

Introduction

Prelude, Considerations, and Definitions

Reading literature, we learn to learn from the singular and the unverifiable.

Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*

Production of Violence: Reflections on an Un-mastered Past

A video of the twenty-six year-old Egyptian journalist Aḥmad Samīr ‘Āṣim’s filming his own death in the aftermath of the June 30, 2013 event as the military was taking over the country is perhaps the most poignant symbol of the state of affairs in Egypt now.¹ The young man was filming the President’s Republican Guards at close range while they were shooting down civilians, only to have the sniper on film realize what the young man was doing, turn the rifle onto him, and kill him on the spot. The blackness that ensued, the brief and haphazard mechanical rolling of the empty film that no longer has agency or the purpose to tilt over and show us the brave young man as he lies dead in a pool of his own blood, signifies the worst return of the same, or, if you will, the saddening descent of Egypt into a state of political chaos.

The death of Aḥmad Samīr ‘Āṣim as he was recording barbarism – like the death of many other innocent Egyptians protesting the abuses of their government – is a grim reminder that even if democracy has not yet found a stable ground on Egypt’s soil, the rule of law still remains the only way out of the vacant darkness of authoritarianism. While incidents like these might make it easy for the “West” to

¹ See www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/video-shocking-footage-appears-to-capture-moment-egyptian-filmed-his-own-death-through-his-lens-8700519.html; www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/egypt/10170307/Ahmed-Assem-the-Egyptian-photographer-who-chronicled-his-own-death.html.

re-absorb the “Egyptian” narrative into the usual colonial and post-colonial pathos – the masses hungry for the “Western” fruit of “civilization” and liberal democracy undone by their own “Oriental” traits of violence, irrationality, authoritarianism – the “Other” continues to struggle to find a way out of these customary traps of representation.

The event is one among thousands of recorded cases of military brutality against Egyptian citizens; it is indeed a logical continuity of colonial violence followed immediately by postcolonial dictatorships. This alone makes writing about Egypt’s modern history a source of pain. But if we were to put this current crisis in a larger context, we would see that education is the backbone of every civilized society and the foundation of civic discourse and democratic government. Just as water does not suddenly come to the boil, but reaching 100°C is rather the culmination of a gradual heating process, so too is an ongoing process of education necessary for building a democratic society. It takes decades, perhaps even centuries, to establish a sound and reliable educational base. One’s indignation at the politics of the democratically elected Egyptian president and his gang of brothers was naively assuaged when hearing about his removal from office and the suspension of the country’s cryptic Constitution, as well as the disbanding and criminalizing of the Muslim Brotherhood as an organization. But taking a more discursive and analytical look at the current affairs in Egypt puts us face-to-face with an agonizing dilemma. How can one choose between the imperative for reclaiming the Revolution and the need to avoid a return to violence – and at what cost?

The heating up of the Egyptian political scene, as currently witnessed, is a symptom of a fundamental failure in education. Harvard Law Professor Noah Feldman denounces the events of June 2013 in Egypt “as a tragic setback for democracy, constitutionalism and the rule of law.”² Whether or not we agree with Feldman that Egypt has fallen into “the rule of the mob,” what needs to be recorded historically is that such a fatal breakdown in the democratic process is not a sudden occurrence but, rather, the result of an accumulated neglect that began more than a century ago. While ruling Egypt for twenty-four years, Lord Cromer, the British commissioner and consul-general in Egypt

² See Noah Feldman, “Democracy Loses in Egypt and Beyond” in *Bloomberg Review*, July 3, 2013. www.bloombergview.com/articles/2013-07-03/democracy-loses-in-egypt-and-beyond.

(1883–1907), vehemently opposed the establishment of a university, claiming that educating the Egyptians would create a class of graduates for which no jobs could be found, and would thus generate a problem of unemployment. Of course, there is more to this willful neglect of education than meets the eye.

Both the killings of peasants by the British Army of Occupation in colonial Egypt and the killings of Egyptians by the military in the post-colonial era are shameful records of barbarism. While one was practiced one hundred years ago by a colonizer, and the second by army officers, one must never lose track of the larger context of which these two events are grave symbols. As happened in the Denshawai Affair of 1906 and Egypt's military coup of 2013, official histories tend to process events, "smoothing out" the textures of pain, loss, and struggle, especially when the mapping of the new imperial world system comes into play, when the colonizer has long left the colonies and labeled them "third world," and when the colonized "Other" has inherited the baton of violence and come to terrorize and recolonize its own. I have addressed the Denshawai affair in more details elsewhere, drawing attention to the invention of Islamophobia and equation of Islam with barbarism as a legitimizing tool for colonizing Egypt.³

It is therefore crucial, in historicizing the turning inward of Egypt's high culture, to pose a different set of questions: Why did Egypt's culture and its dominant religion of Islam attain such dazzling crudeness just when British soldiers, politicians, engineers, and archaeologists were scheming to put together their colonial project? For the context of this study, and to extend George Steiner's salient interrogations of history's material reality outside language,⁴ are there certain types or styles of language that lend themselves readily to embody this "material reality" more than others? These two questions trigger a third: Why would the novel and film art, chiefly notable for preoccupation with the individual, become the mode of choice for writing about colonized populations – about slaves, the disenfranchised, peasants – and about the rigid dogmas and madness by which these wretched populations are oppressed?

³ See Mohammad Salama, *Islam, Orientalism and Intellectual History: Modernity and the Politics of Exclusion since Ibn Khaldun* (London: IB Tauris, 2011).

⁴ George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 29.

In exploring these questions, it is important to emphasize that Egypt's heritage is not merely Islamic. The dictates of colonist and orientalist discourses have fashioned theories about the conflicts between civilizations. As a result of these essentialist theories, Islam came to be viewed as antithetical to, derivative of, or in complete denial of European influences on its cultures. A thorough history of this carefully constructed polarization between Islam and colonial modernity, and, more importantly, within a predominantly Muslim society like Egypt, is long overdue.

Take, for example, Britain's goal of creating a loyal middle class in Egypt without establishing a system of postsecondary education. Political and social institutions loosely modeled on metropolitan Britain were created in Alexandria and Cairo. The Egyptian elite were encouraged to participate in these institutions, although their design was inferior to the imperial models on which they were based. This participation, notes the political scientist Abdelslam Magharaoui, "included defining the boundaries of the political community with the purpose of representing Egypt as the European masters wanted it to be represented: imitating Europe, but not quite European."⁵ In other words, there is an inevitable and futile act of mimicry at work. "Like the Europeans who defined their 'self' against the non-European 'other,'" continues Magharaoui, "Egyptian liberals defined their national identity in opposition to the Arabo-Islamic 'Other.' To construct a nation modeled after those in Europe, Egyptian liberals redefined the territorial, historical, racial, and cultural boundaries of the new Egyptian nation."⁶ Significant writings produced in the early and mid-1920s, including 'Alī 'Abd al-Rāziq's *al-Khilāfa wa Niẓām al-Ḥukm (The Caliphate and the System of Government)* and Ṭāhā Ḥusayn's *Fī al-Shi'r al-Jāhili (On Pre-Islamic Poetry)* fall within the period of Magharaoui's study and seem to confirm his thesis by eschewing traditional Islam for the sake of a more secular and nationalist Egyptian identity. Of course, such works can easily be called political, not simply because they address political matters – e.g. when 'Abd al-Rāziq dismisses the *khilāfa* as a non-Islamic form of government, or when Ḥusayn changes the starting point for classical Arabic or Egyptian identity – but also because these works take sides in and leave memorable marks on the political

⁵ Abdelslam M. Magharaoui, *Liberalism without Democracy: Nationhood and Citizenship in Egypt*, 1992–36 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 69.

⁶ *Ibid.*

confrontations and happenings in which they intervene, thus inevitably becoming part of the political discourse.

And yet intervention in colonial discourses is a double-edged sword. Once in Egypt, Britain sought hegemony over the population through coercion and suppression. The last thing the colonizer needed was an educated class that not only understood its rights but also could organize to fight for the country's independence. Cromer knew this formula quite well, as the educated elite were already causing turmoil in Egypt as well as in India. He knew that the best thing Egyptians could do – for the sake of the British Empire – was to serve as workers and as a labor force in agriculture and industry, so he fashioned his imperial policy to serve that very purpose. In this context, Cromer succeeded in the creation of an Egyptian boom and bringing order to what had otherwise been a messy financial slump since the time of Ismā'īl.

One example of Cromer's "success" is found in enhancing the country's irrigation system and increasing the value of crops, especially cotton: he raised the crop from three million cantars in 1879 to eight million by 1907.⁷ To administer an economically successful colony, Cromer needed peasants and serfs rather than teachers, lawyers, and engineers. Thus, he neglected the most fundamental and basic human right for a nation to grow organically and form a democratic government: education.⁸ Cromer's intentions were clear. He asserts in *Modern Egypt*:

Do not let us imagine that, under any circumstances, we can ever create a feeling of loyalty in the breasts of the Egyptians akin to that felt by a

⁷ The cantar is an obscure measurement that has no exact equivalent, as it ranges from one cantar being equal to 143–148 kg. Hence three million cantars would be around 430,000 tons. Eight million would be around 1,145,000 tons.

⁸ According to the historian Joel Beinin, Egypt turned into a multinational stock house for European capital during the years of Cromer: "European capital was heavily concentrated not in industry but in loans to the government, financing cotton cultivation, and the construction of a transportation network to facilitate the import-export trade. The Suez Canal, opened in 1869, was the crowning achievement of foreign capital in Egypt. This resulted in the development of the export sector of the economy and its necessary infrastructure while other sectors were largely neglected. The earliest concentrations of wage labor in Egypt were in the transport and public utilities sectors of the economy – sectors developed by European capital to meet its needs. The only significant exception to this trend was the establishment of a large scale cigarette industry by predominantly Greek capital and labor in the years after 1875. By 1906 there were 55–60 cigarette factories in Cairo and some enterprises employed as many as 500 workers" (Joel Beinin, "Formation of the Egyptian Working Class" [*MERIP Reports*, No. 94, Feb. 1981], p. 15).

self-governing people for indigenous rulers if, besides being indigenous, they are also beneficent. Neither by the display of good sympathy, nor by good government, can we forge bonds which will be other than brittle.⁹

It is also clear, based on the record of his shrewd, pragmatic political strategy in Egypt, that Cromer sought to avoid at all costs any confrontation between the Egyptians and the Army of Occupation. If anything, Denshawai distracted Cromer from completing all the tasks of the colonial agenda that were assigned to him or that he assigned to himself. Prior to Denshawai, the major demand of the opposition was basic education and equal opportunity employment, with a view toward an improvement of the quotidian conditions for Egyptians. Local presses called for making education a right for all Egyptians and establishing a national university, an urgent need that was not fulfilled until the departure of Cromer from Egypt in 1907. Muṣṭafá Kāmil's newspaper, *al-Liwā'*, published numerous articles criticizing the High Commissioner for turning a blind eye to the education of the Egyptian people. *Al-Mu'ayyad*, another local newspaper, denounced the practice of offering jobs to British and foreign subjects while denying them to Egyptians on the pretext that the latter were not educated enough.¹⁰ Egyptian nationalists gained the impression that English education was not only privatized, catering to the elites as well as to the foreign minority, but also anglicized and tailored to produce submissive subjects. Clearly, educating the natives was never a part of the "civilizing mission" of British Imperialism. The point is that Cromer had a "quarter-of-a-century opportunity" to leave Egypt with a tangible promise toward self-rule, but he missed it; instead of supporting the education of Egyptians, marking his legacy by engraving his name on a public school or university, he chose instead to establish a tribunal, and marked his legacy with the blood of innocent Egyptians. But this book is about more than Cromer's Egypt; as the title suggests, it is, more precisely, about the relationship between Islam and the culture of modern Egypt. In order to introduce this relationship, the terms in the title must be explained.

⁹ The Earl of Cromer, *Modern Egypt*, vol. 2 (New York: MacMillan Company, 1908), 570.

¹⁰ See *al-Mu'ayyad*, November 13–14, 1893; November 28, December 23, 1894; January 14, February 17–19, March 17–18, June 25, 1895; January 20, March 13, October 28, 1900; February 3, June 16, 1901; March 4, October 8, 1902. See also *al-Liwā'*: January 30, February 11, 23, June 28, 1901; October 18–19, November 7, 1904.

Islam

To be a Muslim in Egypt today means living in a predominantly Sunni society, challenged by competing religiosities ranging from the conformist state-administered authority of Al-Azhar, Egypt's religious university, to politically oriented militant organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood, *al-Jamā'a al-Islāmiyya*, *Jamā'at al-Takfīr wa al-Hijra*, and *Jamā'at al-Amr bil-Ma'rūf wa al-Nahyy 'an al-Munkar*, to pacifist and non-political groups such as *Jamā'at al-Tablīgh wa al-Da'wa*, and a variety of Sūfī sects. This was not the case at the outset of the twentieth century, when religious authority in Muslim Egypt was mainly represented by al-Azhar and remained so until the Muslim Brotherhood emerged as an alternative non-conformist religious establishment in the late 1920s. A situation of this sort is not unique to modern Egypt. Across time and space, Muslim societies have shifted their ideologies; specific religious or devotional practices are only understood, tolerated, fostered, or oppressed within specific historical, theological, and geographical contexts. It is difficult, if not perilous, to explore challenging insights – as acceptable as they might have been in the past – into a rigid dogma already at odds with itself, at once calcified and contested by its own intra-religious tensions. Because Islam, like all religions, maintains its very existence in the world through faith, it is unsurprising that the orthodoxy of Islamic faith, which was mostly represented by al-Azhar at the outset of the last century, would attempt to crush so-called “secularist” or enemies of Islam.¹¹ Secularism, a term coined in Europe in 1851,¹² was translated into Arabic in the early 1900s as *'Ilmāniyya/Ālamaniyya*, and is now hypostasized in Islamist (and public) discourse as a state of un-Godliness akin to *kufr* (disbelief). Secularism has undoubtedly influenced major transitions in decolonizing societies, including in Egypt, where a supposed “earlier cohesiveness or integrity of man's social

¹¹ For more on the nexus between Egypt's postcolonial despotic regimes and the reification of militant religious thought, leading to the emergence of radical Islam and the rise of dangerous and fractious epistemologies in religious thought by the likes of Sayyid Qutb and others, see Mohammad Salama and Rachel Friedman, “Locating the Secular in Sayyid Qutb,” *Arab Studies Journal*, Vol. XX No. 1: 104–31.

¹² By G. J. Hoyaoko. See Eric S. Waterhouse, “Secularism” in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, eds. James Hastings et al (Edinburgh: 1908–1921, vol. 11), 348.

and personal life,” as Wilfred Cantwell Smith puts it, “once religiously expressed and religiously sanctified, has been fragmented.”¹³ As strong adherents found it difficult to compartmentalize their faith or to reconcile it with “worldly” aspects of societies, many proponents of the separation of mosque and state, including culture theorists and critics like ‘Abd al-Rāziq and Ḥusayn, as well as secular leaders like Gamal Abdel Nasser, would immediately be targeted and labeled as enemies of Islam who must be killed or persecuted.

In the earlier decades leading to the formation of the Muslim Brotherhood and the rise of Nasserism, institutionalized religion had already created numerous challenges to independent Muslim thinkers. During the first quarter of the twentieth century, scholars with deep expertise in the culture of Islam, such as Muḥammad ‘Abduh, were expelled from the academy due to its one-dimensional vision and selective use of the Islamic past. Ḥusayn, who joined al-Azhar in 1902, owes much of his intellectual development as an *‘ālim* to the impressive teachings of al-Marṣafī, who was also accused of apostasy by the religious establishment for his non-traditional “scientific criticism” of pre-Islamic culture.¹⁴ These tensions between liberal thought and traditionalism reflected a general mood on the part of the educated class in Egypt, although in today’s terms ‘Abduh’s pleas for introducing Islamic philosophy and al-Jurjānī’s work on rhetoric and Qur’ānic *I’jāz* (inimitability and apologetics discourse) into a rigid Azharite curriculum seem quite moderate; indeed, they can hardly be characterized as liberal at all. It is these interactions between persons of letters and clergymen of the letter that formed the roots of cultural *nahḍa* (renaissance/revival/awakening) in modern Egypt.

This cultural renaissance was built on institutional responses to the quotidian complexities of political and social life. The clearer the image of a modern Egypt independent from Britain was, the more Egyptian intellectuals began to disentangle Islam from the traditionalisms and mythologies accumulated throughout the centuries. In light of the fierce competition over who was best qualified to rule Egypt, there was a tremendous need for new propaganda campaigns.

¹³ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press Edition, 1991), 124.

¹⁴ See Pierre Cachia, *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, His Place in the Egyptian Literary Renaissance* (London: Luzac & Company Ltd., 1956). See especially Cachia’s Chapter 11 on “Scientific Criticism,” 143–66.

In response to the increasing intervention of foreign powers in Egyptian affairs, numerous Egyptian intellectuals began to look back to the formative moments of Islam – the roots of their own civilization – to try to recapture a sense of authenticity and legitimation for Egyptians. They also began to realize that the West has repeatedly imposed itself on Egypt in the forms of Christian or secular military campaigns and invasions. There was an overwhelming sense of the urgent need for a renaissance to resurrect a body politic that would be both Egyptian and Islamic, although the term “Egypto-Islamic” did not necessarily go unchallenged.¹⁵

By the beginning of the twentieth century, Britain’s occupation of Egypt was becoming more and more customary and less and less of an event to the public. But for the Egyptian intelligentsia, political resistance continued in the form of nationalist resistance by figures like Muṣṭafá Kāmil, Muḥammad Farīd, and Sa‘ad Zaghlūl. Although Islam played a major role in their speeches and political agendas, it was not at all a dominant ideology in their ways of thinking. The educated Egyptians who grew up in the final years of the nineteenth century and imbibed secular calls for government, as well as the Islamic discussions of Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī and Muḥammad ‘Abduh, reacted to those ideas in many of their writings; they included the pioneering poet Maḥmūd Sāmī al-Bārūdī and his successors, Aḥmad Shawqī and Hāfiz Ibrāhīm. While it is difficult to judge how many were influenced by these new ideas, prior to the birth of the novel in

¹⁵ The Egyptian economist Fawzy Mansour attributes the *nahḍa* directly to local concerns among Egyptians and Arabs and to emergent nationalistic sentiments against British imperialism, and not, as commonly believed, to political reactionary responses by the Ottoman empire to gain control over its lost territories:

“It will thus be seen that the argument, now popular in fundamentalist circles that the Ottoman Empire protected ‘fellow Moslem’ Arab countries against the onslaught of European imperialism is false. The empire did not protect any of these countries against really determined invasion by a Western country. When such invasion took place, the empire created conditions favourable to a much more insidious attack, that of economic colonialism proceeding under the protection and privileges granted by nominal Ottoman sovereignty. Finally, when a country like Egypt attempted to secede and establish an autonomous, modern economy, the Ottoman Empire participated very actively in a consortium of European powers whose aim was to return Egypt to the fold of economic dependency and underdevelopment.” Fawzy Mansour, *The Arab World: Nation, State, and Democracy* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 1992), 81.

Egypt, it is arguable that poetry reached an audience wider than did academic debates on religion. In any case, there is no doubt that such towering figures played an important role in shaping the Islamic tenor of the intellectual life of modern Egypt, stimulating fresh anti-establishment approaches to religion.

This new cultural perspective on religion was in every way informed by Egypt's encounter with Western Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as it became apparent that, for the first time in Islamic history, the political dominion of Islam was fading and that the so-called Muslim *umma* [nation] was at the weakest that it had ever been – socially, politically, economically, and militarily. Al-Afghānī and ‘Abduh strove to reposition Islam in relationship to this foreign “Other,” but more importantly to itself. Metropolitan society in Egypt seemed to have featured a social hierarchy of Sunni Muslims, consisting first of Turks and Turco-Egyptians; secondly of Coptic and Jewish minorities; and thirdly of others: peasants, Bedouins, a few North Africans (Algerians and Tunisians), a few natives of India, and a considerable number of Sudanese. Both Afghānī and ‘Abduh believed that the revival of the Muslim *umma* and the encouragement of national progress required a healthier sense of unity among all Egyptians and a more efficient religious institute; they therefore worked for a serious reformation of al-Azhar and its outmoded approaches to science and education. Al-Afghānī, though not an Egyptian native, had a remarkable influence on Islamic political thought in Egypt. His key position in regard to political reform consisted of a strong advocacy for Islamic foundationalism and for the reunification of all Arab and Muslim states. Al-Afghānī believed that the only way to end European colonialism and prevent Western Europe from occupying more Muslim lands was to re-empower the Islamic *caliphate*, which at this point in history was represented by the fragile Ottoman Empire, whose sovereignty over all Muslim *wilāyāt* (administrative divisions) worldwide was increasingly embattled.

‘Abduh, in contrast, developed a more expansive agenda than al-Afghānī's, and took a less rigid stand toward sociopolitical and cultural reform. Unlike al-Afghānī, ‘Abduh cautioned against the return to foundationalism *per se*; instead, he called for a “neo-foundationalism,” namely, a resurrection of core humanistic values in Islamic tradition. Espousing a comprehensive process that would include an *iṣlāḥ* (reform) not only of all religious institutes but also of social life, particularly in Egypt, and in the Islamic world in general, ‘Abduh adopted a