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TRAUMA IN BAHAA TAHER'S FICTION: "I, THE KING, HAVE COME"

Abstract

The question of trauma in postcolonial Arabic literature has not yet been fully studied. Until recently, literary criticism concentrated on cases in the "white" and Western literature. The present paper opens some fundamental questions in the field, mapping what it means to talk about "trauma" or the experience of violence in the fiction written by the sixties generation in Egypt. In particular, the paper focuses on trauma representation in Bahaa Taher's 1985 story "I, the King, Have Come".

The significance of the study of trauma representations in contemporary Egyptian fiction, commonly referred to as the "new wave" by literary scholars, from the standpoint of poststructuralist, socio-cultural, and postcolonial theories can hardly be overestimated.

Baaha Taher belongs to the sixties generation of Egyptian writers. In his "I, the King, Have Come" the story takes place in the mystical desert during the 20s and 30s of the past century. The plot unfolds against the background of British colonial rule. Filled with mystical symbolism weighing Western versus Eastern personalities and spiritualities, the story is narrated in such a way as to unmask the morally and politically troubling aspects of every day and the psychological effects of colonial domination.

Keywords: trauma, postcolonial Arabic literature, Baaha Taher, colonialism.

Trauma (Arab. الصدمة النفسيّة. According to Nermin Ahmed Haikal, الفجعيّة) representations in postcolonial Arabic literature[1] has been treated by several Western and Arab literary scholars[2].

The disintegration of identity and dehumanized political system are leading themes in contemporary Arabic literature. Trauma finds variant representations in the poetry of Mahmud Darvish (Palestine) and Saadi Youssef (Iraq) and the fiction/prose writing of Sonallah Ibrahim (Egypt), Ghassan Kanafani (Palestine), and Elias Khoury (Milich 2015, https://en.qantara.de/print/22226). Bahaa Taher's writing is particularly interesting in this regard. In his novels and stories, traumatic events are interpreted in the context of Oriental-Occidental encounters and dichotomy and are associated with socio-cultural and political changes.

Taher began his literary career in the wake of the revolution of 1952, which overthrew the monarchy and led to Gamal Abdel Nasser's rise to power in 1954 when Taher was a student at Cairo University. In the introduction to his novel *Aunt Safiyya and the Monastery* (1991), he describes his rapid disillusionment with the new regime. Taher refers eloquently to the contradictory feelings that the political climate of the post-revolutionary Egypt evoked in him and his contemporaries:

[1] A more or less sustained analysis of the Arabic literature from the standpoint of postcolonial theory can be found in Waïl S. Hassan. 2002. "Postcolonial Theory and Modern Arabic Literature: Horizons of Application". *Journal of Arabic Literature.* Vol. 33, No. 1: 45-64; Al-Musawi, Muhsin. 2018. "Postcolonial Theory in the Arab World: Belated Engagements and Limits". *International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*. V. 20. Issue: *Postcolonial Studies and Arabic Literature:* 174-191; Pannewick, Friederike, and Georges Khalil. 2015. *Commitment and Beyond: Reflections on/of the Political in Arabic Literature Since the 1940s*. Wiesbaden: Reichert.

[2] Among the works written in Arabic, the following are noteworthy: ʻAbd al-ʻAziz, Basmah. 2014. *Dhakirat al-qahr: dirasah hawla manzumat al-taʼdhib.* al-Qahirah: al-Tanwir; Khoury, Elias. 1990. *Al-Dakirah al-mafqudah: dirasat naqdiyyat*. Bayrut: Dar al-Adab; Tarabishi, Jurj. 1993. *Madhbahat al-turath fi al-thaqafah al-ʼArabiyah al-muʻasirah*. London, United Kingdom: Dar al-Saqi.

> […] But the time of radical changes was over, and the revolution resulted in the suppressive regime. We won one national victory after another while we repeatedly failed to protect human rights and individual freedoms. Writers and citizens seemed to be completely confused and detached. On the one hand, they continued wholeheartedly to believe in the revolution and what it stood for in principle […] On the other hand, those who had supported the revolution were largely disappointed with the overwhelmingly totalitarian nature of the political system. Only later did they gain a more useful perspective on their conflicting feelings.
>
> Against the background of this all-encompassing confusion, there was no room for the optimistic realism in the literature that would tell us about victories and victorious people. Many outstanding realists, critics, and theoreticians had been imprisoned by the mid-60s.
>
> The new literature that defied the limitations imposed by the official cultural establishment reflected on the ongoing changes; the whole enterprise of realistic fiction collapsed. Literary works had no longer the clear-cut beginning, climax, or end. The environment that would provoke the protagonist to struggle for changes also vanished. Unlike realists, the writers of the new generation felt weakness and the incapability to dominate the environment. Diverse time and space dimensions were mixed in a literary work and, to put it frankly, the positive hero of the victorious revolution was replaced by the disillusioned character whose hopes for a prosperous future are dashed in one way or another. The characters seem to be more or less paralyzed, as all attempts to reverse their fate have met with defeat; the result is a sense of resigned despair. The new reality of the 1960s was marked with a sharp feeling of failure that raised obstacles to free self-realization. Concise/scrupulous description of disparate elements proved to be effective in conveying inconsistent, fragmented inner world as opposed to the bleak and indifferent outer world. These were the striking features of the literature that was created spontaneously, independently of the establishment, without any preliminary consent. (Taher 2017, 28-29).

The emergence of the sixties generation in Egypt gave rise to much controversy in Egyptian literary criticism. Critics sought to understand, analyze, and categorize the emerging literary generation in Egypt. The so-called "new wave" in Egyptian literature precipitated fierce debates about the significance of what came to be known as the sixties generation. The "anxiety over categorization" dominated literary discussions and generational debates that took place surrounding the emergence of the sixties generation during this time. The emergence of a new generation of writers posed a threat to the conventional aesthetic cliché, raising questions about whether or not artistic innovation was strictly the domain of the young. Academic debates focused on the reasons for this "revolt of the young" against the outmoded forms and sentiments in literature. Scholars tried to trace the literary genealogy and identify the inspirational sources of the emerging generation. Were their experimental narratives a real breakthrough in Egyptian prose writing or just an imitation of Western literary trends? Some writers of the sixties generation claimed that they were a "fatherless generation". The extra-literary reasons for the emergence of the "angry young men" movement in Egyptian literature include the disillusionment with the 1952 revolution and the new regime, the feeling of despair and hopelessness, and the severe crackdowns on the left-wing groups and individuals. Arab-Israeli hostilities and the defeat in the war of 1967 sharpened the feeling of depression and helplessness and made the situation even more complicated" (Tskhvediani 2017, 129).

The story of Bahaa Taher's critically acclaimed "I, the King, Have Come" (أنا الملك جئت) predominantly takes place in the desert. The protagonist is doctor Farid, the owner of the medical clinic in Cairo. In the above-mentioned introduction to his novel, Taher refers to the story as the best piece of his writing:

> {…} I was caught completely by surprise with the great success of "I Dreamed of You Last Night". It was discussed in over twenty academic essays and the scholarly work about twenty times the size of the story, whereas "I, the King, Have Come" that I consider being the best among my works, did not receive even a quarter of this attention {…} (Taher 2017, 32-33).

The story was written in Geneva in 1985 and was later included in the collection of short stories of the same title. The story is filled with mystical symbolism weighing Western versus Eastern personalities and spiritualities[3]. In the story, as in *Sunset Oasis*, mixing history and mythology, the author portrays an image of Egypt under the British occupation. The text addresses the themes of identity and individual existential crisis, tradition and superstition, corruption and struggle for power, and cultural diversity of Egypt.

The protagonist, Farid, is a graduate of the University of Grenoble and a successful ophthalmologist. While in France, he falls in love with Martin, the student of the faculty of literature, and decides to marry her. Later, he sets off on a long journey into the desert to discover the lost ancient Egyptian temple there. Farid's father – Sheikh Abdala, the retired Qadi, and a man of common sense is unable to understand his son's aspirations. However, finally, he gives up and orders the servant named Radi to join his son for the journey. The narration opens with these events that take place in 1932.

Farid's life is not narrated in chronological order. Rather, the narration flows along the lines of his feelings, emotions, and the traumatic experience that are represented against the background of the protagonist's memories, hallucinations, and travel account. The grief that follows Martin's death completely changes Farid's life, leading him to abandon a successful career and set out on a journey into the unknown.

Surrounded by the grief over Martin's death, Farid writes the following research works: *Primary Observations on Visual Impairment and Excessive Sunlight: Cases of Upper Egypt*; *Stopping the Secretion of Tear Glands of Egyptian Peasants in the Village of Tunia*; *Optical Memory and the Hereditary Knowledge*. In the latter, which was rejected by the English Royal Society, he hints at the possible journey into the desert and the upcoming search for the temple. Providing a detailed account of the journey, the author skillfully describes the landscapes through the eyes of the protagonist, his visions, and his memories. The language is impressive, sentences are short and laconic. The travel arrangements are described against the background of English occupation and the power struggle:

> [...] ولما ذهب فريد أخيرا للحصول على تصريح السفرمن جنكنز باشا قائد حرس الحدود، شرح له الضابط الإنكليزي، الذي يلبس طربوشا ويفتل شاربه الأشيب إلى أعلى، أنواع العقارب والثعابين التي تسكن في الصحراء العربية والأمصال المضادة لها. قال له إن أخطر شيء بالطبع هو الدقان الذي يسميه المصريون الطريشة (قال هذا بالعربية). ثم قال له إذا تأخر إعطاء المصل عن أربعين ثانية فقل للمصاب وداعا. رفع جنكنز سبابته وقال: إذا رأيت في الرمل ثقبا غائرا بحجم أصبعي هذا فتحسن صنعا يا صديقي حين تتجنبه، وقهقه عاليا ثم سأله بطريقة عابرة وهو يناوله التصريح عن سبب سفره. ولما قال له عن قصة الواحة هز رأسه وقال سمعت ذلك من فخري باشا واندهشت. لم يسمع رجالنا عن هذه الواحة. بل إن اللورد هوارد المستكشف العظيم كان في هذه المنطقة من عامين كما تعلم. لا أقول إنه مسح كل شبر ولكنه – وأستطيع القول إنه حسن الاطلاع – إنه لم يشر من قريب أو بعيد إلى احتمال وجود هذه الواحة. أما لو انتهى الأمربأن يكتشف طبيب عيون بارز واحة مجهولة في منطقة لم تطأها قدم فسأقول إن طريق العلم يمر ببعض الغرائب.
>
> ولما لزم فريد الصمت قال جنكنز باشا بابتسامة متفعلة: سأقول لك بصراحة ما قلته لفخري باشا. لو لا علمي بأن هذه المنطقة غير مأهولة لاعتقدت أن السراي تحاول الاتصال برجال القبائل في الغرب أو ربما بالإيطاليين في ليبيا. لما لا؟ قال فريد بهدوء تستطيع أن تطمئن يا سعادة الباشا إنني لست من رجال السراي ولا من رجال الإيطاليين. أنا أحاول كما قلت أنت أن أحقق بعض غرائب العلم. وربما أكتشف شيئا آخر غير الواحة وله صلة بطب العيون. لن يزيد ذلك غرابة عن رجل خرج يبحث عن الهند فوجد أمريكا. (Taher 1985, 15-16)

Farid chooses to go into the desert in search of solitude, infinite space, initiation, inspiration, and mysterious death (ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd 1993, 195). Martin's ghost clings to him throughout the journey:

> [...] وفي الصحراء كان وجه مارتين في كل مكان..
> في التماعات السراب البعيد وفوق التلال وفي وميض النجوم.
> وفي الصحراء كان فريد يصلي، كثيرا في الغروب. ويبكي وحيدا في الليل. (Taher 1985, 20)

[3] For a more detailed discussion of the East-West dichotomy in modern Arabic literature, see: 1) Gardavadze, Darejan. 2007. "When East Meets West in the Modern Arabic Fiction". *Journal of Literary Theory and Comparative Literature Sjani*, № 8: 108; 2) Surmava, Nino. 2018. *"West and East in the 20th Century Arabic Literature (from the 1910s to 1960s)"*. Ph.D. Dissertation, Tbilisi.

[...] وكان بدر في السماء فمشى وحده بعد العرس. لم يذهب إلى الاستراحة الحكومية التي يبيت فيها، لكنه سار مخلفا وراء البيوت الطينية وأشجار النخيل والآبار التي تصنع حولها بحيرات صغيرة تتلألأ بنجوم بارقة في الليل. مشى حتى واجه من جديد الصحراء الممتدة والقمر. وهناك مرة أخرى وجد مرتين التي أوشك وجهها أن يغيب عنه في تلك الواحة الريفية. رآها في القاهرة وهما يرقصان معا على موسيقى التانجو في صالة شبرد [...] (Taher 1985, 22)

The ambivalence of hybridity that can be seen in the relationship between Mahmud and his wife Katherine from *Sunset Oasis* cannot be traced to Farid's attitude towards Martin[4]. In postcolonial theory, ambivalence is viewed as a kind of spiritual tension, implying a fascination-repulsion relationship with the object (Wisker 2007, 53-54; Kattaya 2017, 58). Unlike Katherine, Martin is an unworldly, utterly vulnerable young woman, who is a victim of fatal circumstances. Unlike Mahmud, going into the unknowable desert is Farid's conscious choice. The resurgence of the image of a young French woman in Farid's imagination transforms the East-West dichotomy into the cultural integration and longing for one another. Nevertheless, the author clearly sees the impossibility of finding the point of convergence between the two different historical and sociocultural contexts and their substances. In *Sunset Oasis* and *Love in Exile*, Katherine and Bridget break the established social norms. Bridget questions the colonial and racist notions and cultural constructs that still persist despite the fact that they have been long since overcome in the Wester/European mentality/consciousness. Her marriage to an African colleague, Albert, causes her sociocultural marginalization by the community to which she belonged. Albert, being an immigrant, cannot endure the sufferings incurred by his marginal sociocultural status and, seduced by the prospects of a more secure and stable life, leaves Bridget (Abdul Wahhab 2021, 66).

The story reaches its climax when Farid discovers the ruins of the temple in the desert. The narration, which may seem to be straightforward at glance, is filled with complex symbols.

At the end of the story, Farid, suffering like a mystic, goes through the phases of initiation: the painful process of physical suffering and spiritual contemplations lead him to greater self-awareness. He reads an inscription engraved on the wall of the temple:

بدأ بالسطر الأول في النهر الأول: أنا الملك جئت ولما المرأة هذبت.. ولما تفرق الذين اجتمعوا حولي.. ولما وجدت نفسي وحيدا اكتملت في تمامي. ولما كنت أنت إلهي وأنا صفيُّك.. أنت النور وأنا صدى النور.. أتملى في ذاتي وأراك وأتملى فيك فأراني فإني بعيدا عن الآحاد جئت لنكون واحدا أنا وأنت. الآن ولم يبقَ وقت وبقي الأبد. الآن أناجيك فتعرفني. أدون سري بعيدا عن الأعين لعينك أنت فتعرفني، أتطلع إلى قرصك اللامع الذي يرقب من السماء كل شيء وأنقش على الصخر سري: إنّي حزين. (Taher 1985, 37)

Farid, bitten by a venomous snake, in his hallucinatory, fanciful visions imagines that the masked man he had met in the desert is still with him:

[...] رفع رأسه فرأى عينين سوداوين تطلان عليه من وحه ملثَّم. أشارت العينين إلى إناء الفخار، وقال صوت خافت اشرب. ستكون بخير. ولما مال برأسه رأى ساقين سمراوين مقرفصتين إلى جانبه، ورأى قدمين متشققتين تعلق بهما ذرات من الرمل. ولما رفع رأسه إلى الوجه الملثم سأله: من أنت؟! (Taher 1985, 39)

The protagonist's journey can be viewed as an attempt to reconstruct the fragmented cultural identity and the search for the point of convergence between the civilizations, lost sacred knowledge, and self-awareness.

Bahaa Taher's narrative technique varies as the story unfolds. The unknown narrator uses interior monologue to convey the inner/emotional world of the protagonist, his hallucinations, and his memories. The authorial narration also includes the use of dialogues and landscape descriptions. The narrative structure is fragmented into 28 more or less short sections that, in the final analysis, are unified into a coherent meaningful whole.

Imaginations, hallucinations, reflections on one's self and cultural conflicts, illusions, reminiscences, and traumatic experiences are interwoven and rearranged in such a way as to emphasize an unbridgeable gap between the past and the present, the possible and the impossible, East and West.

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[4] Bahaa Taher's novel *Sunset Oasis* is discussed from the perspective of trauma theory in Nermin Ahmed Haikal's article: Nermin Ahmed Haikal, 2018. "Fight-or-Flight Response: A Study of Bahaa Taher's Sunset Oasis with Reference to Trauma Theory". مجلة البحث العلمي في الآداب. المجلد 19. العدد 10. الصفحة 1-22.
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Time and space are integrated into chronotopic configurations that shape the narrative structure of the story. Despite the intangible, mystical desert and the symbolic temple, the spatiotemporal dimension of the text is rather realistic: indirect clues and signs, impulses and instincts, vague topoi/places, an ambiguous masked man, and the characters who appear early in the story (Sheikh Abd-Allah, Pakhri Pasha, doctor Hishmet, etc.) have – all converge towards the aesthetic end and are, directly or in a more remote way, subordinated to the unifying motive of the search for the self-identity (Māmkiġ 2002, 239).

Trauma representations are common in the literature of the sixties generation. Bahaa Taher, as a typical writer of the sixties generation, brings up the themes of alienation, existential anxiety, isolation, solitude, and exile in his fictional narratives. The cultural representations of colonial collective trauma and the Western Other have been instrumental in shaping the contours of his artistic world. Emerging out of the experience of colonization, "I, the King, Have Come" has asserted itself by foregrounding the tension with the imperial Other, thus emphasizing a discourse where the encounter between East and West, whether literal or metaphorical, has been presented in a series of deep-rooted dichotomies of East/West, colonized/colonizer, slave/master, backward/civilized, bonded/free, etc. These dichotomies are represented through the protagonist's traumatic experience, personal tragedy, and the search for self-identification.

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