

Intellectual Rape: The Image of the Political Prisoner in the Egyptian Novel

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We are born in a strange age, one where those possessing enlightened minds and truthful hearts are driven into prisons and persecuted for their viewpoints. In Egypt and elsewhere, writing fiction, poetry, and drama is considered a crime, a crime in the full sense of the word. The prison has become a fundamental part of the Egyptian life; it is a main pillar for supporting and sustaining iniquity and corruption.

The text may be under the authority of and influenced by heritage, language, religion, sex, customs, or society. We live in a region full of depressions, societal pressures, and dictatorships. Narrative texts are rich in endless codes and messages due to types of oppressions and suppressions practised against writers and intellectuals. Some of the writers tend to manipulate symbols, artifice and omission. Consequently, the text becomes ambiguous; and critics have to fill the spaces so as to make the picture for the ordinary reader quite clear. With the continuity of oppression, clash replaces harmony concerning the relationship between intellectuals and authority. The latter, henceforth, is inclined to snub the former and to subjugate them by intimidation and enticement in order to become one of its followers. In other words, as a result of the state's dominance, the process of creation is not significant because of the paucity of explicit elements and the increased use of implicit ones. That is to say, writers are prevented from openly expressing their positions and must be wary of conforming to the wishes and values of the ruling authority.

Fadel Thamer confirms—in a study entitled *The Unspoken and the Repressed in Arabic Narration* (2004)—that Arabic texts are subjected to a series of internal and external pressures and are subject to oppressing and controlling authorities. He divides these authorities into three groups: periodical, spiritual, and aesthetic. Remarkably, some modern

literary forms are characterized by frankness and clarity, but by conforming to the existing codes of literary expression dictated by the authorities, these works lead to nothing in terms of activism, freedom of expression, supporting human rights and effecting change.

A number of novels have tackled the image of the political prisoner such as: Foad Al-Tukruly's *Alwageh Al-Aakher (The Other Face)*, Gamal Hemdan's *Al-Mawt Al-Gameel (Beautiful Death)*, Ghaleb Helsa's *Al-Khamasin*, Fadela Farouk's *Ta'a Al-Khagal (The Stutter of Shame)*, Son'a Allah Ibrahim's *Sharaf (Honour)*, and Latifa Al-Zayat's *Saheb Al-Beit (Head of the Family)*. There are also many critical studies that have dealt with this subject such as Dr. Sabry Hafez's study entitled *Torture, Prison, and Assassinations in the Arabic Novel (2003)*.

This article concentrates on what writers are subjected to, in Egypt in particular, including imprisonment, torture, and rape. It lays bare the gravity of political detentions, the outrageousness of torture, the devastation that is inflicted upon ordinary people, and the cruelty of the bloody signs that are left on the victims' bodies. Many intellectuals are forced into emigration and exile, as it becomes difficult for them to live safely in their countries as their rights are trespassed and completely wiped out. These issues are brought to light and explored by Fathi Abdel-Wahaap's *Prison and Exile (1995)* and Baha'a Taher's *Love in Exile (1995)*.

Even Naguib Mahfouz's novels cannot avoid the theme of writers and intellectuals suffering in prisons, detention centres, and police stations as apparent in his novel *Al-Karnack (1986)*. This novel points to the tragedy, the effects of the absence of freedom and the negative impact of depriving people of their different rights. It is clearly a literary condemnation of the Egyptian revolution. Nevertheless, Mahfouz, who was not subjected to imprisonment or detention himself, stops short of offering an analytical image of the political prisoner.

Many thinkers have suffered from the agonies of prisons and detentions because of their political views, religious beliefs, cultural and intellectual worldviews. Arabic as well as foreign literature often reflect and portray the general circumstances, causes and characteristics which have led to the practice of torture and assassination, and discuss the effect

of oppressive government policies on prisoners' lives in particular and society in general. These works also display the success of municipal authorities in exerting control over people and show the outstanding skill and commonality of governing practices of authoritarian regimes all over the world.

Farouk Abd El-Kader, an Egyptian critic, suggests that the novels discussing issues of persecution, torture and detention of citizens deal also with the pursuit of intellectuals worldwide. He asserts that this genre is more common in Oriental Arabic literature. This perhaps comes as a result of the vehemence of the political disorders to which these Arabic countries have been exposed, the great number of successive coups as well as racial, sectarian and class disputes that have dominated these countries over long decades. Farouk Abdel-Kader wonders:

What is the matter with the Jordanian novelists? Why did Tayseer Sapoul shoot the bullet of mercy? Why did the eventual stranger Ghaleb Helsa die in another city suffering from loneliness, strangeness and defeat? Why did M'ones Al-Razzaz hope for immediate death? (205)

This article also challenges highly-accomplished souls who have morals to be able to interact with the characters exposed to tyranny, oppression, discipline and reform. It tries to expose the absurd facts that are unfamiliar to the public. It also endeavours to represent rebellions against municipal authorities who have been molded by external powers in order to retain individual freedom and belief in the necessity of a basic enjoyment of life. The use of first-person narration, flash back and documentation in the texts discussed uncovers the reality of tyranny from which political prisoners suffer. The dialogues reflect the mechanisms of interrogation, insulation, and punishment that dominate the arena of political imprisonment. A few of the authors also refer to the meaninglessness of discussions and dialogues between authorities and prisoners, and the great similarity between the way with which authorities treat political prisoners around the world. Dr. Sabry Hafez's study ignores this point as he portrays the images of torture and oppression as a purely Arab phenomenon, giving no reference to

foreign literature that deal with the topic of political oppression: Jack London's *The Star Rover* (2008), Victor Serge's *Men in Prison* (1981), Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* (1981) and Angela Davis's *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (2003).

Writing is the main weapon for Latifa Al-Zayaat to defend herself, her individual rights and freedom in addition to the rights of larger society. Through writing, she expresses the tragedy of the poor, the women, and slaves. She stresses the idea that she hates iniquity; yet she never pays any attention to power in her works. Instead, her strategy to address issues of iniquity is through responding to her mind and her thoughts. Rather than solely focusing on the level of the social and the political, she concentrates also on the individual, personal level. For example, she would indirectly critique the effects of authoritarian control through expressing how she feels nauseated while reading Egyptian newspapers. Highlighting a different form of imprisonment than that of the physical prison, Al-Zayaat illustrates the various forms of oppression and effects of power on the female in society.

Al-Zayaat's novels also refer to the experiences of political prisoners. Her novel, *Al Ragol Allazi Arafa Tohmataho* (*The Man Who Knew His Charge*, 1994), poses a frequently asked question: *Is it possible for individuals to enjoy any kind of freedom while perceptible and imperceptible means of suppression are numerous?* Al-Zayaat uses black comedy in an attempt to extract laughter out of a dramatic situation. She also uses the genre to possibly communicate with the governing forces, as black comedy may afford the possibility of a direct but veiled means of interaction with the oppressive regime. In *Selling and Buying* (1994), she asserts, however, that freedom is not only molded by the nature of a regime, but also by the individual, and the larger social morals that control the nature of that regime. In her view, individuals completely lose their freedom if they surrender to control and authority that turn them into slaves. In other words, this novel depicts the dominance of dictatorial regimes over the individual citizen. It is the individual who implicitly encourages and confirms the authority of the regimes, as he or she worships the ruling body as an aim in itself. Thus, the individual is complicit in the actions of the dictatorial powers through ignoring

the atrocity of the blind inclination to submit to the subjugating forces of authority.

Ironically, prisons may allow the prisoner the opportunity to step away from the busy schedules of the world and to speculate on the conditions of life—personal, social, communal and global. This is asserted by Radwa Ashur in her novel, *Atiaf* (*Apparitions*, 1999). In prison, thinkers have enough time as days and nights take their course. Each hour passes slowly, not beset by the demands of a later hour. Ashur is greatly interested in history and language. She deals with the problems of society positively; she tackles the concepts of suppression, exile, and banishment using new technical approaches. She sheds light also on various topics including Egyptian military defeats, history, and geography. Interestingly, she depends on notes, diaries, and facts in her novel and combines fact and fiction in her writing. What the novel gains in detail, however, it often loses in depth, comprehensiveness, and capacity.

Ashur pays great attention to what the communists and Muslim Brothers are exposed to in prisons:

- Where is Mr Fawzy?
- He died!
- No, my brother told me that they [the police] had arrested many people including men and women early this year.
- Why are they detained?
- Because they are communists.
- What do you mean?
- They are practicing a political anti-government activity. (37)

The narrator digresses to point out that drug traders, sex criminals, and murderers are luckier than political prisoners because they enjoy greater freedom of movement as well as frequent family/conjugal visits while inside prisons. They sometimes are allowed conjugal visits via co-ordination with the men of authority. As for the political prisoners, whose number amounts to approximately two thousand, they are dismissed from their jobs and deprived of everything.

The remarkable thing about the hideous treatment of political prisoners in prison is that the responsible leaders announce frequently that

Egyptians enjoy a life completely free from torture, exile, and suppression. Of course, this is very different from reality. President Gamal Abdel-Naser stated before a foreign journalist that Egypt did not have political prisoners. Mustafa Al-Nahas [an Egyptian Prime Minister] announced that there were no illegal detentions in Egypt. That day the political prisoners were released and Fawzy came out of prison. As for the reaction of the political prisoners towards their bad conditions in prisons and their deprivation of many basic rights, they shouted: "May the policy of lying and hypocrisy go to ruin! May the policy of tyranny and oppression collapse!"

It seems that the legislative authority has lost its legitimacy and the executive authority has taken over. Detentions have taken different forms and new shapes. The novel, *Atyaf (Apparitions)* sheds light on these statements through its comment on the detentions of 1981 when Egyptian people of all classes were charged as a result of the Camp David Treaty:

To be just, we have to say that this time the government acts in accordance with justice. It does not detain communists and Islamists only, but justly distributes charges on all the political powers, Copts and Muslims, and on men and women also. It gives all of them a free service of radios, televisions and the first pages of the daily newspapers. (237)

John Fowles, contemporary English academic, novelist and critic and author of *The Collector*, *The Magus*, and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and other novels, thinks that the process of creativity has become difficult; he suggests that we do not find either the material for writing, the appropriate means to express what we want, or the people who can fully comprehend what we want to say. Hence, many writers stop writing due to depression and hopelessness and are not sure of the benefit of the process of writing (Zidan). Mark Twain adds that he sometimes thought that he could not express with his pen his feelings towards life and people. Consequently, he stopped writing for six years rationalizing that life is so ambiguous and complex that he could not have a fully grown philosophy to evaluate it objectively. This paralysis of creativity

is a sentiment shared and asserted by Shokry 'Ayyad in his novel, *Tà'er Al-Ferdous* (*Paradise Bird*, 1997):

Tell me why you don't write for people any more!... of course, you know that there is strict censorship imposed on writing. I cannot write down what I want to say. (9)

This dialogue stresses why creativity is not possible. It is because of the censorship imposed on it; and the difficulties of publishing political and cultural literary works.

Farouk Abdel-Kader sees the situation of censorship and the stifling of intellectual creativity somewhat differently from that of Mo'enes Al-Razaz's novel, *Inclination to life*. Mo'enes clings to a sparkle of hope that his writings can be positive in bringing about a desired significant change. Engaging in a Sisyphean task, he devotes himself to writing knowing that they will confiscate his writings. He does not lose his hope, however, that he is stronger than his jailers. He is sure of living until he witnesses the twenty-first century that is expected to be the century of freedom (205).

Writers are able to illustrate the various effects of dictatorial leadership on the lives of citizens through their works. Issues addressed include religious persecution or coercion, physical and sexual abuse, loss of property, work and so on. For example, one author shows how the head of the family must express his belief in Allah and his disbelief in idols. Also discussed is the fate of the political prisoners' wives who are vulnerable to abuse at the hands of policemen and other figures of authority. The injustices extend farther as on account of the actions of the political prisoners, their families, friends and neighbours too often face authoritarian punishment as well. Consequently, wives leave their husbands, and fathers desert their sons; and misery affects many lives. This point is highlighted by Al-Zayyat in her novel, *Saheb Al-Beit* (*Head of the Family*, 1994) through the picture she draws of the uncertainty and confusion that have overcome Samya, the prisoner's wife:

It takes me some time to realize that Refky, her husband's friend, is the one who knocks the door and not policemen as expect-

ed.... Does the dream eventually become true? Is Mohammed [her husband] released? (8)

Similar issues are summed up by Hamida Qutp in her novel, *Nedd'a Ela Al-Dafa Al Okhra (A Call to the Other Bank, 2000)*. She tries to deepen man's humanity in order not to be physically and psychologically tortured and depressed because of radical viewpoints, which are considered an essential introduction to creation and innovation. She writes:

Here ... around this isolated building that is not vibrant with life, movement strikes out ... heavy feet go back and forth preparing the house, the slaughter-house! ... collecting the victims to throw them around the walls! Meters separate them with their faces tacked to the wall, and with their knees resting on pebbles! ... Another group includes those who stand on one foot dangling their hands, letting them not to touch anything even the pebbles of their neighbors ... A third group gathers those who squat on the ground with bowed heads. From time to time the sound of the lashing whip is heard! ... This is made to delight the victorious leaders of war whenever they visit these detentions ... The rat-like jailers are rewarded for their bravery. (817)

Violence dominates this novel. There is no difference between day and night in prison. However, the narrator knows well how to penetrate the prison's dull walls through a series of monologues, flashbacks, and self-examinations. Therefore, the novel is marked by vitality and richness. Victory is the outcome of these detentions. Dialogues do not play a very significant role because it is an autobiographical novel and the circumstances are such that it is difficult for her to have company and engage in conversation with others. She might have used the first-person method of narration to convey by her experience and self-vision. This would have led to concentration, greater stress, and stylist economy. However, she uses third-person narration, so the novel loses some of its focus, and the monologues seem to be those of an external participant.

In contrast, Sonalla Ibrahim's novels are told in the first person; they resemble press reportage that mimics reality. His main theme seems to be the importance of resisting the influence of the political megapower that attempts to invade the third world economically through ways which include transcontinental companies. His novels incorporate many excerpts from newspapers, magazines and other political sources in order to enlighten the people about a certain political/social issue. In other words, he is known for his documentary novels that employ a postmodern literary style unique for Arabic writing.

In his novel, *Sharaf* (*Honour*, 1997) Son'a Allah Ibrahim tackles different forms of torture including rape in detention centres, police stations and disciplinary organizations which are overcrowded with communists and Sunnites. Life is powerless. Death is effectual. Life is incomplete, and it tries to be complete. Death is in itself complete. Rape in *Honour* symbolizes death: to be virgin symbolizes a type of completeness. The narrator refers to the behaviour of Muslim Brothers and Communists saying:

More than one thing of the behavior of Muslim Brothers strike us with wonder, as for instance the strict system that allows them to spend days interestingly: Waking up early to perform the dawn prayer, going back to bed until sallying forth to the W.C., exercising karate, lecturing and attending religious lessons, memorizing the Holy Qur'an, performing the five prayers, as well as performing and practicing other kinds of behavior, in addition to their solidarity and joint liability. (181)

As for the behaviour of Communists, the last group of them, which included those who still looked forward to a good life in the future, equipped the water closets at their own expense with hot water tanks. They allowed all prisoners to use them freely. When they were released they were sure that they would return.

At the beginning of her writing career, Nawal Al-Sa'dawy published a novel, *Zekrayat Tabeeba* (*Memoirs of a Female Doctor*, 1985). Since then she has written many literary and medical works tackling sexual and social discrimination against women. This novel deals with the general

and the particular, since she was not imprisoned in an isolated prison; she lived with hundreds of female prisoners whether political or non-political prisoners. *The Novel* (2004) is a dramatic novel. It does not depend on logical or natural sequences of events. It gives due respect to her characters' thoughts other than through events. It also gives a painstaking analysis into the depths of characters. It is well structured and the novelist is able to attract the readers' attention through the plot. She begins the novel with her heroine, a young girl with no identity. She takes apart the unity of character. It would be difficult for readers to identify whether the novel is realistic or whether the events spring from Carmen's character. The text mixes tenses and places to the extent that it forms a state of chaos, and is comprised of both realism and impressionism.

This novel assures the endeavour of authorities to achieve their goals using legal or illegal means. She writes:

Rostom sighs while reading. Truly! Now after her death, Carmen's words proved to be correct and reasonable. They tied her to bed posts and charged her head with electric current. Their target was her mind, not her body or soul. They aimed at destroying her head, and what it contains. The electric current was switched on to destroy her mind. Her crime lay in the bottom of her head where her mind is. She triumphed over them at the last moment before death. (174)

It is quite clear that Egyptian intellectuals live in an illusion of belonging to an elite who are able to govern society, change sordid structures and minds, and build up new generations marked by rationalism, freedom, justice, and democracy. Dictators have done their best to take hold of the process of decision making, power, and reality. However, they are backward, unable to cope with development and life, and inimical to modernization and democracy. This extract also stresses the significance of revolution: silence is death; expressing one's opinions is also a certain death. Consequently, it is better for you to state openly your revolution as long as you are doomed to die.

Baha'a Taher pays not much attention to fame. He is not also interested in publishing successive works to prove that he is still present on

the literary scene. He does not write unless he feels that he has something different to say. His characters demonstrate collectivity when the narrator and the other characters work together. They are complete characters. They have to live in exile, but their exile is temporary. The narrator sheds light on the failure of those characters. His novel, *Al-Hob Fi Al-Manfa* (*Love in Exile*), criticizes the Arab ego, reality, and characters' self-satire. It is an accusation against western civilization; depicting the downfall of any civilization based on greed, selfishness, and racial discrimination.

In *Love in Exile*, his masterpiece, Bahaa presents images that are rich in truthfulness, pain and sweetness. He portrays the picture of a generation around which circumstances, values and thoughts are changed. Experiences emerge in a strange world where truth is suffocated and expelled. This generation, despite the gravity of the tragedy of the loss of the right of freedom of expression under authoritarian control, is still vibrant with life. The events of the novel are based on a world-wide background.

Love in Exile also explores the nature of torture and oppression in prisons. Exile is portrayed as a form of punishment for whoever opposes the idol (the governor) or expresses their own opinions. This novel is a universal one because it depicts the tragedy of men of letters and intellectuals not only in Egypt, but also all over the world at large. The number of political prisoners in Chile following Pinochet's coup d'état amounted to many thousands. They are exposed to different forms of torture; a character recounts the situation in Chile:

Albert does not know how the nightmare of absolute regime in South America can come to an end.... In our first meeting, he tells me about the dictator who ruled the country at that time and ruined it. He says that before the insane Masyus took over; his country was a happy oasis. Everyone has their own work and house. At least, everyone knows how to read and write.... Those who wanted to study in universities traveled abroad. (108-9)

Finally, over the span of its history, the Arab world has frequently witnessed many movements of reform, revolutions against tyranny, destruction and coups against dictators. These changes, however, have not succeeded in changing peoples' conditions, transforming them from one stage into another or steadying them against their stumbling blocks. Instead, the image of suppression has increased; the methods of control used by absolute regimes have been perfected and cruelties intensified, showing great excellence in closing doors and building prisons and detentions. Also, emergency and exceptional laws have been enacted that further limit the rights of citizens. The sanctity of justice has been violated. These movements of suppression are well fortified under the pretext of maintaining identity and particularity and defending national dignity and supreme interests.

Notes

- 1 The Egyptian movies have also portrayed several forms of torture objectively; it is quite clear in *Ehna Beto'e Alotopes* (We are the Bus People). In this movie, an officer interrogates a prisoner accused of ladling out political leaflets and having a plot to detonate the bus:
 - Who're you?
 - The prisoner sadly answers: "I'm a dog".
 - The dictator goes on asking the prisoner: "What does the dog do when it needs something?"
 - The prisoner says dramatically: "It barks!!!!!"

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