‘Our Times’: A Personal View

Latifa Al-Zayat[*]

Foreword by Hala Kamal[**]

In this keynote address delivered at the First International Symposium on Comparative Literature, subtitled “Images of Egypt in Twentieth Century Literature”, held in 1989, Egyptian academic, critic, and writer, Latifa Al-Zayat (1923-1996) provides ‘a personal view’ on ‘our times’ – which span most of the 20th century. In the opening words of her speech, she describes – what is now termed as – her ‘positionality’ by situating herself as a ‘witness’ sharing her ‘personal memories and experience’. The opening paragraphs set the tone of the whole address, establishing the intersections of national history and literary history, presented from a Marxist perspective conscious of social and class struggles.

In her direct engagement with the topic of the symposium, Latifa Al-Zayat offers a chronological survey of Egyptian literary history in the 20th century, starting with the impact of 1919 Revolution against British colonialism in Egypt. Pointing out its impact on her, during the formative years of her life, she highlights its effects on her generation as a whole, leading to the emergence of what she describes as ‘a distinct national literature’ – grounded in a cultural continuum. She asserts its beginnings as going back to Ancient Egyptian civilisation and ‘proceeding through the Greek, Roman, Coptic and Islamic eras’, within ‘the larger context of human history’.

Latifa Al-Zayat’s article lists and explores key literary figures and texts, situating them within their socio-political historical and geographical contexts. She is also aware of the intellectuals who formed her thinking, most prominent being Salama Moussa through his socialist approach. It is this approach that she admits as having left its greatest impact on her as reader, writer, and citizen. While exploring the development of Egyptian literature since the 1920s until the 1980s, Latifa Al-Zayat refers to what she considers foundational novels such as Al-Hakim’s Awdat al-Ruh *(The Return of the Spirit) and Al-Sharkawi’s* Al-Ard (*Earth*). *She also gives due to Naguib Mahfouz’s and Youssef Idris’ realism, marking the evident shift in the works of No’man Ashour since the 1950s and then Naguib Surour. These, among others, indicated a clear development from the literary liberalism of the early twentieth*

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century to a clearer socialist turn in the 1950s and 1960s – ushering in what she describes as the Egyptian literary New Realism.

Latifa Al-Zayat situates herself directly within the 1960s generation, established by the publication of her first novel Al-Bab al-Maftuh *(*The Open Door*) published in 1960, which she had started writing in the late 1940s. She pinpoints the way in which the novel reflects socio-political transformations in the Egyptian society in the 1940s and 1950s, highlighting the impact of the social context on a literary text, by explaining the importance of the existence of shared values and sentiments between the writer and her reading public, to avoid the 'cultural crisis' marking the 1970s and 1980s. Still, she ends her article on an optimistic note about the signs of a hopeful resolution of this 'cultural crisis'.*

This survey of Egyptian literature from the personal perspective of Latifa Al-Zayat as an academic, critic, and writer provides a significant decolonial Marxist reading of Egyptian literary history in the 20th century. At the same time, it offers a method and model for a critical inquiry that looks at literary texts as 'images' and representations of their times and societies. Perhaps most importantly it shows how a personal reflection can offer a political perspective; the way in which individual experiences develop into intellectual engagement; and how literary expression can provide a view and a vision.

'Our Times': A Personal View
Latifa Al-Zayat (1991)

I bear witness to the age I live in: in this capacity I was asked to talk today and in this capacity I draw upon the store of personal memories and experience.

First, about myself: by profession, I lecture on English Literature and Criticism at The Girls College, Ain Shams University. More publicly, I am a critic who writes about Arabic Literature particularly that of Egypt. Vocationally, I am a writer, though my writings are few and far between: in thirty years I wrote a novel called *The Open Door*: in 1960 and only lately a collection of short stories called *Old Age and Other Stories*. I was born in the coastal town of Damietta in 1923 in the wake of the 1919 bourgeois revolution against the British occupation in Egypt.

The revolution had a serious impact on the intellectual life in Egypt, especially art and literature, which began to subside in the thirties. It gave birth to a new nationalism of which I was fully aware in my forming years. The concept of the nation in the strict technical sense had been known in Egypt in the 19th century at the time it was breaking away from the Ottoman Empire; it never crystallized until the 1919 Revolution, when Egyptian thought began to yield a distinct national literature. Equally important is the fact that history was seen not as a succession of disconnected events, but as an integrated

pattern, a system which subsumed apparently disparate phenomena. Egyptian history, beginning with Ancient Egypt and proceeding through the Greek, Roman, Coptic and Islamic eras, was seen as being part of the larger context of human history. The nation became aware of its varied past, meanwhile resolved to open up to European culture, with France and England in the lead. The European was "the other" within this historical perspective, and represented a model of culture and scientific progress worthy of emulation.

Histories were written to account for the evolution of the various social phenomena, including old Arab literature. The image of literature, both old and new, partook of the national fervour. This view of history went hand in hand with a rational orientation based on causality and the analytic methods of science. The old classical ways persisted, but in the Twenties the new liberal and scientific mode of thinking adopted from the West was clear in the writings of Lutfi Al-Sayed, Ali Abdul-Razik, Taha Hussein, Abbas Mahmoud Al-Aqqad, Shibli Shumayyil and Salama Mousa. Liberalism and secularism aided the advancement of science and the traditional arts, such as poetry and drama, as well as literary criticism. Sculpture was altogether revolutionized by Mukhtar. In the Twenties and Thirties, new literary forms were adopted as a result of contact with French and English literatures, such as the short story, the novel and the social play, although the beginnings of the dramatic art in Egypt can be traced back to the last quarter of the 19th Century. This task was undertaken by pioneering writers such as Taha Hussein, Abbas Al-Aqqad, Abdul Kader Al-Mazni, Hussein Haykal, Taher Lashine, Mahmoud and Mohammad Taymur, and Tawfik Al-Hakim. A new phase in Arabic Poetry began, marking an individualism which moved away from the general and traditional towards the personal and innovative. The new school of poetry advocated simplicity in diction, which brought the language as close as possible to everyday Arabic; unity in structure; and topics which celebrated man's individuality. They upheld the right of self-expression, especially for artists. *Al-Diwan* school was exponential in this change, spurred by the new nationalism and the emerging individualism. They were influenced by the British Romantic poets. Its most important figures were Al Aqqad, Al-Mazni and Abdul-Rahman Shukri.

The translation of French and English literature was an equally strong movement in the second half of the 19th Century and into the 20th Century. It was an introduction to the new literary genres, and together with journalism it aided in producing new stylistic techniques adapted to narration and in creating the reading public for these new genres.

Although writers often read the original works, their adaptations from French or English had a local quality. Meanwhile, in rediscovering the Arabic heritage and in writing the history of Arabic literature, Taha Hussein's method combined Taines' scientific approach, seeing phenomena as natural products

of history and environment, with Sainte Beuve's views. Al-Aqqad, on the other hand, was clearly influenced by the Romantic poets in Britain and his histories of the Islamic and contemporary thinkers exhibited marks of the concept of the hero in Thomas Carlyle. To him, history could be explained in terms of individuals.

I learned from those pioneers. I read Al-Hakim's *Awadat Al-Ruh* (1933) when I was twelve and I could see how he bridged the gap between the ancient and modern histories of Egypt. He recreated the events of the 1919 Revolution in the context of a small bourgeois family. Until then I had only read detective stories in translation; Al-Hakim's novel introduced me to a world with which I could identify. I found it quite stimulating, and ever since then I wanted to become a writer, and I adhered strongly to the realistic technique.

Today I may have reservations about the piety with which the pioneers regarded "the other" in Europe ignoring his image as a colonial power and about the selections made among the writings of the Western thinkers, which I think were not the best. On the other hand, I would not deny those pioneers' valuable contributions and I consider myself lucky for having been a student in some of their classes. Their writings inspired me and enhanced my awareness; their ambitious programmes which were already dying out in the Thirties impressed me greatly.

In the early years, my favourite writer was Salama Mousa, who advocated a type of Fabian thinking. I liked his style which was simple, direct and, compared to his contemporaries, highly economical. It was his socialist thought which attracted me most, and in the Forties it shaped my life.

But first I must go back to 1934, when I was only eleven. One day, from the balcony of our house which stood in one of the main roads of Mansura, I could watch the popular reception that was accorded to Mostapha Al-Nahas, leader of *Wafd* party, the party of the majority, at a time when the government was in the hands of a minority party led by Prime Minister Ismail Sidki. The road was being barricaded by trenches dug on the spot to hinder the procession. People, most of whom were barefoot and hungry volunteered to carry the car across the trenches. The procession continued, but police bullets were heard everywhere, and I saw fourteen persons fall.

I could never forget that incident: that tragedy encapsulated the state of Egypt in the Thirties. Sections of the Egyptian bourgeoisie were acting in consort with the forces of the British occupation and foreign capital against the best interests of the Egyptian people and *Wafd*. In 1936, *Wafd* concluded a treaty with Britain which was far from ideal. Shortly after, the struggle against colonial power was checked by martial laws which were declared in Egypt throughout the war years.

Throughout the Thirties and the Forties, the Egyptian bourgeois thought was not able to sustain its hopes for change. Writers indulged in the Islamic

heritage and most of them backed up from the frontier positions which they had assumed. Al-Aqqad who started off as an innovator in poetry and critical practice and an advocate of democracy, soon regressed to a typical reactionary position, maintaining the status quo and denying the new in literature and politics. Al-Hakim's realistic techniques of *Awdat Al-Ruh* and the *Yawmiyat* were supplanted by an escape, to an abstract world void of life.

As for Naguib Mahfuz, his writings in the Forties were gradually bringing the novel in Egypt to full fruition. He readapted the language to the expressive purposes of the novel form. He was a realist at the time when the romantic and moralist trends were in full sway. In the manner of Balzac, he documented Egyptian social life in his novels beginning with *The New Cairo* (1945) to the trilogy which was finished in 1952. Mahfuz was also a naturalist; in his writings, history moved in circles, always returning to the point of departure. This will always remain to be Mahfuz's concept of history, no matter how his style should oscillate between naturalism and expressionism, between direct methods and adaptations from the folktale. The language will continue to evolve to suit the technical developments, but the social perspective will stay fixed. The social and historical facts will always be recreated within the same framework: always changing but not developing.

Towards the end of the war in 1945, the actual non-circular progress of history produced a movement among students and workers which soon mushroomed to become one of the most notable liberation movements in the world. Both social and national forces combined in a general demand for food and freedom. They joined voices, calling for the evacuation of the British forces and the abolition of both the monarchy and the treaty with Britain. Egypt was at the crossroads in the Forties. The national question turned into a social one. The people's demands were beyond the means of any one political party. The people decided to lead their own march against local and foreign exploitation, forming the "National Committee for Students and Workers", a hierarchic formation, whose base soon began to extend to members of the bourgeoisie. The unrest grew as the numbers grew. Public demonstrations often resulted in the fall of the government, and the whole regime seemed to be threatened at the roots by the movement. In 1952, The Free Officers' movement spelled out an acceptable alternative abroad and to a large extent locally.

I was part of this popular movement during my undergraduate years from 1942-46. I was one of three reporters elected to the Committee. I was permanently shaped by that movement which made no sex distinctions among its participants, thus providing me to this date with a sense of independence and challenge.

Following 1952, the liberal trends subsided while the secular ones took over in the early years of Nasser's rule. Egyptian nationalism gave way to Pan-

Arabism and the unity of the Third World for the cause of liberation. The Suez aggression in 1956 speeded up the evacuation of the British forces. This was corroborated by a number of decisions to secure a measure of economic independence. The ensuing national project for liberation was supported by the people in their search for a universal set of values to back up their freedom. The arts flourished as the art public multiplied. This revival which promised a good deal of change was short-lived. The Nasserite programme seemed successful at the outset, but the seeds of contradiction it bore proved abortive to its ends in the absence of democracy on the one hand and in the face of the Israeli intervention on the other. The defeat in 1967 ended a stage and began another in the history of Egypt.

The social question emerged clearly in the Fifties and Sixties on all intellectual, creative and critical levels. The movement embraced both sender and receiver, and the growth of the middle class was invigorating for the theatre in particular. The commercial theatre which had ruled in the Thirties and Forties gave way to a more serious art form, and before long it began to suffer a relapse which continued, in the Seventies and the Eighties. The mid-Fifties saw No'man Ashour's play *The People Downstairs*, Yusuf Idris' collection of short stories *The Cheapest Nights*, and Al-Sharkawi's novel *The Land*, all written in the spirit of the national movement of the Forties. The three writers started a new school of writing which came to be known as the new realism as it was distinct from the type of realism that was salient in the novel until then. To them history had a socio-historical reality with a progressive upswing which superseded any deviation from the main course. They indulged into a realistic description of both town and village, employing colloquialisms in dialogue, showing personal involvement in the action and abandoning the viewpoint of a bystander. When I wrote *The Open Door* in 1960, I was upholding the tenets of the new realism. In this novel, I recreated the history of the national movement from 1946 to 1956, implying the need for further change. Unlike other novels written to that date, the novel has no description, it is a dramatic narrative bearing the seed of change for the characters and signifying more change on the national level.

The new realism attracted younger writers such as Soliman Fayyad, Saleh Mursi and Abdullah Al-Toukhi, who wrote novels and short stories, and Alfred Farag, Mikhail Rouman, Mahmoud Diab and Naguib Surrour who wrote plays. There was a good deal of experimentation based on the cultural heritage. There was an attempt to create a kind of national theatre. The social play reached a zenith in the Sixties, and it was highly critical of the state of society, analysing its morphological structure carefully enough to be able to predict the 1967 defeat. Diab's *The Storm* and Surrour's *Ah Ya Leil Ya Amar* (Both written in 1964) marked the end of an era and the beginning of a new one. The former play was put on stage a few months before June 1967 and the

later shortly after. The new era, which began then, has lasted until today. It would be rather a difficult task to try to place the last two decades on the literary map, but I will try to characterise it very broadly by stressing only a few of its features.

Mahfuz has continued to write, so has Yehya Haqqi, Yusuf Idris, and Edward El-Kharrat. Fathi Ghanim too has always experimented with literary form and style but has held hard to his basic concept which is the unity of the universe. To him intuition is the source of knowledge rather than the mind.

In the Sixties a new batch of writers and critics both old and young joined in. Their output has been of a special quality and came to be known as "The Literature of the Sixties." These writers, too many to be fairly represented here, have since been, and still are, the innovators. Socially and politically, each has his own individual convictions and historical perspective, but their beliefs and styles converge in an area that was not favoured by the critics and public of the Sixties but is tolerated by at least a limited population in the Seventies and Eighties. Writers such as Yehya Al-Taher Abdulla, Ibrahim Aslan, Amal Dunqol, Afifi Matar, Gamal Al-Ghitani, Yusuf Al-Qa'eed, Abdul-Hakim Qassem, Sun'alla Ibrahim, and Mohammad Al-Bisati, to mention only a few, began writing short stories and only recently have some of them started to write novels. None has written plays, in spite of the great popularity enjoyed by the theatre.

Once I humoured one of the writers of the Sixties at a radio broadcast on the Second Programme by saying that the programme for my generation was to change the face of Egypt, whereas that for his generation has been to find a way to cross the city streets safely. This may apply to only part of the generation of the Sixties, not all. It was true of their early writings, but not of what they write today. Some of them already show signs of outgrowing the shadow cast by some foreign writers such as Hemingway, Camus and the writers of the Nouveau Roman in France. These are paving the way for the Egyptian novel on Egyptian soil. Some may resort to intercontextuality contrasting or comparing two moments in our history, a present one and another inspired by the Mamelukes, the Pharaohs or even by folklore. They indulge in technical innovations away from the influence of the Western novel, drawing closer to typically traditional Egyptian and Arab forms. Their topics are about food and freedom, and their language, oscillating between the documentary and the lyrical, comes closer to the speech variety and therefore with less dialogue and more description and therefore less dramatic narration. The writer assumes the part of a detached spectator watching yet another spectator, the latter being the hero or rather the anti-hero. Objectivity and objective reality are rejected in favour of subjectivity and subjective reality in some of their work. Some move within a strictly confined world, where the anti-hero fulfills his purpose, hopelessly awaiting to lose. All absolutes are

abandoned by most. Truth bears many faces, appearing relative, brittle and unjustifiable, and made up of a number of disconnected moments unredeemed by the context. Voices multiply rather than unify, so do perspective angles. The writers mostly continue to adhere to realism notwithstanding attempts at experimenting with new forms and in spite of the influence exercised by Marquez and other Latin American writers.

For twenty years, there has been talk of problems of creativity, of the theatre and of criticism. Few may have noticed that the problem in fact is one of reception: for twenty years now the population of receivers of art and thought has shrunk to a minimum. The remaining numbers have split up in disparate groups, lacking a common ground of sentiment, values and cultural entity. This situation has been intensified by the extending fundamental trends. The middle class which has been the foremost patron of the arts in Egypt has receded in quantity and quality, which had a negative impact on the intellectual and artistic life.

When I wrote *The Open Door* at the end of the Forties, I did that in the presence of a large reading public with common sentiments and shared values. I knew beforehand the shared ground the reader and I stood on and I knew how to lead him gently to believing in a new and more progressive set of values. I knew which note to play, and what response to expect. In the mid Eighties while I was writing *Old Age* I felt like someone jumping to the sea blindfolded. The circle I address is narrow due to the multiplicity of value systems and sentiments. I play a note to a public whose taste I do not know. This is one more reason behind the existing cultural crisis which we have lived with for long and which is now showing signs of relief.