographical details of each of the ten characters with absolute precision, and have encountered at the same time one of the most ironic and scathing critiques of Nasser's regime to be found in the pages of a literary creation.<sup>6</sup> This, in fact, is the fundamental aim of Elkhadem's razor-sharp writing, although we should not forget that *The Plague*, as I mentioned earlier, also raises in a more general way one of the most problematical issues of the contemporary Arab world: the dramatic conflict between what people say and what they really think, between the word and silence, between freedom and repression.

The novel's protagonists, obliged by circumstances to talk as little as possible, have no option but to take refuge in thought. In their thoughts, which they never manifest in public, they find the little patch of freedom and personal intimacy which they so badly need. Descartes's maxim, "I think, therefore I am," is understood in *The Plague* as: "I think, and I do not say what I think, therefore I am." However, not only are the operations of thinking and speaking different and, in a situation of political repression like the one described in the novel, mutually exclusive. It is also evident that the two processes are produced and manifested on different levels of language.

The contrapuntal structure of *The Plague*, referred to earlier, is not brought about solely by the constant interruption of the characters' monologues, but is also achieved by the dynamic changes of linguistic rhythm that are reflected in the novel's writing. Standard classical Arabic is reserved for the words spoken by each of the ten characters to the visa official, as well as for those of the omniscient narrator identified by means of an asterisk. On the other hand, everything that reflects the secret inner feelings of these men and women is written in the Egyptian dialect of Cairo.

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<sup>6</sup> No wonder that the novel and its author were viciously attacked in Cairo by a Nasserite critic immediately after the book's publication in Canada; see 'Alâ' al-Dîb, "Riwayah Qalilat al-Hayâ'" [A Shameless Novel], *Ṣabāḥ al-Khayr* 28 Sept. 1989: 66.

Elkhadem has demonstrated throughout his literary career that he is a full-fledged master of dialect, and his reconstruction in this novel of Egyptian popular speech, with its double meanings, humor, irony, insults, and idioms, is nothing short of magnificent. The book thus becomes a tribute to the spoken dialect of Cairo, recalling in some respects the experimental style of Raymond Queneau's *Zazie dans le métro* (1959). Whilst Elkhadem is neither the first nor the only Arab author to write a novel in dialect or in a blend of classical and colloquial Arabic, it is nonetheless hard to find similarities between his literature and that of his predecessors and contemporaries. In his latest novel, *Crash Landing of the Flying Egyptian* (1992), Elkhadem, who has been praised by several critics for his "poetic" style and the "highly aesthetic quality" of his "rhythmic sentences,"<sup>7</sup> lets the protagonist of the novel defend the use of colloquial language in literature by stating the following: "Look, brother, if you want to write realistic and unaffected literature, actually expressing what people think, feel, and say, then you must use the same idiom adopted by the majority of people, even if the style is weak, or improper, or ungrammatical. The masses, respected sir, would never believe the protagonists of any story, novel, or play, if we let them talk as if they were reading the news, or acting on the stage of our classical actor George Abyad. You see, fellow, when a normal man is sick and tired of something in his life or his world, doesn't he yell and scream, cursing the whole world and everybody in it; or do you think he'd kneel, raising his hands to heaven in supplication, then shout: 'Alas, my father! Succor, my God!' Oh, man, bless the name of the Prophet and forget the words of the sheikhs, whose minds are full of cobwebs as if they are still living in the days of ancient writers such as al-Hariri and al-Buhturi; or the words of pedantic critics who want to turn the wheel of time backward to a bygone age as they know and understand nothing beyond it! May God save literature from newspapermen, language teachers, and book dealers!"<sup>8</sup>

Some novelists, connected in one way or another with the so-called "Realist school," solved the hotly debated question of the appropriate language for writing by opting for a compromise: they reserved classical Arabic for narrative, and used dialect for dialogues. Examples include the Egyptians Maḥmūd Tāhir Ḥaqqī, Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal, Maḥmūd Taymūr, and Maḥmūd Tāhir Lāshīn, and the Lebanese writers Anīs Frayha and Mīkhā'il Nu'aymah. Although this procedure came in for harsh criticism from classically oriented authors and purists, like Tāhā Ḥusayn and 'Abbās al-'Aqqād, it has remained habitual and is accepted without fuss by the reading public. However, there have also been writers who started off by following this type of procedure in their novels and short stories, only to abandon it in favor of a simpler form of Arabic for both narrative and dialogue. This was the case of the Egyptian Maḥmūd Taymūr (1894-1973), who was quick to perceive the incongruence, from a purely aesthetic point of view, of this mixture of two vastly divergent registers of the same language.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Fatma Moussa-Mahmoud, "A New Oriental Bird with Leaden Wings: On Saad Elkhadem's *Ajniha Min Rasas*," *International Fiction Review* 2.1 (1975): 69-70; A.F. Cassis, *International Fiction Review* 19.2 (1992): 131-32; D. Denisoff, *Canadian Book Review Annual* (1994): 3025-29. It is worth mentioning here that Alā' al-Dīb, the same critic who attacked Elkhadem for using "vulgar and obscene" words in *The Plague*, (see footnote 6), had praised him earlier for his "original," "sensitive," and "lyrical" style (*Sabāh al-Khayr* 7 Dec. 1972: 66; and *Sabāh al-Khayr* 27 Nov. 1980: 62).

<sup>8</sup> Saad Elkhadem, *Crash Landing of the Flying Egyptian / Al-Hubūt al-Iḍtirārī lil-Miṣrī al-Tā'ir* (Part III of his Trilogy of the Flying Egyptian), translated with a critical introduction by Saad El-Gabalawy (Fredericton: York Press, 1992) 8.

On the other hand, works written entirely in dialect are seldom to be found in contemporary Arabic literature. Evidently, the growth of this type of writing is hindered by the prospect of problems with the literary and political establishments; in addition, there may be difficulties in getting the works published and distributed. Even so, there are some exceptions that are well worth mentioning, like the versatile Egyptian intellectual Luwīs 'Āwad; his *Muzakkirāt Talib Ba'tah* (Memoirs of a Scholarship Holder Abroad), which narrates his experiences as a student at Cambridge, was written in 1942 but could not be published until 1965. Another example is Muḥammad Bayram al-Tūnisī,<sup>9</sup> also Egyptian, and his very amusing novels *al-Sayyid wa Maratuh fi Miṣr* (The Gentleman and His Wife in Egypt) and *al-Sayyid wa Maratuh fi Baris* (The Gentleman and His Wife in Paris). In these books, it is not difficult to discern a remote and partial precedent of Elkhadem's writing, despite the latter's evident distance from Bayram al-Tūnisī's literature of manners and, more generally, from the aesthetic and ideological creeds of the generation which grew up in Egypt between the wars.

For although it is true that Saad Elkhadem's work needs to be analyzed from the standpoint of its place within contemporary Arabic literature as a whole, for the simple reason that he is an Egyptian author writing in Arabic, it is also clear that his books contain certain elements which differentiate them from the various narrative tendencies displayed by his literary contemporaries.<sup>10</sup> His mastery of a genre that is fairly scarce in contemporary Arabic letters (the novella or, as he calls it, the "micro-novel"), his use of dialect, his recourse to humor and sarcasm as a radical means of unveiling reality, his piercing and highly committed vision of the world (whether European, American, or Arab), his perfect assimilation of the themes and techniques of Western literature, and his fertile recreation of them in Arabic have all conspired to make Elkhadem a marginal writer (in the best sense of the word) in his native country, or "the quintessential 'outsider'" as he was once called by Roger Allen.<sup>11</sup> This probably explains why his work has been acclaimed by Western critics but failed to receive the recognition it deserves in Egypt and in the rest of the Arab world.<sup>12</sup>

I began this article with a reference to the Arab exile, and I should like to finish it in the same way. Many things distinguish that first Syrio-Lebanese *Mahjar* from the second "time of exile" that is going to mark the end of the twentieth century

<sup>9</sup> Bayram al-Tūnisī was born in Alexandria in 1893. After writing a poem in which he criticized Sultan Aḥmad Fu'ād, he was deported to France in 1919. He subsequently took up residence in Tunisia, but was once again expelled, this time by the colonial authorities. Finally, he returned to Egypt, where he died in 1960. For many years, his novel, *al-Sayyid wa Maratuh fi Baris*, was used by the University of Berlin's Department of Oriental Studies as a textbook for the study of Egyptian dialect.

<sup>10</sup> An excellent account of these tendencies can be found in Edward al-Kharrat, "The Age of Ideology and Polarization since 1950: The Mashriq," in *Modern Literature in the Near and Middle East. 1859-1970*, ed. Robin Ostle (London: Routledge, 1991) 180-92.

<sup>11</sup> *Al-'Arabiyya* 22 (1989): 169-72; similar opinions have been expressed by Arne A. Ambros in his article, "Nach Wien auf Bleiernen Schwingen: Zu einer Erzählung von Saad Elkhadem," *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 75 (1983) 66; and by Saad El-Gabalawy in his "Introduction" to Saad Elkhadem's *Avant-Garde Egyptian Fiction: The Ulysses Trilogy* (Feredicton: York Press, 1988) 9.

<sup>12</sup> A few years ago, the Lebanese critic Samāh Idrīs published a study of a long list of novels dealing with the period of Nasser's regime, and it is significant that it should contain absolutely no mention of *The Plague* or any of Elkhadem's other works. See, Samāh Idrīs, *al-Muthaqqaf al-'Arabī wa al-Sulṭah.: Bahṭ fi Riwāyāt al-Tajribah al-Nāsiriyyah* [The Arab Intellectual and the Authorities: Study on the Novels of the Nasser Period] (Beirut: Dār al-'Ādāb, 1992).

and the beginning of the twenty-first. Generally speaking, those earlier writers were eventually granted their rightful place in the history of Arabic literature, thought, and criticism. After a long journey, they were reunited with their public. Might the same thing be true of this second *Mahjar*? Clearly, such a recovery is considerably more complicated now than it was then, bearing in mind the enormous difficulties, even within the Arab world, which hamper forward-looking intellectuals who try to make their voices heard or to escape from the silence and censorship that are imposed on them from every side. Under these circumstances, it is equally evident that the breach which has opened between the interior and the exterior, between those inside and those outside, is bound to become still wider, something which does not bode at all well for the future of Arabic culture.