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To promote interdisciplinary studies in the fields of Languages, Humanities and Social Sciences and provide a reliable academically trusted and approved venue of publishing Language and culture research.

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## An Anarchist Reading of Ahmed Fouad Negm's Poetry

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**ABSTRACT:** Anarchism, which is considered “the “revolutionary movement of the twenty-first century,” has attracted many contemporary writers who have been motivated by its strong opposition to totalitarian ideologies and authoritarian governments. Recently, anarchism has developed into a literary theory. Taking the anarchist literary theory as a framework, this paper attempts to analyze some anarchist elements as reflected in Ahmed Fouad Negm. Negm is known for his political poetry through which he speaks out against governmental oppression. He is one of the rebellious political activists and poets in contemporary Egypt. In his poetry, he always sympathizes with the poor and oppressed, and expresses his contempt for Egyptian corrupt and dictatorial figures. He directs his harsh and sever criticism towards all kinds of authorities and dreams of a free society which depends on mutual aid and in which each individual counts regardless of his race, color, religion, or social class.

**Keywords:** *anarchism, anarchist literary theory, Ahmed Fouad Negm, vernacular poetry, anarchist poetry.*

### Introduction

Ahmad Fouad Negm, “*Al-Fagoumi*,” (1928-2013) is an Egyptian poet who is known for his revolutionary vernacular poetry. Negm was born in 1928 in Sharqia, Egypt. His father died when he was just 8 years old. After the death of his father, Negm spent most of his life in an orphanage. At the age of 17, he worked in one of the British camps near the Suez Canal while helping the Egyptian resistance guerilla operations against the British occupation in Egypt. During this period, Negm was introduced to the Left, communist ideology, Marxism, and he even read his first novel, *Mother* by Maxim Gorky.<sup>1</sup> Negm then worked for the Egyptian government, and he got imprisoned for forging some papers. The period he spent in prison was a turning point in Negm's life and helped to form his political ideology and attitudes. He was introduced to political activists and different political ideologies. During those years, Negm wrote his first poetry collection *Pictures from life and Prison*<sup>2</sup>(1964) which sheds light on his life in prison and how he met different types of people and political activists. These encounters with the world politics and political activism have shaped Negm's radical political and social ideologies (Halim 46).

After Egypt's defeat in 1967, Negm turned into a fierce political activist who was considered “*enfant terrible*” for different Egyptian governments. He got imprisoned for his political views and his harsh political poetry more than once during Nasser's and Al-Sadat's

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<sup>1</sup> According to Hernández and Paonessa, during this period, communists and other socialist ideologies cooperated with the anarchist groups to deliver free education for the working classes (40).

<sup>2</sup> "صور من الحياة و السجن"

regimes. His political activism continued until the very last day of his life in December 2013. According to Abdel-Malek, “in almost every manifestation of mass unrest, whether by students, workers, or both, from 1968 onward, ... Negm ...[was] implicated and consequently arrested and locked up in prison for ‘disturbing the public peace’” (39). Despite imprisonment and the continuous troubles he has faced because of his political views, Negm never hesitates to express what he wants to say. He proudly describes himself as someone who does not abide by any authority, an impulsively outspoken person, or “*Al-Fagoumi*.” His poetry has been described as satirical, revolutionary, and harsh. Negm “is often credited as ‘the poet of the poor,’ ‘Egypt’s revolutionary poet,’ ‘Master of vernacular poetry,’ ‘national security agitator,’ ‘ambassador of the poor,’ ‘political comedy guru,’ ‘king of Sarcasm’” (Magray). Negm’s Juvenalian satire sets him apart from the literary canon in Egypt. His poetry was banned for a long time during the 1970s.

This paper is an attempt to provide a new critical reading of Negm’s poetry in light of what Jesse Cohn calls the anarchist literary theory. Taking this theory as a framework, the current paper discusses the features that Cohn and other critics assign to anarchist literature in Negm’s poetry. Though Negm has never been declared as a political anarchist, the paper hypothesizes that Negm’s poetry reflects some key features of anarchist literature.

### **Anarchism: its Definition and History**

As defined in dictionaries, the word “anarchy,” with its Latin origin, means “no authority.” As an ideology, Pierre Joseph Proudhon, the father of anarchism, declares that it “is order without power” or “the absence of a master, of a sovereign” (Proudhon 277). Noam Chomsky, one of the most famous adherents of the ideology, defines it as “a tendency that is suspicious and skeptical of domination, authority, and hierarchy (The Kind of Anarchism I Believe in). As an ideological philosophy, anarchism has developed and gained complex meanings that have been modified through ages, and it has evoked lots of controversies among its strong followers and fierce opponents. However, one can distinguish between two main lines of anarchism: individualist and socialist. The individualist anarchism, promoted by Max Stirner, either reflects a nihilistic attitude or advocates “a competitive capitalist, but stateless society.” Socialist anarchism is the most common type of anarchism and is supported by Pierre Proudhon, Michael Bakunin, Peter Kropotkin, and Noam Chomsky (Levy and Adams 4).

Like other socialist philosophies, socialist anarchism has a strong reaction against capitalism. It searches for collective solutions to economic, political, and social problems. According to Chomsky, “in the European libertarian tradition, ... every anarchist has been a socialist—because the point is, if you have unbridled capitalism, you have all kinds of authority: you have extreme authority” (*On Anarchism* 34). However, some anarchists criticize “authoritarian socialism” that promotes revolutionary dictatorship which is associated with some socialist movements such as Marxism. Though anarchism meets with Marxism in the rejection of the capitalist system, the two ideologies differ regarding the existence of the authoritarian state. and as Carne Ross explains, “if people are to be treated equally, they must have an equal say in their affairs. The only way to guarantee this inclusion is for people to govern themselves: any hierarchy is intrinsically corruptible” (Levy and Adams x). Thus, the difference between anarchism and other socialist movements is the refusal of hierarchy. The anarchist refusal of any kind of hierarchy, not only in political, class, gender, or racial relations, but in all relationships, makes the ideas of freedom, equality, coexistence, and mutualism important tenets of anarchism as well.

Through the twentieth century, the anarchist thought has attracted some “of the best minds” “from Bertrand Russell and George Orwell to Jean-Paul Sartre and Noam Chomsky” (Jun 110). Recently, this kind of classical socialist anarchism reappeared due to governmental persecution and a new world order whose problems are no longer easy to understand, and also due to the dense multiple intersecting layers of capitalist and patriarchal representation.

### **Anarchism in Egypt**

Egypt has never been far from these anarchist ideologies that prevailed in Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. From the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of WWI, Egypt became an important cultural center of anarchism which “developed principally in the coastal city of Alexandria and in the capital, Cairo” (Hernández and Paonessa 30). Through the first years of the twentieth century, and with Egypt's rapid economic development and the flux of European immigration, Cairo and Alexandria became important cultural centers for Anarchism. In 1901, the Free Popular University was established in Alexandria to represent anarchist thought and education. The cooperation between anarchism among European immigrants and the nationalist tendencies among Egyptian workers and even artists was a salient feature of the cultural movement in Alexandria and Cairo at that time. The anarchist revolutionaries kept supporting most of the nationalist movements in Egypt against corrupted regimes and against the British militant occupation of Egypt. However, with the emergence of World War I, the rise of Bolshevism, and the different nationalist movements, anarchism eventually went into decline between 1914 and 1920. (Hernández and Paonessa 31-35)

Though, after the end of WWI, self-defined anarchism declined in Egypt as in other parts of the world, anarchism influenced other ideologies and appeared among artists and literary men who represented the radical left. “Arts and Freedom”<sup>3</sup> was one of these cultural groups “formed in 1939 by a group of artists, writers and intellectuals who used their artistic work to rebel against the bourgeois norms of the time” (Hernández and Paonessa 32). During the first decades of the twentieth century, the anarchist groups cooperated with other socialist and communist groups to deliver free education for the working classes who had no access to education (Hernández and Paonessa 40).

The rise of Nasserism together with the start of the Arab-Israeli conflict has resulted in a temporary decline of political anarchist movement in Egypt. However, it appeared in socially and politically involved literature that went against dictatorship and one-man government in Egypt and around the world.

Recently, anarchism has been a hot topic in media. With its pros and cons, there is a strong reappearance of anarchism among leftists around the world, especially during and after what is called the Arab Spring. However, contemporary scholarships and literary criticism have hardly paid attention to the anarchist impact upon literature, especially political poetry.

### **Anarchism and Literature**

Though Anarchism is a controversial political ideology, its presence in the literary scene is powerful and cannot go unnoticed. The utopian nature of the anarchist philosophy makes it a perfect source for literary production. Anarchism has impacted literature in its themes and topics and has provided it with figures and anarchist characters. According to Donald Drew Egbert, “the combination ... of an individualistic emphasis, frequent interest in the arts, and strongly social aims naturally made anarchism appeal to artists who regarded themselves as being both artistically and socially radical” (qtd. in Bremerkamp 10). During the French Revolution, “the anarchist ideals ... have served as an inspiration for authors and

<sup>3</sup> "الفن و الحرية"

artists across Europe” (Bremerkamp 8). It seems that, as James Gifford argues, “the bonds between literature and anarchism are deep and old” (Levy and Adams 572).

Famous literary figures such as Percy Bysshe Shelley, Oscar Wilde, James Joyce, John Cowper Powys, Henry Miller, Robert Duncan, Jackson Mac Low, Kathy Acker, and Phyllis Webb have displayed anarchist attitudes and tendencies. For example, Oscar Wilde’s article, “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” has been described by Kropotkin and other anarchists as “the most ambitious contribution to literary anarchism during the 1890s” (Levy and Adams 571). During the twentieth century, the influence of the anarchist movement appears via avant-garde modernisms. Contemporary anarchist movements, like Occupy Wallstreet, always cite Ursula’s novels; in some marches they hold the placards of the cover of Ursula’s novel, *The Dispossessed* (Levy and Adams 572). Even in the Middle East, particularly in Egypt, anarchism has had its strong advocates in literary groups such as “Al-Fann wa Al-huriyya” and some writers such as Albert Cossery. The recent revival of academic interest in the anarchist tradition has drawn new attention to its reflections in literature. So, if anarchism has failed as a political movement, it has flourished as a literary one.

This strong relation between anarchism and literature has driven some critics such as Jesse Cohn, Birgitte Bremerkamp and others to announce it as an independent literary theory. According to Cohn, the anarchist literary theory, “like other literary theories which draw on the traditions of political movements, e.g., ecocriticism, postcolonialism, Marxism, feminism, etc. ... draws its inspiration from the body of thought and practices which have historically comprised the anarchist movement.” In his work, Cohn addresses the major features that define anarchism as a literary theory. In her article “Anarchy in Literature,” Bremerkamp refers to anarchism as an influential postmodern literary theory (9).

### **Anarchist Features in Negm’s Poetry Social Involvement**

One of the most important tenets that the anarchist literary theory stresses in literary works is the necessity of the writer to be socially involved. Literature should have an aim to reform the world and to create a better free real world. Therefore, what is important in a text is its attempts to change societies, especially the hegemony of the bourgeoisie and capitalist systems that control and restrain the freedom of its individuals. As Cohn puts it:

literature must always be situated in a wider social context.... Art should evoke the imagination of, and longing for, “a better” real world. Each text, as an event, must be viewed both in retrospect, as the sequel to other events *and* in prospect, as the possible cause of further and future events. (“Literary Theory” 117)

Negm’s poetry has never been separated from its social, economic, and political context. It has been an expression of Negm’s political and social ideology throughout his life. One can say that his poetry is a kind of interactive poetry that is written in a reaction to events and evokes reactions at the same time. His poetry is known to be related to Egyptian society and every-day life of poor and deprived masses of Egypt whom Negm takes as his source of inspiration. According to Abdel-Malek, “all through his life Negm has been cognizant of Egypt’s class inequality” (31). His poem, “Coalition,”<sup>4</sup> is his first confrontation with the Egyptian governments, as he declares in his autobiography: “and this was ... the beginning of troubles with the Egyptian government” (319).<sup>5</sup> The poem denounces the great

4 "التحالف"

<sup>5</sup> Negm wrote it to decry Abdel Nasser’s reaction against the Egyptian caricaturists especially Ahmed Hegazi who spoke against the creation of a new powerful class out of the revolutions’ army officers who started to abuse people and misuse their power.

gap between different social classes in Egypt after the Revolution of 1952. It demonstrates deep concern with those who live under poverty and oppression, who work hard in the farms, factories, and streets, but still live in hunger: "Long live the poor, in the darkness of suburbs/ In cloudy days and teary nights."<sup>6</sup> The poem also criticizes the new bourgeoisie class embodied in the people who live in Alzamalek with their "fat bellies," separated from the poor common people of Egypt. Other important social issues, such as fair payment and human rights, are addressed in the poem. The poem illustrates how the poor of Egypt are not only unfairly paid for their hard work and labor, but they are also deprived of the right to participation. In a sarcastic way, the poem mocks how the government deceives the poor and asks them to focus only on their hard work and production and not to think politics.

O ye the poor of our country,  
the lubricant of our norias,  
the coal of our factories,  
don't bother thinking politics;  
heed your own labor and hard work,  
teach your kids the virtue of contentment,  
that we're the slaves of fate.<sup>7</sup> (336)

In another poem, "The Worker,"<sup>8</sup> Negm criticizes the miserable state of the working class who live under poverty, and are deceived by the business owners they work for.

Though I've been wretched throughout my life  
I've eaten nothing but *Besara*<sup>9</sup>  
I walked through different alleys.  
In each alley, I have created, constructed,  
built, and handled among the shovels.  
But the contractor cheated me cleverly.<sup>10</sup> (534)

It is not only the working class that Negm defends in his poetry; in his poem, "O Egypt,"<sup>11</sup> Negm wonders how the Egyptian peasants who have worked, fought, and built a great civilization since the age of Khufu, are still deprived of their right to live in dignity.

Your peasants are those of Ramses and Khufu,  
an army, without bread to eat or water to drink in hot days.  
Sickness carries them to death  
while they carry their fear.<sup>12</sup> (488)

<sup>6</sup> Translations are provided by the present author, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>7</sup> يا غلبان بلدنا يا شحم السواقي  
يا فحم المصانع  
عقبك في شغل السياسة  
و شوف انت شغلك بهمة وحماسة  
و عود عيالك فضيلة الرضا  
لان احنا طبعنا عبيد القضا.  
" الفاعل " <sup>8</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *Besara* is known to be a cheap food common among the poor in Egypt.

<sup>10</sup> من صغر سني شقيان لكني  
ما لط سني غير البصارة  
ودخلت حارة من جوة حار  
وفكل حارة عليت عمارة  
وسط المعامل بنا ومناول  
بس المقاول كلني بشطارة  
" يا مصر " <sup>11</sup>  
<sup>12</sup> فلاحينك هما هما  
فلاحين رمسيس و خوفو  
جيش لا عيش و لا زمزية

For Negm, real poetry can only be found in the streets and slums as he says in his poem, “We Will Sing:” “The street is our home and our song;/ it is the greatest singer. /From the flesh of the street bloom our words;/ on the tunes of the street we sing” (22). It seems that his poetry conforms with *Encyclopédie anarchiste*’s definition of art: ‘Art must be *social* in the most complete sense of the word’ (qtd. in Cohn, “Literary Theory”117).

### The Text as a Force

The anarchist literary theory interprets the textual meaning as the relationship between the text and the forces which produce it, and between “the text as a force and its possible effects.” According to the anarchist literary criticism, “what is important in a text is not what it means, but what it does and incites to do” (Cohn, “Literary Theory” 121). Similarly, Negm believes that “the function of poetry is to change the world” (Magray). For him, poetry can radicalize the oppressed, empower the weak, and free the imprisoned. Negm’s poetry is not only an angry voice against social inequality and oppression, but also interactive and many a time provocative poetry that calls upon people to rebel against any type of exploitation or oppression. In his autobiography Negm expresses his pride that he is described by the critics as “the rifle poet” (Autobiography 529). In his poem “Bitter Words,” Negm compares between poetry that deceives people by its decorative sweet words and poetry that seems to be harsh but stands up for what is right: “Bitter words are swords/ that can get through, / lenient words are easy, / but they mislead and fool”<sup>13</sup> (446).

Moreover, Negm’s satirical description of the social inequality and fake democracy is not just an expression of anger, it is a call for the poor, oppressed, and silenced people to rebel and fight for their rights. In his poem “The Workman,” Negm directly addresses the workers of Egypt and calls them to take a break, quit working, and think how the political and economic systems abuse them and steals their labor and effort: “Lay the sac by the sac, / sit, Hufny, lit your cigarette, / and think: ‘where is the problem and what is the case?’”

His poem, “Guevara’s Cry,”<sup>14</sup> as Booth states, is “a declaration that only armed struggle can allow the powerless any participation or hope” (Booth 49). In this poem Negm calls upon the oppressed to break the chains, to rebel, and to fight for their rights and freedom; he describes the people as “The God of Strikers.”<sup>15</sup>

Oh ye, deprived workers,  
chained from head to toe  
enough is enough.  
There is no liberation  
but through guns and bullets;  
this is the motto of the new age  
.....  
where Justice is either dumb or coward.<sup>16</sup> (594)

في الهجير تيل جوفه  
المرض للموت يجره  
و هو ماشي يجر خوفه.  
<sup>13</sup> مر الكلام زى الحسام  
يقطع مكان ما يمر  
اما المديح سهل و مريح  
يخدع صحيح و يغر  
<sup>14</sup> "صرخة جيفارة"  
<sup>15</sup> "اله المضربين"  
<sup>16</sup> ياشغالين ومحرومين  
يا مسلسلين رجلين وراس

In another poem, "Hocus Pocus,"<sup>17</sup> Negm calls on the Egyptian people to rebel against Nasser and his government: "Damn you, people of Egypt, /, Wake up sleepy heads/.....Rebel and ditch the roots of your misery"<sup>18</sup> (419-420).

While "Hocus Pocus," accuses Egyptian people of being submissive compared to Sudanese rebels, other poems, such as "Good morning," "Message No.1 from Turra Prison," and "The Revolution," praise and glorify young people who rebel against what Negm calls "the Guards' Weapons" (205). In "Good Morning,"<sup>19</sup> Negm calls the students and the young protestors "the flowers that have blossomed in Egyptian Gardens," an epithet that has represented all Egyptian protestors even during uprising against Mubarak's regime in 2011.

Even the concept of the hero in Negm's poetry seems to come to terms with the anarchist view. For him, the true hero is rebellious. He should be one of the common people and works for them, like Guevara / Abozeid Elhelaly. The hero is the one that "destroys barriers and liberates the captives"<sup>20</sup> (378) not the one who leads and builds states.

Accompanied by Sheikh Imam's music, Negm's poems have a mobilizing power and "the ability to spark demonstrations and strikes and oppositional assemblages. They (are) able to move the masses" (Booth 72). His poetry has been an inspiration to Egyptian opposition and revolutions against political, economic, and social oppression. It is, as Halim asserts, "secured in Arab memory by virtue of its association with movements of protest and with historical junctures in Egypt and the Arab world for more than half a century" (45).

Negm has expressed his pride that through his poetry he has a responsibility to change "the world;" as he states in one of his interviews: "I am not a humble person, and I am not stupid; I know I am a poet that has affected this nation" ("Egypt's 'Poet of the People'").

### Libertarian and Antiauthoritarian

However, as Cohn declares in his book, *Anarchism and the Crisis of Representation*, "art's social mission consists in its violation of the social; it has a "social-antisocial function" (127). Anarchist literature, just like the political ideology, comes to be mainly libertarian and antiauthoritarian. As he argues in this book, "anarchist modernism typically emphasize(s) the liberation of artists and their works from a restrictive social framework" (139). Anarchist literature tends to refuse any kind of hierarchy whether political, social, ideological, or even literary.

For Ahmed Fouad Negm, freedom is a sacred tenet of human life. In his introduction to his poetry collection, Negm insists that his poetry is "free verse" not because of its form but

خلاص خلاص  
مالكوش خلاص  
غير بالبنادق والرصاص  
دا منطق العصر السعيد  
عصر الزنوج والامريكان  
الكلمه للنار والحديد  
والعدل اخرس او جبان.  
"شقق يقع"<sup>17</sup>  
يا شعب مصر يا خم النوم<sup>18</sup>  
ما تفوق بقى  
و تشوف لك يوم  
.....  
يا شعب ثور  
داهية تسمك  
و شيل اصول اسباب همك.  
"صباح الخير"<sup>19</sup>  
"يركب ضهر الهجين و يحطم الحواجز و يفك المساجين"<sup>20</sup>

“because poetry is freedom... that teaches me not to hold my tongue or flatter authorities” (Collected Poems 8). He has opposed all types of power throughout his life, and he has launched harsh attack against them through his poetry.

His love for freedom has induced Negm to be in continuous enmity not only with the political authority in Egypt, but with all types of hierarchy. He is always described by critics as an antiauthoritarian and a rebellious poet. His antiauthoritarian attitude appears not only in his criticism of political authorities but also in his harsh criticism of all types of authority in Egypt, social, cultural, and even literary authority.

Though Negm started his literary career writing love poems, after 1967 his poetry, according to Abdel-Malek, “one cannot ignore the shift in Negm’s work from a quietist social and political awareness of Egypt’s cause before 1967, to a strident revolutionary leitmotif both in theme and tone after 1967” (20). His poetry comes to be a full denunciation not only of different Egyptian governments but also of the bureaucratic Egyptian institutions, the economic system in Egypt, and even of the educated elite class who claim to be the sole representative of the Egyptian culture. Negm has used his poetry to rebuke the Egyptian state with its governing bodies: the presidents, the army, the police, and even its judicial system.

After 1967, Negm was one of the few writers who were courageous enough to speak up against Abdel Nasser’s regime. In his poem, “Haha’s Cow,” Negm refers to the defeat of 1967 and how the Egyptian army was not able to defend Egypt just because of corruption and “lack of vision” (569-572). In the poem, Egypt is portrayed as “a healthy milking cow” whose milk is stolen by “its own ruling people.” Though the cow is healthy and strong, no one is able to make use of it. “The cow falls” because of “fear and lack of vision.”

In another poem, “Alhamdulillah,” Negm’s criticism of the Egyptian state was very harsh in a time when no one was able to speak against the government. In this poem, Negm ridicules the defeat of the Egyptian army against the Israelis, accusing Abdel Nasser’s regime of lying to the Egyptian people about the defeat and deceiving them by keeping them busy looking for food and humble life.

The state Egypt  
is drowning  
in a sea of lies.  
The People confused

.....

Cities are going to be wrecked by Abdel Gabbar.<sup>21</sup> (518)

The poem attacks the government and the political authorities and accuses them of being indifferent to the defeat and the death of Egyptian youth in the battlefield. In this poem, Negm attacks Abdel Nasser in person, calling him “Abdel Gabbar,” referring to his tyranny and oppression, in a time that no one was able to even criticize Abdel Nasser. When composed and sung by Sheikh Imam, the poem went viral among students and political activists. Because of this poem, Negm was imprisoned for more than nine years under Nasser’s regime. However, as Booth states, “a ragged-looking poet and a slightly built composer singer with a wicked grin became the performative beacon of a movement that challenged the final years of the Nasser regime and beyond” (55).

<sup>21</sup> الحمد لله ولا حولاً

مصر الدولة

غرقانة في الكذب علاوله

و الشعب احتار

.....

و ان شا الله يخربها مداين عبد الجبار

Nasser's regime is not the only one that Negm ridiculed and attacked. Though Abdel-Nasser's successor, Mohamed Anwar Al-Sadat, ordered Negm out of prison, Negm participated in many protests against him decrying his treaty with Israel, and his economic policies. Al-Sadat is a constant target for Negm's polemical poetry that expresses his refusal to Al-Sadat's political and economic plans, especially establishing a capitalist economy. Al-Sadat's open-door economic policy and his relations with the West, especially America, are a recurrent subject for Negm's poetic satire. Negm, who defines himself as one of the poor Egyptian people, rejects and attacks this economic policy and its oppressive consequences on poor Egyptians. In poems such as "Erect your Palaces," "Important Announcement," "Shaaban the Grocer," and "The Thing," Al-Sadat is presented as a "broker," a "stoner," and a "grocery man."

Negm was arrested once again after writing "Important Announcement," in which he derides what he calls the phony democracy of Al-Sadat, or "Shehata the sweet stoner" as Negm calls him. In this poem, Negm criticizes how the President deludes the Egyptian people by his sweet tongue and false speeches about democracy, open door economy, and the prosperous life that awaits them if they follow his lead. While pretending to establish a democratic state, according to Negm, Al-Sadat controls all aspects of life in Egypt without caring about what the poor people would say or believe. The poem introduces El-Sadat as:

the country's chief broker,  
the leader of gamblers and dealers,  
the farmland saboteur,  
the vender of its crops,  
And above all, the head of the armies. (86)

The speaker of the poem, *Shehata Elmaasel*, who represents Al-Sadat, addresses the people, especially the university students who protested Al-Sadat's political and economic decisions, accusing them of not appreciating what he does for the country. In a satirical way, the speaker of the poem accuses Egyptian students of being ignorant and greedy:

"Useless it is to talk and mumble.  
Shame it is for a silly juvenile  
to lead upheavals and preach  
his foolish preamble.  
Obviously, I am at dispute  
with the great dealers  
(As a rival and as a fellow)."<sup>22</sup> (91)

"Erect your Palaces" is another poem in which Negm accuses Al-Sadat of deceiving the people in order to gather wealth and power by unscrupulous means out of their hard work and labor.

Erect your palaces on our farmland  
with our hand labor and toil;  
build bars alongside the factories,  
prisons in place of gardens.  
Unleash your dogs

<sup>22</sup> مالوش لازمة الكلام و اللجاجة  
و عيب ان عيل يسوق السماجة  
و يعمل لي باللو  
و يعمل ديباجة  
انا بطبعي ضد السماصرة الكبار  
بحكم المنافسة و حكم الجوار

on the streets  
and lock us in your cells.<sup>23</sup> (342)

Moreover, Al-Sadat's attempt to achieve a democratic state has been attacked by Negm as a false and phony policy to seduce the West. In his poem "Cheers to Tarzan,"<sup>24</sup> Negm criticizes the new political party that has been established to represent the majority, "the National Democratic Party":

Cheers for the new party;  
it'll destroy the old one,  
.....  
though the newborn Tarzan  
is the same as the late one.<sup>25</sup> (181)

Egypt's victory against Israel in October 1973 was not an excuse for Al-Sadat not to be the target of Negm's satire. In his poem, "Who's Who,"<sup>26</sup> Negm, as Abdel-Malek alludes, never mentions Al-Sadat as part of the victory: "when a radio producer told Negm that his poem did not have a single reference to *al-rayyis*, Negm answered 'I am writing about martyrs, let him become a martyr and I will write about him' " ( 22 ).

Al-Sadat's successor, Hosny Mubarak, who ruled Egypt for more than 30 years, is a frequent target for Negm's satire. In his poem "As if You're Null as Nothing,"<sup>27</sup> Negm criticizes all aspects of political, social, and economic corruption under Mubarak's regime. He accuses Mubarak of acting like an idiot, not listening to his people's voice and, intentionally, letting his government and businessmen to exploit the poor Egyptians.

Though your pictures are everywhere  
every doorway, entrance, and hub;  
though they cover every street wall,  
you are acting the fool with deaf ears.<sup>28</sup> ("As if You're Null as Nothing")

The poem also attacks Mubarak's plan to prepare his son, Gamal, as the next president of Egypt. Negm joins the fierce public opposition against this "project."

O president,  
you gave us a headache talking about your *Gamal*;  
since then, we have been Your Excellency's slaves.  
Don't you get mad at me for being a naughty citizen,

شيد قصورك في المزارع<sup>23</sup>  
من كدنا وعمل إيدينا  
الخمارات جنب المصانع  
والسجن مطرح الجنينة  
وأطلق كلابك  
في الشوارع  
واقفل زنازينك  
علينا  
24 "شوبش طراران"  
25 ز غروطة للحزب الجديد  
هيدمر الحزب اللي فات  
.....  
مع ان طرزان الوليد  
ذات نفس طرزان الفات  
26 دولا مين و دولا مين  
27 "كأنك مغيث"  
28 برغم إن صورتك فكل الدواير  
وكل المداخل وكل المحاور  
ومليا الشوارع على كل حيط..  
مطنش علينا وعامل عيبط

who decries the abuse of your own people by your dogs.  
 O President, their corruption is overt and plain.<sup>29</sup>  
 (“As if You’re Null as Nothing”)

Throughout the 30 years of Mubarak’s rule, Negm participated in the opposition against the regime. He was against Mubarak’s economic policy and the rise of a strong bourgeoisie class in Egypt. As a mockery of the Egyptian media annual celebration of Mubarak’s birthday, Negm wrote one of his most sarcastic poems, “Our Dark Muddy Night.”<sup>30</sup>

On your seventy something,  
 happy birthday to you, not to us.  
 Many returns while you’re the Governor,  
 and we’re the governed, wretched, and distressed.  
 O idol of millions, do you see us, or we are unnoticed?  
 Do you see your political prisoners, the hungry, the displaced  
 or those who have been burnt to death?  
 Do you remember those who have drowned to their demise?  
 May God be with you, how can you remember all those?<sup>31</sup>

Moreover, Negm’s poetry has been the voice of the youth opposition throughout Mubarak’s rule. In his article, “6<sup>th</sup> of April,” Negm praises the Egyptian revolutionary movement that opposed Mubarak and insisted on removing him: “God bless the youth of 6<sup>th</sup> of April Movement. May God protect them” (Halawet Zaman 22). More than once in his poems, Negm calls for Mubarak to step down.

Forget the past  
 and we’ll forget your cruelty!!  
 ....  
 I beg you, [Mr. President]  
 by the Holy Book.  
 by the martyrs’ blood,  
 by your victorious army,  
 and by the free youth you have promised to take part,  
 to gather up your lackeys,  
 pack your money, take your *Gamal*,  
 leave us, and go to hell.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> دوشنوا دماغنا ” بجمال ” طلعتك  
 ومن يومها واحنا عبيد حضرتك  
 ما ترعلش ايني مواطن ابيح  
 ورافض كلابك فشعبك تطيح  
 فسادهم يا ريس واضح .. صريح  
<sup>30</sup> "ليلتنا طين"

<sup>31</sup> في عيد ميلادك الكام وسبعين، كل سنة وانت طيب واحنا مش طبيين  
 كل سنة وانت حاكم واحنا محكومين، واحنا مظلومين، واحنا متهانين،  
 ويا ترى يا حبيب الملايين، فاكرونا ولا احنا خلاص منسيين،  
 فاكرو المعتقلين، فاكرو الجعانيين، فاكرو المشردين، فاكرو اللي ماتو محروقين، فاكرو الغرقانيين،  
 الله يكون في عونك، ها تفكر مين ولا مين.  
<sup>32</sup> انسى اللي فات هننسى الاسية

....  
 و بحق اللي بيئا يا ريس وبينك

("As if You're Null as Nothing")

Even, after the 25 January Revolution which ousted Hosni Mubarak, Negm was totally and openly against Muslim Brotherhood rule in Egypt. Though Negm elected Mohamed Morsi as a president, it was only to get rid of what he called "military regimes" as he states in an interview. Negm openly wrote against Morsi accusing him of being "a clown" who was biased to his Muslim Brotherhood group, betrayed the Egyptian youth, real heroes of the revolution, and did not really represent the Egyptian people. In his poem, "Damn Your Majesty,"<sup>33</sup> Negm attacks Morsi and his Muslim Brotherhood group: "Damn Your Majesty, /and those who've brought you to the government, / damn your folks, / and those who thought, one day, to obey you, / and Damn those who let you unleash your dogs." When asked about the reason behind his continuous and fierce enmity towards the Egyptian presidents and political regimes, Negm replied that "it's them (the presidents) who take the people as an enemy."

Negm is not an opponent only to political regimes or economic exploitation, his poetry is a biting critique of all types of authorities that form a hegemony over common people. Though he wrote a couple of religious poems throughout his life, Negm expresses his contempt and rejection to those who use religion and ideological authority to justify oppression and corruption: "The idle shaikhs/ lead the guided/ into corruption." He sees the men of religion as hypocrites who have been used to suppress people and propagate for the idea that while "the happy lot of the rich (is) Allah's decree, the poor (should) teach themselves contentment, awaiting the reward and bounty of the last Day" (qtd. in Abdel-Malek 56).

In his poem, "The Enlightened Revolutionary,"<sup>34</sup> Negm, in his usual ironical style, derides fraud people who use religion to gain authority and power: "Reposed the religion's gonif / Now he is sober and mature!" (599)

Besides his opposition to political and religious hegemony, Negm's anti-authoritarian tendency is also reflected in his attack on all types of authorities and establishments of different Egyptian regimes, including the Police, judicial system, media, and even the literary elites. Negm's "Egyptian Voice"<sup>35</sup> is a satire of the judicial system and its members. In this poem, Negm asserts that finding a good fair judge is a rarity in Egypt. The poem presents different types of corrupt judges in Egypt who are portrayed as hypocrites and unqualified:

A judge who is idle  
pays back his master's favor,  
sells his faith for a penny,  
and chases innocent people.<sup>36</sup> (178)

The other type of judges mentioned in the poem are those who are appointed as a result of nepotism, just for the sake of their fathers who are corrupt and larcenists.

وَحَقَّ الِتِّمِينِ وَ" الْكُتَابِ " فِي يَمِينِكَ  
بِحَقِّ الشَّهِيدِ .. إِلَيَّ رَافِعِ جَبِينِكَ  
وَجَيْشِ إِنْتِصَارِكَ فِي يَوْمِ الْعُبُورِ  
وَجِبِلِ خُرِّ طَالِعِ .. وَعَدْتَهُ بَدُورِ  
لَمَلَمِ عِيَالِكَ .. وَجَمَعَ فِ مَالِكَ  
وَإِسْحَابِ " جَمَالِكَ " وَسَيِّبِنَا وَغُورِ  
" مَلْعُونِ جَنَابِكَ " <sup>33</sup>  
" الثُّورِي النُّورِي " <sup>34</sup>  
" الصُّوْتِ الْمِصْرِي " <sup>35</sup>  
<sup>36</sup> فِيهِ فَاضِي اتَّعَيْنَ قَاضِي  
بِبُرْدِ جَمِيلِ مَوْلَاهِ  
بِبَيْعِ الذَّمِّهِ بِنُكْلِهِ  
وَبِشْرَدِ خَلْقِ اللَّهِ

### Literary Iconoclasm

Negm refuses literary hegemony as well, and he launches a harsh attack on what Herbert Read calls “cultural aristocratism” (Adams 70). Through his poetry, Negm attacks the literary icons in modern Egypt, accusing them of betraying the impoverished Egyptians in order to please the political authority. In his poem, “Riddles,”<sup>37</sup> Negm criticizes many Egyptian literary icons. He criticizes Salah Jaheen<sup>38</sup>, Om Kalthoum, Abdelhalim Hafez, Alabanoudy, Ihsan Abd El-koddous, and many others. He accuses all of them of being frauds and hypocrites who flatter authorities for money and fame: “Honesty is a rarity in our country/ Due to the Police/And icons’ literature” (329). In the poem, Negm compares the icons of Egyptian literature to police officers; they both play the same role which is to deceive people and flatter the political authority. According to Zeina Halaby, Negm, just like the Egyptian anarchist writer Albert Cossery, presents a desire to bring down these icons and the cultural hegemony they represent: “literary dissent emerges in these authors’ peripheral narratives as a counter-discourse that deconstructs processes of canonization” (Halaby 77).

In his poem, “The Lady’s Dog,”<sup>39</sup> Negm sarcastically criticizes the social status represented by Om Kalthoum as a representative of the cultural elites who live in El-Zamalek, an upper-class neighborhood in Cairo at that time, separated from the rest of the Egyptian society. The poem narrates the story of Ismail, an educated young man who inhabits an impoverished areas in Egypt. While having a walk in Al-Zamalek, Ismail gets attacked by Om Kalthoum’s dog, Fox. The poem denounces how the famous singer’s dog happens to be more important for the authority than the poor young man, Ismail: “You are not equal (to the dog), Ismail. / This is the Lady’s dog, / But whose son are you?!” (281)

The poem also addresses how an iconic figure like Om Kalthoum can control and influence the judicial system. After Ismail gets arrested for fighting with the guards over the dog’s bite, he is kept locked in the police station for a whole week. During the interrogation, it seems that the police cares more about Fox than Ismail. When the public attorney asks Ismail about what happened:

Ismail said, “just let me leave,”  
 “Go and check Mr. Fox,”  
 “He might have been poisoned by me.”  
 The DA said, “it might be.” (282)

Negm concludes the poem with his sarcastic contempt of the hegemony the upper-class practice over the poor to deprive them of their right to live in dignity; he decries how the media people oppress and humiliate the poor in Egypt:

Goodnews for jackasses and brutes:  
 whoever has a pal  
 who sings in the Radio,  
 can crush the poor ...  
 and the Justice  
 with his boots. (282)

In “Coalition,” Negm exposes another type of the corruption of cultural elites who do not represent the real majority of the public and set themselves apart from the real problems

<sup>37</sup> "فوازير"

<sup>38</sup> Though he has praised Salah Jaheen for being a great vernacular poet, he criticizes him for flattering the authority. Later, they became friends and Negm wrote an Elegy on Jaheen’s death .

<sup>39</sup> "كلب الست"

of common people. The poem portrays them as hypocrites who obliviously use jargons and educated speech only to classify themselves away from the uneducated public.

Long live the intellectual on Cafe Riche  
slippery, slick, and talkative  
an unexperienced ochlophobic  
who quickly fabricates  
problems' solutions  
with few buzzwords  
and meaningless jargon.<sup>40</sup> (332)

In his abrasive "The Enlightened Revolutionary," Negm talks about fake revolutionaries who change their ideologies according to the canon: "the talkative enlightened revolutionary/.... someday, he is a Marxism/ others an Islamist;/ befriends all the rulers/ and follows no real ideology" (598). Here Negm is similar to most anarchist writers who, according to Murphy, refuse to elevate themselves above the public with unnecessary and exclusionist 'Marxist jargon, modernist obscurantism, or postmodern opacity' (Murphy 78).

### Collective or Public Reason

Another feature that Cohn and Proudhon announce as a tenet of the anarchist writing, and that can easily be detected in Negm's poetry, is its "collective or public reason." "To *be*, indeed, is to be 'grouped'; existence means 'collective being'" (Cohn, "Literary Theory" 120). Negm's iconoclasm encouraged him to attach to the public and the poor common people in Egypt. Through his poetry, as well as his life, Negm insists on building a "relationship of power" with poor people of Egypt, the peasants, the working class, and with the lower class who live in the poor suburbs of Cairo. He even spent most of his life in a humble apartment in *Hosh Adam*, an impoverished area in the suburbs of Cairo. When he lost his home in a 1992 earthquake, he moved to a small humble flat in a social housing block given to him by the authorities. He preferred to wear a "*Galabbya*" which is the dress of common people in Egypt. When asked why he insisted on wearing a "*Galabbya*" and staying in a humble apartment in spite of his ability to live like a gentleman among the educated elites, he said: "among common people, I am able to breathe pure air." For Negm, living among the impoverished people of his country is empowering.

Negm's appearance and lifestyle matched the bluntness and the nature of his verse, immersed in the language of the poor. He often boasted that his fame did not tempt him to be seduced by offers of money or perks. No one can co-opt or seduce him, because I want nothing – I have all I want here," he said during an interview in his flat. ("Egypt's 'Poet of the People'")

Like many anarchists, Negm views power as "immanent in society,' emerging from the matrix of relationships" (Cohn, "Literary Theory" 125). Accordingly, Negm draws power from his strong involvement with the poor common people in Egypt. This type of life among the poor majority gives him the power to speak up and to be the sincere voice of the deprived.

<sup>40</sup> يعيش المثقف على مقهى ريش  
يحفظ مزق لظ كثير الكلام  
عديم الممارسة  
عدو الزحام  
بكام كلمة فاضية  
و كام اصطلاح  
يفيرك حلول المشاكل قوام.

Negm does not consider himself as just an observer of the social and political scene in Egypt, but as the collective voice of the people.

O my brethren,  
my blood partners,  
our vigor is when we come together  
and sing for the deprived.<sup>41</sup> (“Arghoul” 39)

While drawing power from the middle and lower-middle class of workers and peasants of Egypt, Negm glorifies them. Though he portrays them as impoverished, oppressed, and ignored, he considered these people the main source of power and life. In “Sindbad,” Negm portrays common people as a divine power that should be listened to and respected:

People are the eternity.  
They are the history  
and the future;  
a great wise flood  
that can recreate life.  
When they speak,  
You should listen to the voice of the god.<sup>42</sup> (17)

Also, in “Nightingale’s Call,” Negm assigns a divine power that controls everything to the people:

“O people, You are the eternity,  
You are the infinity.  
doomed are those who Know not you  
You are the essence of existence.  
Yours is the Kingdom;  
Yours is the Word;<sup>43</sup>(165)

Through his poetry, Negm is able to blend the subjective self in his poetry with a collective one and “to reframe (his) individual perspectives in terms of others” (Cohn 119). As Booth argues, Negm draws “on oral storytelling, traditions of song and vernacular Arabic poetry, popular proverbs and other deeply-rooted expressive forms to couch a political voice that (enacts) a collectivity of those who felt disempowered” (52). Randa Abou-Bakr also argues that his poetry presents a kind of an interfusion of what is personal and what is public. In Negm’s first collection, *Pictures from Life and Prison*, the main voice is the generic national-popular “I.” “I am the people.” “The stress shifts from the poet-speaker to the created persona or the collective voice and, in the meantime, almost always on the addressee” (Abou-Bakr 269).

يا صحبتي في الهم<sup>41</sup>  
يا شركتي في الم  
عزوتنا لو نتلم  
و نغني للفقرا  
الشعب هو الباقي الحي<sup>42</sup>  
هو اللي كان  
هو اللي جي  
طوفان شديد لكن رشيد  
يقدر يعيد  
صنع الحياة  
انت الازل و انت الابد<sup>43</sup>  
و الهالك اللي يجهلك  
يا شعب يا نبض الوجود  
الحكم لك و الملك لك

Moreover, Negm has never meant his poetry to be read or even heard privately; he has been very keen to recite his poetry and even sing it with Imam in groups of public audience. Setting the poems to music is the easiest tool for Negm and Imam to reach common people everywhere, especially those who are illiterate and cannot read or write.

### Literary Autonomy

Negm's language and style, which seem odd to some critics, are exactly what Jesse Cohn describes as anarchist writers' refusal to follow or issue a manifesto and their inclination towards personal expressions ("Literary Theory" 116). Like many anarchist writers, Negm's poetry represents a literary autonomy as he asserts in his autobiography when he describes himself as a "free" poet who follows "no leaders" (Autobiography 526). His iconoclasm has helped him to fashion "a political aesthetics that is new" (Booth 77).

Negm's corpus manifests the anarchist view of language as dynamic process, an action, or "the tension between inherited codes and what needs to be said," (Cohn, "Literary Theory" 119-120). Negm rejects "the inherited codes" of the poetic elites or what Nietzsche calls "prison house," and insists on singing a new language, that is the language of common people in the streets. The unconventionality of his language interrupts the dominant hegemony of canonized literature; in other words, it makes no compromise with old standards of communication.

Though he was a contemporary to a group of poets who were in the forefront of colloquial poetry, the language of Negm's poetry is unique and different, "written basically in Cairene Arabic," Abdel Malek explains, "drawing from the fount of folk idioms and witticism and appealing to a largely urban populace" (6).

Through his use of Cairene dialects that communicates only with the poor of Egypt, Negm fights what Cohn calls the "tyranny of the signifier" (Anarchism and the Crisis of Representation 116). Many a time, He deliberately uses words that are not to be found in the dictionaries of the colloquial Egyptian dialects but in the streets among the impoverished Egyptian workers. Words such as *sho'a bo'a*, *sha'laban*, *hangaf*, *mehuflat*, *bazrameet*, or *yesahyen* (which Abdel Malek describes as untranslatable) are not to be understood by the educated elites; they are addressed to and, at the same time, express the tongue of silenced people in the streets. Sometimes, Negm uses these words to cover his harsh, sometimes aggressive, attack on political and literary icons. In his poem "The Thing" or "El Beta'," Negm makes use of the different interpretation of the word among the different classes in Egypt in order to avoid censorship. While he declares that the word "thing" refers to Al-Sadat's open-door policy, among lower classes the word has a sexual connotation that is meant to humiliate Al-Sadat. Negm's puns and twists of phrases produce sarcastic poetry that represents the silenced uneducated mass in Egypt.

Moreover, many of Negm's poetry is modeled according to known folk songs. For example "Haha's Cow" resonates an old song he heard the peasants sing when he was a child in his village (Negm, Autobiography 154). The performance of the poems by Imam and Negm and the tune Shaikh Imam adds to Negm's poetry also add new meanings to the poems. The music, just like the language, relates to the lower classes in Egypt. Negm's language, style, and performance create a dynamic relationship between the text and its reader/audience. Negm is able to provide his readers with a dynamic collective process in which the author, the text, and the readers/audience are involved to construct a meaning while no voice controls the other voices.

Together with Sheikh Imam, Negm has introduced new aesthetics which can be described as a counter-iconic aesthetics through which Negm's poetry asserts its individuality and its autonomy of any external interpretation. It proves to be a struggle against the authority of the critic. In other words, it is a fight against sociolinguistic hierarchy and the linguistic hegemony practiced by the iconic poetry that is written and read only by the educated bourgeois. His chosen diction, poetics, music, performance, and aesthetics are a counterpart of the politics of resistance he has pursued throughout his career.

### **Conclusion**

Negm's poetry comes to be "the voice of the people" against all types of hegemony: political, social, religious, and cultural. He displays most of what Jess Cohn calls features of the anarchist literature, including antiauthoritarian attitude, social involvement, collective reason, literary autonomy. It follows what Proudhon says about the aim of the anarchist literature which is "to eliminate the ABSOLUTE from the consideration of things" (127). Though it is really difficult to assign an affinity with anarchism as an ideology, (Negm himself has refused to be classified according to any strict ideological perspective,) his poetry displays many anarchist elements that Cohn discussed in his work.

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