

# **THE SUEZ CANAL IN THE EGYPTIAN NOVEL: A POSTCOLONIAL REVIEW**

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**Abstract:**

The main aim of this paper is to present a postcolonial review of the symbolic literary references of the Suez Canal in selected Egyptian novels and to historically trace how the symbolic significance of the Suez Canal changed many times throughout a number of significant historical phases – the Suez Company's concession, the Suez Crisis, the Arab-Israeli wars and post-war era. To achieve its purpose, this paper makes use of the concepts and ideas of Postcolonialism to discuss the relationship between history and literature and to examine how the Egyptian novel attempted, since the 1960s, to act as a counter discourse to the Western literary canon about the Suez Canal that served to reinforce colonialist ideology since its construction in the mid-nineteenth century. I conclude the paper by pointing out that the symbolic significance of the Suez Canal in the modern Egyptian novel has changed considerably throughout a number of significant historical phases from being a symbol of domination and exploitation of the East to become a symbol of anti-colonial and anti-subjugation resistance.

**Keywords:**

The Suez Canal, Symbolism, Egyptian novel, History, Postcolonialism.

## قناة السويس في الرواية المصرية:

### قراءة نقدية ما بعد استعمارية

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### الملخص:

إن الهدف الرئيسي من هذه الدراسة هو تقديم قراءة نقدية ما بعد استعمارية للإشارات الأدبية الرمزية لقناة السويس في روايات مصرية مختارة من خلال تتبع تاريخي لكيف تغيرت الأهمية الرمزية لقناة السويس عدة مرات في عدد من المراحل الهامة في تاريخها- امتياز شركة قناة السويس، والعدوان الثلاثي أو أزمة السويس، والحروب العربية الإسرائيلية، وعصر ما بعد حرب 73. ولتحقيق هذا الهدف، اتخذت الدراسة من بعض المفاهيم والأفكار الأساسية المستخدمة في نظرية ما بعد الاستعمارية النقدية منهجا لدراسة العلاقة بين التاريخ والأدب ودراسة كيف حاولت الرواية المصرية، منذ الستينيات، العمل كخطاب معاكس للأدب الغربي حول قناة السويس والذي سعى دائما لتعزيز الإيديولوجية الاستعمارية منذ حفر القناة في منتصف القرن التاسع عشر. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن المغزى الرمزي لقناة السويس في الرواية المصرية الحديثة قد تغير بشكل كبير عبر عدد من المراحل التاريخية الهامة من كونها رمزاً للهيمنة واستغلال الشرق لتصبح رمزاً لمناهضة الاستعمار ومقاومة القهر.

### الكلمات المفتاحية:

قناة السويس، الرمزية، الرواية المصرية، التاريخ، نظرية ما بعد الاستعمارية.

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### **Introduction**

Since 1849 I have studied incessantly, under all its aspects, a question which was already in my mind since 1832. I confess that my scheme is still a mere dream, and I do not shut my eyes to the fact that so long as I alone believe it to be possible, it is virtually impossible. . . . The scheme in question is the cutting of a canal through the Isthmus of Suez. (Lesseps 1)

In these words, from a letter that the French diplomat and later supervisor of the construction of the Suez Canal Ferdinand de Lesseps sent in 1852 to the Dutch Council-General in Egypt M. S. W. Ruysenaers, de Lesseps not only expresses his desire for the project, but also Western colonial motivations towards the East.<sup>1</sup> Examining De Lesseps' interest in excavating the canal and the Orientalist ideology behind the project, Edward Said wrote:

In the Suez Canal idea we see the logical conclusion of Orientalist thought and, more interesting, of Orientalist effort. To the West, Asia had once represented silent distance and alienation; Islam was militant hostility to European Christianity. To overcome such redoubtable

constants the Orient needed first to be known, then invaded and possessed, then re-created by scholars, soldiers, and judges who disinterred forgotten languages, histories, races, and cultures in order to posit them — beyond the modern Oriental's ken — as the true classical Orient that could be used to judge and rule the modern Orient. The obscurity faded to be replaced by hothouse entities; the Orient was a scholar's word, signifying what modern Europe had recently made of the still peculiar East. De Lesseps and his canal finally destroyed the Orient's distance, its cloistered intimacy *away* from the West, its perdurable exoticism. (91)

On November 17, 1869, the canal was opened connecting the Mediterranean with the Red Sea, the Occident with the Orient. The opening of the canal had its impact on Egypt as well as the imperial powers of the world at that time, namely France and Britain. Since then, the canal has become pivotally important in forming international power relations between the East and the West.

However, as I contend in the present paper, the impact of the Suez Canal was not only reflected in politics and economy, but in literature as well, particularly in the novel as a dominant modern literary form. Accordingly, the main aim of this paper is to present a postcolonial review of the symbolic literary references of the Suez Canal in selected Egyptian novels<sup>2</sup> throughout a number of significant historical phases — the Suez Company's

concession (in Abd Al-Rahman Fahmi's *al-Zi'āb wa al-Farīsa*, Siham Bayyumi's *Ayyām al-Qabbūtī*, and Saad Al-Qirsh's *Washm Waḥīd*), the Suez Crisis (in Latifa Al-Zayyat's *al-Bāb al-Maftūḥ*), the Arab–Israeli wars (in Yusuf Al-Sibai's *al-'Omr Laḥza*, Ihsan Abd Al-Qudus's *al-Roṣaṣa Latazāl Fi Jaibi*, Gamal Al-Ghitani's *Ḥikayāt al-Gharīb*), and the post-war era (in Naguib Mahfouz's *Yawma Qutila al-Za'īm*, Amina Zaydan's *Nabīdh Aḥmar*, Muhammad Al-Tohamy's *Heropolis*, and Son'allah Ibrahim's *Sharaf*). By symbolic literary references of the Suez Canal, I mean those literary references wherein the canal is employed by the author as an indispensable element that serves in the development of the theme or the plot of the literary work. A symbol in literature, as defined in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, is “a word or phrase that signifies an object or event which in its turn signifies something, or has a range of reference, beyond itself” (Abrams 311).

Very few critical attempts have been made in English to examine the portrayal of the Suez Canal in literature and most of them were solely focused on Western fiction. Examples of such attempts include Emily A. Haddad's “Digging to India: Modernity, Imperialism, and the Suez Canal” in 2005, Dorian Bell's “Miracle in the Desert: Zola's *L'Argent*, the Suez Canal, and the Transformation of French Imperialist Ideology” in 2006, Ailise Bulfin's “The Fiction of Gothic Egypt and British Imperial Paranoia: The Curse of the Suez Canal” in 2011, and Andrew Hammond's “British Literary Responses to the Suez Crisis” in 2013. The problem with these and similar Western critical attempts, however, is that they are one-sided in their ideology and limited in

their scope, either in time or in space. That is to say, in most of them, the main aim of the researcher or the critic is to examine Western literary works<sup>3</sup> (written in English and French) that belong to a certain period in the history of the Suez Canal (The Suez Company's Concession) and serve to reinforce colonialist ideology without taking into consideration the Eastern perspective, predominantly Egyptian, in history and literature. The significance of the paper lies in that it examines examples from Arabic literature, a less explored zone in postcolonial criticism as Wail S. Hassan argues:

One of the ironies of postcolonial studies is that colonial discourse analysis began with several theorists who studied colonialism in the Arab world: Albert Memmi (in Tunisia), Frantz Fanon (in Algeria), Edward Said (in the Levant). However, the work of those critics led to the development, in the 1980's and 1990's, of a sophisticated theoretical apparatus that rarely takes Arabic literary and cultural production into account. (45)

The discussion of references to the Suez Canal in the Egyptian novel would give us a full picture of how the symbolism of the Suez Canal developed and why. Also, the discussion of literary references to the Suez Canal in its earliest history might help the readers to understand how literature can succeed where history fails. For whereas history is written by the victors, literature offers an opportunity for the colonised, the marginalised and the oppressed to revisit, reread, re-contextualise and rewrite crucial moments in their recent past. This attempt can be

seen in light of Bill Ashcroft's proposition about the cultural resistance of colonised peoples:

[T]he most fascinating feature of post-colonial societies is a "resistance" that manifests itself as a refusal to be absorbed, a resistance which engages that which is resisted in a different way, taking the array of influences exerted by the dominating power, and altering them into tools for expressing a deeply held sense of identity and cultural being. (20)

In order to find answers to the aforementioned enquiries about the literary significance of the Suez Canal in selected Egyptian novels, this paper will make use of concepts and ideas of postcolonialism to examine how the Egyptian novel has attempted, since the 1960s, to act as a counter discourse to the Western literary canon about the Suez Canal that served to reinforce colonialism since the digging of the Suez Canal in the mid-nineteenth century. What is really significant about postcolonialism as a critical approach is that it pushes literary study toward cultural studies with its emphasis on factors that are not literary.

The theory and practice of postcolonial criticism began in the late 1970s in the work of critics such as Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and developed later in Gayatri Spivak's *The Post-Colonial Critic* (1990) and Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994). Postcolonialism is defined by Graham Huggan in his *The Postcolonial Exotic* (2001) as "an anti-colonial intellectualism that reads and valorises the signs of social struggle in the faultlines of

literary and cultural texts” (6). The main focus of postcolonial criticism is on “postcolonial literatures” that “emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2). As a reading practice at the present time, postcolonial criticism appears to be following two major paths:

On the one hand, via the reading of specific post-colonial texts and the effects of their production in and on specific social and historical contexts, and on the other, via the ‘revisioning’ of received tropes and modes such as allegory, irony, and metaphor and the rereading of ‘canonical’ texts in the light of post-colonial discursive practices. (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 191)

Therefore, this paper employs postcolonialism to analyse examples of literary references to the Suez Canal in Egyptian novels representing postcolonial literature. The analysis of postcolonial literary references of the Suez Canal in the selected novels is done all throughout, in terms of the narrated time rather than publication time, into a number of significant historical phases including the Suez Company's concession, the Suez Crisis, the Arab-Israeli wars and the post-war era.

### **1. The Suez Company's Concession (1854-1956)**

In the discussion of the different literary representations of the Suez Canal in the Egyptian novel, one is confronted with the critical views of major Egyptian critics and scholars who condemn the fact that there are

few literary works in Arabic about the Suez Canal, i.e. its history and development, and that until today there are almost no panoramic literary work in Arabic that gives a genuine representation of the history of the Suez Canal and the role of the Egyptians in its construction. In the Conference of the Writers of the Suez Canal Region and Sinai in 2010, the Egyptian writer and critic Yusuf Nofal stated that:

إن الأدب العربي ما زال مقصرا إزاء تصوير حدث حفر قناة السويس سخرة وتعذيبا والمبالغة في مظاهر الاحتفال وتجاهل الأدباء والفنانين والخطباء العالميون في حفل الافتتاح دور الشعب المصرى صاحب الفضل الأول في حفر القناة.

Arabic literature has not yet been able to capture the events of the digging of the Suez Canal, as global writers, artists and speakers, at the opening ceremony, ignored forced labor and torture and exaggerated excessive manifestations of celebration at the expense of the role of the Egyptian people in digging the canal.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, Egyptian novelist Yusuf Al-Qaid wrote in February 2013:

قناة السويس ليست مجرد مجرى ملاحى نحصل منه على أموال الدنيا بسبب مرور السفن فيه من الشمال إلى الجنوب ومن الجنوب إلى الشمال. فقبل أن تجرى فيه المياة كانت دماء الذين حفروا القناة من فقراء الفلاحين المصريين قد ملأت المجرى. إن السخرة في حفر قناة السويس توشك أن تكون قصة متكاملة الأركان لم تجد من يكتبها بعد. [28]

The Suez Canal is not just a navigation waterway that works as a vital source of revenue for Egypt because of the passage of ships from north to south and south to north. Prior to seawater, it was the blood of poor Egyptian peasants who dug the canal that filled its course. The use of *al-sukhrah*<sup>5</sup> (forced labor) in digging the Suez Canal is a full story that has not been written yet. (28)

However, in his article, Al-Qaid mentioned one of the significant attempts by Egyptian writers to present the story of the Suez Canal – that of Abd Al-Rahman Fahmi's 1989 novel *al-Zi'āb wa al-Farīsa* (The Wolves and the Prey). In the introduction to the novel, Fahmi states that he wrote the novel during a vacation in the early sixties and it was meant to be the first of five novels that he intended to write on the Suez Canal because the history of the Canal is the history of modern Egypt. Although Fahmi planned for a number of novels written on the Suez Canal, only *al-Zi'āb wa al-Farīsa* was published:

هذه الرواية كتبت خلال أجازة تفرغ في أوائل الستينيات كواحدة من خمس روايات عن قناة السويس. وقصة قناة السويس هي قصة مصر في العصر الحديث. وقارئ تاريخ القرنين التاسع عشر والعشرين يجد فكرة (الطريق الأقصر إلى الهند) وراء كل حدث هام من أحداث هذا التاريخ . . ومن هنا خطرت لي هذه الفكرة الطموحة لكتابة خمس روايات عن مصر الحديثة تدور كلها حول قناة السويس. وقد كتبت الرواية الأولى . . ثم كتبت فصولا في الرواية الثانية، حولتها إلى مسلسل إذاعي قدم من صوت العرب باسم دماء على الصحراء. [3-4]

I wrote this novel during a vacation in the early sixties and it was meant to be the first of five novels that I intended to write on the Suez Canal because the history of the Suez Canal is the history of modern Egypt. The reader of the history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries will find that the idea of “the shortest route to India” is behind every significant event in this history. Hence, I came up with this ambitious idea of writing five novels about modern Egypt that revolve around the Suez Canal. I wrote the first novel, followed by chapters in the second which was turned into a radio series presented by *Şawt al-‘Arab* (Voice of the Arabs) as *Dimā’ala al-Şaharā’* (Blood on the Desert). (3-4)

Fahmi maintains that the author of historical fiction, just like the historian, should spend a lot of time reading and exploring history. Instead of presenting notable historical figures in his novel (e.g. Mohamed Sa'id Pasha and Ferdinand de Lesseps), Fahmi chooses to focus attention on characters that are less explored in books of history (e.g. Ibrahim Ilhami Pasha the son of Abbas I of Egypt, Nazli Hanem daughter of Muhammad Ali, Abdul-Medjid I, Bolivar and Lord Stratford). Thus, he was able to use his imagination to explore how the concession for the construction of the canal was granted through conspiracy and scheme.

While reading *al-Zi'āb wa al-Farīsa*, one realises that the vision the author of the novel provides for the symbolic significance of the Suez Canal goes beyond the context of

the publication time in the sixties (a time of popular rage against monarchy and Muhammad Ali's Dynasty) and the context of the events in the mid-nineteenth century prior to the digging of the Suez Canal to hint for the symbolic significance of the Canal in the future. It is true that in *al-Zi'āb wa al-Farīsa*, the writer is concerned with the extent of the cruelty of colonialism and its attempt to devour the prey, symbolically represented in the novel in the Egyptian Suez Canal:

وأخذ بوليفار يتصور فعلا، ويحاول أن يدمج في الصورة التي يرسمها على بك صورة لقناة تحفر في هذا البلد . . طولها مائة وعشرون كيلومترا، وتجري وسط صحراء يرتد البصر حسيرا عن أمادها، وتغطيها طبقات من الرمال المتحركة المنهارة، وتبرز فوقها كتل من الظهور العارية، تلفحها الشمس وتلهبها سياط هذا الوالى، فتحنى بالنفوس تضرب بها الصخر الصلد فتفتته، وتلك الرمل المنهار أمام الماء الدافق لينطلق فى مجراه . . وفوق هذا الماء تجرى مئات السفن حاملة كنوز الشرق وثرواته، وهو – بوليفار – يقف عند مدخل المجرى، يحصل من كل سفينة رسما لا يقل عن عشرة فى المائة، بل عشرين فى المائة، من هذه الكنوز . . وفى زاوية بعيدة من هذه الصورة جلس سمو الوالى – الهامى باشا – مخمورا يترنح، فى يسراه كأس قدمتها له لوليتا، وفى يمينه سوط يلهب به الظهور العارية. [76]

Bolivar began to imagine it, trying to integrate into the image drawn by Ali Bey another of a canal to be dug in this country, a canal that runs for one hundred and twenty kilometers in a desert where the vision returns humbled while it is fatigued because of its vastness, covered by layers of collapsed quicksand and blocks of bare backs and

inflamed by the sun as well as the whips of the Governor to hit hard rocks by axes and move the sand away so that the water can flow in its course. In the water, hundreds of ships are sailing carrying treasures of the East, while Bolivar stands at the entrance of the canal to get a fee from every ship at least ten percent, or even twenty percent, of these treasures ... In the far corner of this image, his Highness – Ilhami Pasha – is reeling drunk, holding in his left hand a cup of wine given to him by Lolita and in his right hand a whip flaming the bare backs. (76)

But a closer look on Fahmi's novel reveals that this symbolic representation of the Suez Canal is likely to change with the change of history. Although Fahmi, who died a few months after the fiftieth anniversary of the July 1952 Revolution, was not able to complete his epic work, he ends *al-Zi'āb wa al-Farīsa* with an optimistic tone emphasising that the colonialist scheme imagined by Bolivar early in the novel is doomed to failure because one day the coloniser will leave and the canal will become then the property of those who dug it:

ولكن هذه القناة لو شقت فسوف تجعل مصر مستعمرة أوروبية. . !  
يا بنى ياما جاءنا مستعمرون . . وياما جاءنا ذئاب . . فهل غيروا  
مشرق الشمس إلى الغرب . . ؟ هل منعوا القمر من أن ينور في  
الليل المظلم . . ؟ هكذا نحن يا ابني . . هذه الأرض الخضراء . .  
وهذا النيل الأسمر . . ونحن الفلاحين باقون بقاء الشمس والقمر . .  
نحن الشيء الوحيد الصحيح في كل هذا . . ولا يصح إلا الصحيح .  
. ألم أقل لك. [387]

But if this canal is dug, Egypt will become a European colony! O son, how many colonists came to us? How many wolves came to us? Have they managed to bring up the sun from the West instead of the East? Have they managed to prevent the light of the moon in the dark night? So are we, my son. This green earth, this dark Nile and we peasants will survive as long as the sun and the moon. We are the only right thing in all of this. Truth shall prevail. I told you so. (387)

Historically, it took almost a century for this final vision in *al-Zi'āb wa al-Farīsa* to become true. According to Caroline Piquet, the effect of the Suez Canal Company's concession in Egypt was double-sided:

For more than a century, the Suez Canal Company's concession in Egypt was a French preserve, reflecting the role of the concession system there. Supported by favorable legislation, concession was the most widespread European business practice in Egypt. The system provided a way for Egypt to acquire modern infrastructures; the European contribution was a necessity, especially for digging the canal. The effect of the Suez Company is indisputable — the desert of the Suez isthmus was turned into a true economic area with ports, cities, and a labor force, and the region was progressively linked to the rest of the country via a road network. At the same time, however, the concession system denied the country any benefit from the infrastructure it created. (1)

Piquet's words about the contradictory role of the concession system raises questions about what was known in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as the *mission civilisatrice* (the French for “civilizing mission”) as a rationale for the colonisation of Africa and other parts of the world by the French as well as the British empires. Politically, the British and French colonial projects in Asia and the Indian subcontinent were dramatically facilitated by the Suez Canal. Those European colonial powers felt it was their duty to bring Western civilization to what they perceived as backward peoples. Yet, this colonial rationale was criticised by many writers and thinkers in postcolonial period such as Francophone and Martinican poet Aimé Césaire who argued that “No one colonizes innocently, that no one colonizes with impunity either; that a nation which colonizes, that a civilization which justifies colonization—and therefore force—is already a sick civilization, a civilization which is morally diseased, which irresistibly, progressing from one consequence to another, one denial to another, calls for its Hitler, I mean its punishment” (39).

Published in 2004, Siham Bayyumi's *Ayyām al-Qabbūtī* (Days of al-Qabbūtī) deals with the excavation of the Suez Canal. *Ayyām al-Qabbūtī* is an attempt to present the early history of the canal and the dilemma of the Egyptians, who worked for ten years in forced labour to finish the project. The history of the Egyptian workers, who died during the digging, was neglected for so long by Western and Eastern writers and historians alike. Presenting history from below, the novel puts stories of ‘official’ history aside and foregrounds the stories of

marginalised Egyptian people who dug the canal with their hands in hard times in Al-Farma (later Port Said). The protagonist of the novel, Al-Qabbuti, has been arrested for resisting the excavation of the Suez Canal. After some time, he is released from prison to find that the digging of the canal has already begun:

بدأت قوافل عمال الحفر تهل ثانية على الفرما وسط توجس الجميع. ولم تمض أيام قليلة حتى تزايدت أعدادهم حتى ملأوا أرجاء الفرما. قامت الكومبانية بإضاءة ساحة الحفر ليتواصل العمل فيها ليل نهار. لم تكن تترك الفرصة للفلاحين القادمين لالتقاط أنفاسهم من مشاق الرحلة الطويلة التي قطعوها حيث جاءوا من قرى الوجهين القبلي والبحري مكدسين في المركب ... وصدرت تعليمات لرؤساء الانفار بعدم التهاون مع المقصرين في العمل، فارتفعت السياط في مواقع الحفر دون رحمة، ودون تقدير لظروف الانفار الذين يعانون الجوع والعطش والجو الحار. [391]

The workers began to arrive again to the digging area in Al-Farma amid apprehension by everyone. In a few days their numbers increased until they filled areas of Al-Farma. The company lit the digging site so that the workers continue working day and night. It did not give the coming peasants the opportunity to catch their breath or relieve from the rigors of the long journey they made as they came from villages in Upper and Lower Egypt crammed into a boat ... Foremen were given orders so as not to tolerate with careless workers. Therefore, whips were used in the digging site without mercy and without any consideration of the conditions of the workers who suffered from hunger, thirst and hot weather. (391)

Just like *Ayyām al-Qabbūti*, Saad Al-Qirsh's *Washm Waḥīd* (Wahid's Tattoo), published in 2011, is a recent Arabic attempt to capture the dilemma of the Egyptians who dug the canal. The novel opens with the protagonist, Wahid, holding the body of his dead father in the canal digging site:

حمل وحيد أباه. رفعه بين يديه ودفء الحياة لم يتسرب تماما من الجسد الهزيل. لم يصدق ما جرى. حدثته نفسه أن أباه مجهد أتعبه العطش وحمل الرمال مع آلاف لا يعرف لهم حصراً ممن يحفرون القناة. «ابعد الميت عن الشغل».. كاد وحيد يقتل صاحب اللسان البارد... لم يبال وحيد بأمر «المقدم». عز عليه أن يكون الجسد في مقطف من الخوص واحتمل سوطاً لسع ظهره وهو يضع أباه برفق في العربة. ذهب به بعيداً أبعد بقليل من المكان المخصص لدفن من يموت من العمال. «أيقن وحيد أن أباه مات. عليه أن يهرب بالجثة إلى مكان لا تصل إليه عيون الحرس ليتمكن من العودة إلى «أوزير» ويدفنه هناك فترتاح روحه ويرجع وحيد نفسه إلى بلد سمع به ولا يحتفظ له بملامح. [1]

Wahid carried the body of his dead father. He raised it with his bare hands and felt the warmth of life that has not completely gone from the body. He could not believe what happened. He thought that his father was suffering badly from thirst after carrying the sand with innumerable thousands of people digging the canal. “Back off with the dead body”. He wished to kill the foreman who said it indifferently. However, he ignored the foreman's order. It was unbearable for him to put the body of his dead father in a basket made of palm fronds, so he endured the whip that hit his back and gently put his father in

the vehicle. He went slightly apart from the place where the dead workers were usually buried. Wahid realized that his father was dead and that he has to run away with the dead body to a place where the guards cannot find him to be able to return to Ossir and bury his dead father to rest in peace. Then he can return to a place he heard of but does not quite well remember. (1)

The significance of *Washm Wahīd* lies in that it is an attempt to capture this neglected history of ten years of excruciating and poorly compensated labor by Egyptian workers. Thousands of workers died over the ten years of construction due to malnutrition, fatigue and disease, especially cholera. In 1875, the British government purchased Egypt's shares in the canal. The canal remained under the control of France and Britain until the Suez Crisis in 1956.<sup>6</sup>

## **2. The Suez Crisis (1956)**

As stated by Caryl Philips, the post-world-war-II years witnessed the progressive weakness of the British colonial position in the Middle East, and as a result, Britain's diplomacy sliding into deepening entanglement, compounding confusion, and finally explosion in the Suez crisis of 1956:

Postwar Britain was an austere and insecure place. British people knew that their role in the world was shrinking, and the years between the handing over of India in 1947 and the Suez crisis of 1956 were years in which the reality of Britain's

increasingly limited role in world affairs was becoming painfully evident. (qtd. in Shaffer 14)

According to the provisions of the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936, Britain was allowed to install a pro-British government in Cairo and convert the Suez Canal Zone into “the largest military headquarters in the world” (Lucas 254). However, Egyptian nationalists in the 1950s demanded repeatedly that Britain evacuate the Suez Canal Zone, and in 1954 the two countries signed a seven-year agreement that superseded the 1936 treaty and provided for the gradual withdrawal of all British troops from the zone by June 1956.<sup>7</sup> In the introduction to her translation of Latifa Al-Zayyat's *al-Bāb al-Maftūḥ (The Open Door)*, Marilyn Booth records that within months of the British withdrawal, Gamal Abdel Nasser, the new president, denounced Western influence in the Arab world by announcing the nationalisation of the Suez Canal. This came as a response to the US pullout of the decision to, together with Britain, finance the building of the Aswan High Dam. Instead, Abdel Nasser explained that revenues of the Canal would go to construction projects that Western governments were unwilling to finance (xxii). Written in 1960, *al-Bāb al-Maftūḥ* covers the historical period from 1946 to 1956. Commenting on the significance of the historical context of the novel, Hoda Elsadda wrote:

The novel [*al-Bāb al-Maftūḥ*] is a period piece par excellence, as Al-Zayyat captures the idealism and euphoria of the dominant nationalist discourse of independence and freedom that was empowered by the Free Officers' revolution in 1952 and

confirmed in 1956 with the failure of the Tripartite attack on Egypt following the nationalization of the Suez Canal. (99)

In the novel, Layla and her brother Mahmud become involved in the student activism of the 1940s and early 1950s and in the popular resistance to imperialist rule; the story climaxes in the 1956 Suez Crisis, when Abdel Nasser's nationalisation of the Canal led to a British, French, and Israeli invasion. Throughout the novel references are made to the struggle at the Suez Canal Zone and its effect on the life of characters and their attitudes:

وانسحبت رجفة الى جسم ليلى وتركزت فى رأسها .. محمود ذاهب الى القناة، الى القناة.. وترددت هذه الكلمات فى رأسها وكأنها نشيد وغزت جسمها موجة من فخر.. [77]

A tremor ran through Layla and right into her head. Mahmud would go to the canal. To the canal! The words rang through her brain as if they were an anthem, and a swell of pride poured through her body... (Al-Zayyat 85)

Layla feels disappointed because her cousin and lover Işam does not join Mahmud in the struggle against the British in the Canal Zone. According to Sandra Buijsse, "As Layla's emotions toward her cousin change and weaken, her relationship with her brother gets stronger and they exchange letters daily; Layla is the only one in their circle of family and friends who truly understands and supports Mahmud's dangerous struggle for national liberation" (5). The effect of the canal is expressed by

Mahmud, after spending time there struggling against the British forces, in one of his letters to Layla as follows:

لقد كبرت يا ليلي. كبرت وأشعر كأني لم أبلغ إلا بعد أن أتيت الى القنطرة. أنا أحيا يا ليلي أحيا. أتفهمين يا عزيزتي؟ أحيا منفعلا كل ساعة وكل دقيقة من عمري. [101]

I don't think I was even close to becoming an adult until after I came to the Canal Zone. I'm really living. I am so alive Layla – do you understand what I'm saying, my dear? I feel more alive every hour... (Al-Zayyat 110)

Soon, Layla comes to experience these feelings herself as she arranges to be sent to Port Said where she becomes part of the struggle against the British:

ولم يكن أمر نقل ليلي من بورسعيد بالسهولة التي تصورها رمزي، وبدلاً من الأسبوعين بقيت ليلي في بورسعيد شهوراً. وفي 29 أكتوبر سنة 1956 بدأ الهجوم الإسرائيلي على صحراء سيناء، وفي 31 أكتوبر اشتركت بريطانيا وفرنسا في العدوان على مصر، وبدأت العمليات الحربية ضد المواقع المصرية. [314]

Layla's reassignment was not the easy matter Ramzi had imagined. Instead of two weeks, Layla stayed in Port Said for months. And on October 29, 1956, the Israelis attacked Sinai. On October 31, Great Britain and France joined in the aggression against Egypt, and military operations against Egyptian positions began. (Al-Zayyat 325)

In a symbolic gesture, Layla witnesses the destruction of the statue of Ferdinand de Lesseps, which, in

Elsadda's words “symbolized colonial exploitation of the Suez Canal” (104):

وعند نقطة التقاء القناة بالبحر، وعلى مبعدة من تمثال دلسيس،  
وقفت جموع من الناس تنتظر فى سكون، وشاب فى ثياب المقاومة  
الشعبية يقف على آخر درجات سلم مرتفع ويحفر بمتقاب حفرة فى  
جسد التمثال. [349]

Where the canal met the sea, and just slightly apart from the statue of De Lesseps, a group of people stood waiting silently. A young man in the uniform of the popular resistance stood on the highest step, plying a hand drill to carve a hole in the body of the statue. (Al-Zayyat 361)

At this moment, destroying the statue was, for people, a symbol of decolonisation and independence. Commenting on the conclusion of the novel, Buijsse notes that the optimism that can be felt at the end of the novel will soon be replaced with feelings of pessimism resulting from *Naksah*, or the Setback of 1967:

*al-Bāb al-Maftūḥ* remains a timely literary work and is very much a product of its time. The revolutionary optimism that followed the years of struggle for national liberation imbues the novel. The common sentiment among Egyptians at that time allowed the ending of Latifa al-Zayyat’s novel to offer a new beginning for Egypt and for Layla. Unfortunately, the door that opened in 1956, closed shortly afterwards. (26)

Graham MacPhee sheds light on a new strategic significance of the canal after its nationalisation in 1956,

“The Suez Canal, originally built to connect European metropolitan centres with their colonies and potential colonies in Asia and Eastern Africa, had by the mid-twentieth century developed a new strategic significance as a shipping route for oil supplies from the Arabian Gulf to Europe” (20). Therefore, the closure of the Suez Canal between November 1956 and May 1957 was a massive shock to the British and the Europeans.

### **3. Arab-Israeli Wars (1967-1973)**

Since the evacuation of the British forces from Egypt in June 1956 and the failure of the Anglo-French war against Egypt over the Suez Canal in October 1956, almost all the literary references to the Suez Canal have been mainly Egyptian. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Suez Canal acquired a special significance due to the Arab-Israeli Wars in 1967 and 1973. There had been conflicts between the Arabs and Israel ever since the 1917 Balfour Declaration and the British Mandate for Palestine. The relations between the Arabs and Israel became tenser in the 1948 Arab–Israeli War as a result of the Israeli Declaration of Independence in the same year. On June 5, 1967, Israel launched an air strike on Egyptian military sites in Sinai. The war of 1967 resulted in that Israel seized control of the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula (from Egypt), the West Bank and East Jerusalem (from Jordan) and the Golan Heights (from Syria). Most of the literature written about the Suez Canal Zone in the 1960s and 1970s is mainly in Arabic along with some literary attempts made by Israeli writers to capture their experience of the war of 1967 and

the October War of 1973. Examples of the former include Yusuf Al-Sibai's *al-'Omr Laḥza* (Life is a Moment) in 1973, Ihsan Abd Al-Qudus's *al-Roṣaṣa Latazāl Fi Jaibi* (The Bullet Is Still in My Pocket) in 1974, and Gamal Al-Ghitani's *Ḥikayāt al-Gharīb* (Tales of the Stranger) in 1976, all adapted into films with the same names.

For more than a century since its opening in 1869, the Anglo-French controlled canal was not only a split in the Egyptian landscape but also a split in the Egyptian self aggravated by the Israeli occupation of Sinai and the East Bank of the canal. This disintegration of the self is captured in *al-'Omr Laḥza* when the heroine of the novel, Namat, goes to Port Tawfiq to meet the Egyptian soldiers in 1970 during *Ḥarb al-Istinzāf*, or the War of Attrition:

هذا جزء من بلدها .. من جسد هذا الوطن .. ومن تراب هذه الأرض .. لا يكاد يشعر به الجزء الآخر .. جرح دام .. تقيح وتعفن .. ولم تنضح آلامه بعد على سائر الجسد. [46]

This is part of her country, of the body of this country, of this land, that is hardly felt by the other part. It is a bleeding wound that festered, got rotten and has not yet inflicted pain on the rest of the body. (46)

- نخرج إلى الخارج لتشهدى القناة والبحر .. ومدافع اليهود.

ووافقت نعمت وتبعته صاعدة إلى الخارج ووقف الاثنان يرقبان الأفق .. المياة والشاطئ والسماء.

أشار صلاح بيده يمناً وهو يقول:

- هذا جبل عناق

ونظرت نعمت إلى جبال ترتفع وتمتد وواصل حديثه قائلاً وهو  
يشير إلى بقعة تمتد أمام الجبل:

- وهذه هي الجزيرة الخضراء.

ثم أشار إلى الشاطئ المقابل وهو يتنهد قائلاً:

- وهذا هو شاطئنا الآخر .. [76]

- Let's go out to see the canal, the sea and the  
canons of the Jews.  
She agreed and followed him to the outside where  
the two stood to watch the horizon, the water,  
the beach and the sky. Salah pointed to the right  
and said:

- This is Ataqa Mountain.

Namat looked to the mountain going up and  
stretching. He continued, pointing to a spot  
stretching in front of the mountain:

- This is the Green Island.

Then he pointed to the opposite shore, sighing  
and saying:

- This is our other shore. (76)

*Al-Obour*, or Egypt's crossing the Suez Canal in October 1973, as portrayed in *al-Roṣaṣa Latazāl Fi Jaibi* can be interpreted as an attempt to reverse humiliation and regain the lost territory. Before the nationalisation of the canal in 1956, the movement of the ships upward and downward was nothing but a vertical movement in the hierarchy of colonisation between the coloniser (Western powers) at the top and the colonised (Eastern and Asian

colonies) at the bottom. However, the movement is now horizontal uniting the two banks of the canal, as well as the two parts of the disintegrated self produced by the Setback of 1967, together as these two extracts by the protagonist of the novel reveal:

يا أخى .. إنى سعيد لأنى عبرت .. عبرت القناة .. ألم تقرأ عن عمليات العبور التى تمت .. لقد كنت بين الذين عبروا .. وقد انتظرت كثيرا لأعبر .. بل إنى لم أعد من غزة إلى مصر إلا لأعبر وأحارب [33]

My brother, I am glad I crossed the canal. I crossed the canal. Haven't you read about the crossing? I was among those who crossed. I have waited for so long to cross the canal. I left Gaza and came to Egypt only to cross the canal and fight. (33)

\*\*\*

إنك لا تدري كيف أحس وأنا واقف هناك على الضفة القناة وعيناي مركزتان فى غل على الضفة الأخرى .. إنى أحس كأن على الضفة الأخرى كاننا يستغيث بى .. صراخ استغاثته يملأ صدرى .. الأرض تستغيث بى، والمستقبل يستغيث بى، وشرفى يستغيث بى .. وأرواح الألاف من إخوتى تستغيث بى. [46]

You do not know how I feel while I'm standing there on the bank of the canal and my eyes malevolently fixed on the other side. I feel as if there were a living being on the other side, crying out for me to help. My chest is filled with his screams. The land is crying out for me to help, the future is crying out for me to help, my honour is crying out for me to help and the lives of

thousands of my brothers are crying out for me to help. (46)

As given in *Maghūd Ḥarbī* (War Effort), a short story in *Ḥikayāt al-Gharīb* collection, the dream becomes a reality and the two sides of the canal are fully united as one land, as one self, when Khider Abu Attia, the tea seller, crosses the canal in the morning of October 7, 1973:

لن يمنعه أحد، القدامى يعرفونه، الجنود الجدد سيعرفونه من القدامى، بعبورهم إلى الشرق أصبحت الأرض امتدادا طبيعيا للسويس، للمدينة، سيبحث عن فكرى، عن رجب، عن لطفى، عن كمال، عن مكرم عن اسماعيل .. يهنئهم بأول صباحية فى الشرق، ارتفعت الأرض به، لمح زرقة القناة، أعمدة دخان بدت متجمدة فى الصباح الباكر، النقى، تهوى انفجارات متتالية من السماء، يمتد الجسر، يصل الضفتين، يربطهما. [249]

No one will stop him. Veterans know him, and new soldiers will be told about him by veterans. By crossing to the east bank of the canal, it has become a natural extension of Suez, the city. He will look for Fikri, Rajab, Lotfi, Kamal, Makram, and Ismail. He will congratulate them for their first morning on the east bank. The land goes up as he moves onward. He sees the blue canal and smoke columns that seemed frozen in the early, pure morning. Successive explosions fall from the sky. The bridge spans, linking up the two banks, uniting them. (249)

The 1967-1975 closure of the Suez Canal represents an important stage in the history of the canal and its symbolic significance. The economic and military effects of

the canal's closure for eight years did change the world in general and the relationship between the East and the West in particular. Here is what Horatio Clare writes about his passage through Suez and describes the situation as follows:

The lake we float on now was home to the 'Yellow Fleet': a convoy of merchant ships trapped by the closing of the canal in 1967 during the Six Day War. They remained at anchor, blown over with desert sand, until the canal reopened in 1975, when only two of them were able to leave under their own power. One of Yellow Fleet, African Glen, was sunk during the battles of the Yom Kippur War in 1973. The crews trapped on the Great Bitter Lake had a terrifyingly good view of this war: the canal was one of the front lines and the counter-attack which eventually ended the conflict began with Israeli tanks crossing into Egypt at Deversoir, at the northern end of the lake. (105)

The reopening of the Suez Canal in June 1975, coming after an era of decolonisation and the 1973 oil crisis, marks the beginning of a new phase in the relationship between the East and the West in general and the history of Egypt in particular.

#### **4. The Post-war Era (1974-Present)**

The *Infitah* (1974-1985), or 'Open Door' policy that involved replacing the socialist principles of Nasserism with capitalist economic policies, was the policy that Egypt

adopted in the years following the 1973 October War. According to Tariq Othman, the policy of Infitah was over-ambitious and increasingly marginalised the public sector:

Al-Infitah's main fault was that it was over ambitious. It failed to recognize the complexities of Egypt's socio-economic conditions ... It ignored the limitations of the country's administrative system and the power of the military establishment ... the mismatch between the skills of the Egyptian middle class and the various economic opportunities springing up as a result. ... As such, it was an unrealistically rapid developmental programmed that was doomed to fail. (125)

Concerns about the negative consequences of Infitah are raised by Naguib Mahfouz in his 1985 novel *Yawma Qutila al-Za'īm (The Day the Leader was Killed)*. The novel is set during the early 1980s while Egyptian President Anwar Sadat was introducing Infitah. In the following extract, told from the perspective of a retired religious old man (Muhtashimi Zayed) in a stream of consciousness format, the writer criticises the new age of Infitah in which materialism became more important than nationalism:

يجمعنا فى الصباح المدمس وحده أو الطعمية. هما معا أهم من قنال  
السويس. سقيا لعهد البيض والجبن والبسطرمة والمربى، ذلك عهد  
بائد، أو ق.أ. أى قبل الانفتاح. الأسعار جنت، كل شىء قد جن. [6]

Now it is beans or falafel for breakfast. Both of these are more important than the Suez Canal. Gone are the days of eggs, cheese, pastrami, and

jam. Those were the days of the ancient régime or B.I.—that is, Before Infitah, Sadat’s open-door economic policy. Prices have long since rocketed; everything has gone berserk. (Mahfouz 6)

It is possible here to attribute Infitah to the re-opening of the Suez Canal which contributed to the investment climate and increase of imported consumer goods that were sold at high prices. Elwan, Muhtashimi's grandson, is trapped in low-paid jobs during years of inflation and uneven distribution of wealth. As a result of Infitah, he finds no means to fulfill the financial obligations for marriage:

كنت عاشقا فأصبحت مرهقا عاجزا مسئولا ... لا حل لديها ولا حل  
لدى ولا نملك إلا الحب والإصرار. أعلنت الخطبة في عهد  
الناصرية وواجهنا الحقيقة في عصر الانفتاح. غرقنا في دوامة عالم  
مجنون. [12]

I was in love then, but now I am exhausted, helpless, and burdened with responsibilities. ... Neither she nor I have a solution. We have only love and determination. Our engagement was announced in the Nasser era and we were made to face reality in the days of *Infitah*. We sank in the whirlpool of a mad world. (Mahfouz 12)

Mahfouz's novel that opens with criticism of the hardships faced by the people of Egypt from Infitah reaches its climax with the assassination of Sadat in October 1981.

Set in Suez over the course of four decades, *Nabīdh Aḥmar (Red Wine)* 2007 by Amina Zaydan explores the

events which rocked the city through the heroine of the novel, Suzy, born in the Egyptian city of Suez during the War of Attrition in the late 1960s. The novel is divided into four chapters; each represents a decade in Suzy's life. In the first chapter, that covers the years from 1960 to 1970, Suzy recalls past events in Suez at a time of popular resistance:

كنا نركض أنا وأسعد وأندريا وكل الصحاب النبلاء خلف مدرعاتنا التي تشق شريطاً بين بيوت المدينة باتجاه الضفة الشرقية حشود مؤلفة كلهم عائلتي خرجوا من الركام كنييران لا يطفئها غير الموت كل يعرف دوره في نصر المقاومة المحكمة. [14]

Assad, Andrea, and all our noble friends were cheering our armed vehicles heading toward the east bank of the canal. Everyone erupted from the debris like fires that only death could quench. Everyone played his or her part in this well-written drama of the resistance. (Zaydan 8)

The image of Suez during the war is contrasted with that image remembered by Khairiya, the poor girl who left Suez because of the war:

تستعيد معي شوارع مدينتنا المرصوفة ونشم رائحة عيش الحمص المخلوطة برائحة السمك المشوي في فرن "شوشة" الذي يحمص العيش ويشوى السمك في آن واحد نتذكر نط الحبل ولعب الحجلة في جنينة الفرناوى التي تطل على الخليج الذائب فى القناة. [50]

We would ponder what brought us here and remember the paved streets of our hometown and the smell of freshly baked bread and grilled fish in Shusha's bakery which baked bread and grilled

fish at the same time. We would also remember jumping rope and skipping in the French garden that overlooked the meeting point between the bay and the canal. (Zaydan 50)

Beginning with a description of life in Suez tied to the wars in 1967 and 1973, the novel goes on to present, in the words of Sarah Carr, “the loss of direction, the fall of combatants, the rise of fundamentalism, the disintegration of society into vying factions, and the emergence of an opportunistic and unethical class during the *infatih* (open door) period. It is a time of madness and rampant depression.” (*Daily News Egypt*).

In *Heropolis* (2009), Muhammad Al-Tohamy makes it clear that the Suez Canal Zone was the main target of the policy of *Infatih* because of the amount of devastation that this region witnessed during the war. As given in the novel by the narrator, Suez was about to become a free zone, but Sadat changed up his mind and in 1976 Port Said, the entry point of the Suez Canal by the Mediterranean Sea, was declared a tax-free zone:

بعد الانتصارات المجيدة، أعلن الرئيس السادات قرار تحويل هيروبولس إلى منطقة حرة، كان السادات يرى أنه لابد من تعويض أهل السويس عما ذاقوا من هجرة وتشريد، كما يجب مجازاتهم، فقد ضرب أهالي هيروبولس مثالا راقيا في الحفاظ على تراب الوطن والتضحية من أجله، يجب تعويض هذه المدينة التي فقدت ممتلكاتها وأموالها وجمالها وبيوتها ... لكنه بعد تفكير اهتدى لتحويل مدينة بورسعيد لمنطقة حرة، فهذا أفضل من الناحية الجغرافية. [55]

After the glorious victories, President Sadat decided to convert Heropolis into a free zone. Sadat believed that the people of Suez must be compensated for what they suffered from migration and displacement, and because they set a respectable example in the protection of and sacrifice for homeland. Suez must be compensated for its losses in property, funds, beauty and homes ... But after thinking, he decided to transform the city of Port Said instead into a free zone because he thought it would be better geographically. (55)

The novel presents a series of events witnessed by Egypt in general and Suez in particular, especially during the last hundred years from the time of Isma'il Pasha to the present time of electronics, blogs and networks. The real hero in the novel is the city of Suez itself. Despite all the destruction and devastation it witnessed in the 1960s and the 1970s, Suez remained attractive, always a magnet for the characters.

Son'allah Ibrahim's 1997 novel *Sharaf*, about a young man called 'Sharaf' which means 'honor', draws attention to the difference between the symbolic significance of the Suez Canal Zone during and after Nasserism. The nationalisation of the Suez Canal by Abdel Nasser in July 1956 was a symbol not only of Egypt's independence but also of the independence of all peoples colonized and dominated by Western powers, as one of the viewers of the subversive puppet show that Dr. Ramzi writes and

directs for the prisoners in celebration of the 6 October Victory says:

أسمعه الآن، وهو يعلن باسم الشعب، تأميم الشركة العالمية لقناة السويس، وبوسعي أن أستحضر النشوة التي شعر بها كل مصري وعربي وإفريقي، بل وأبناء الشعوب البعيدة في آسيا وأمريكا اللاتينية، وكل المستعبدين المستذلين، وهم يسمعون بعودة القناة إلى أصحابها. [390]

I hear him now announcing, on behalf of the Egyptian people, the nationalisation of the Global Company of the Suez Canal, and I can invoke the excitement felt by every Egyptian, Arab, African, distant peoples in Asia, Latin America, and all the oppressed and enslaved, when they hear about the return of the canal to its owners. (390)

Later references to the Suez Canal in the novel draw attention to the intrusion of American politics in Egypt during Infitah and after. The American aid to Egypt in the late 1970s, closely associated with Sadat's infitah policy, marks a shift away from some of the economic and political principles of Nasserism and a break with the Soviet Union:

كان في قمة الانتشاء، وهو يحدثني عن التعمير، (كانت إسرائيل تشترط البدء فوراً في تعمير مدن القناة لتكون حاجزاً إذا ما تجدد القتال) وعن تحويل بورسعيد إلى مدينة حرة، تزدهر فيها المصانع الأجنبية دون قيود .. وكانت المعونة الأمريكية جاهزة للتمويل، (تحيةً لزعيمة العالم التي وقفت إلى جانبنا وقت الشدة) وسرعان ما امتلأت أسواق البلاد العطشى بالسلع الأجنبية التي حرمت منها طويلاً: السفن أب، وصابون كامي، وشوكولاتة نستلة، والجبن الفرنسي ذو الرائحة النتنة. [407]

He was extremely excited when he told me about the reconstruction (Israel required the reconstruction of the cities of the canal to start immediately to act as a barrier in case of fight renewal) and the conversion of Port Said to a free zone, where foreign factories flourish without restrictions . . . The US aid was ready to fund these projects, (Hail to the world's leading power that sustained us in hard times!). Soon, the thirsty markets of the country were filled with foreign goods from which they were deprived for long: 7Up, Camay soap, Nestlé chocolates and French cheese with the stench. (407)

Also, the Suez Canal is referred to by the viewers of Ramzi's play to point out two main economic problems during Mubarak's rule in Egypt: External Debt Crisis (1985–1990) and Privatisation (1991-2011). The angry comments given by the viewers during the prison play reveal how external debt affected the living conditions of the Egyptian people making the poor poorer and the rich even richer:

نحن لم نذهب الى الحرب .. ولم نتعرض لشيء من أهوالها .. لم يمت منا أحد .. ولم نفقد عينا أو ساقا أو يدا .. ولا حتى شردنا من منازلنا .. أو هجرنا الى أماكن بعيدة عن القنال .. لكننا دفعنا ثمن الأسلحة .. ثمن الهزيمة والنصر .. ولم نعرف بعد الحياة الكريمة التي نتحدثون عنها .. الأسعار ترتفع كل يوم .. وكل من لديه يزداد حتى يصبح لديه وفرا .. ويؤخذ ممن يفتقرون حتى الذى بين أيديهم .. والآن يقال لنا أن كل واحد منا مدين بألف دولار لبلاد أجنبية لا نعرفها .. وهناك خطة وضعها صندوق النقد الدولي .. لتحويل هذا الدين .. تقولون لنا أنها مضبوطة وسليمة. [345]

We did not go to war. We did not suffer from its horrors. Nobody of us died. Nobody of us lost an eye, a leg or a hand. We were not even displaced from our homes nor evacuated to places far from the canal. But we paid for weapons, the price of defeat and victory. We have not yet lived the decent life you are talking about. Prices increase every day. The rich get richer and the poor get poorer. And now we are told that each and every one of us owes a thousand dollar to foreign countries that we do not know. There is a plan set by the International Monetary Fund to collect this debt. You say that this plan is precise and accurate. (345)

Privatisation of state-owned industries was the solution that Mubarak's governments proposed to repair Egypt's failing economy. As given in the novel, the old transactions of privatisation were riddled with low sale value and corruption and if this economic policy is to proceed, important national institutions, projects and treasures will suffer a similar fate to the privatised ones:

تصفية القطاع العام (الذى نهبوه وخرّبوه) .. وبيعه فى المزاد .. أى  
الخصخصة والمصمصة.. وبعد ذلك الكهرباء والمجارى .. النقل  
العام والمترو والسكة الحديد .. الطيران والمطارات والطرق ..  
التليفونات والبريد .. الجامعات والبنوك .. قناة السويس والبتروىل ..  
السد العالى .. المصانع الحربية .. الأهرامات .. أى كل ممتلكات  
الشعب المصرى... كل ما حاربنا وضحينا من أجل اقامته والدفاع  
عنه .. فى 56 و67 و73 .. وكأنتنا يا بدر لا رحنا ولا جينا. -[423]

27]

Reduction and sale of public sector (which they plundered and ruined) at auction, i.e. *khaṣkhaṣah* (privatization) and *maṣmaṣah* (to scrape or suck the bone marrow). And then electricity, sewage, public transport, metro and railway, aviation, airports, roads, telephone and postal service, universities and banks, the Suez Canal and oil, the High Dam, military factories and the pyramids, which are all the property of the Egyptian people. It sounds like that all we fought and sacrificed for in 1956, 1967 and 1973 was in vain. (423-27)

### **Conclusion**

To cut a long story short, the symbolic significance of the Suez Canal in modern Egyptian novel has changed considerably throughout a number of major historical phases, i.e. the Suez Company's concession, the Suez Crisis, the Arab–Israeli wars and the post-war era, from being a symbol of domination and exploitation of the East to become a symbol of anti-colonial and anti-subjugation resistance in postcolonial Egyptian novels. In their portrayal of the Suez Canal, the Egyptian novelists tried to present postcolonial texts that reverse the western colonial discourse which, for so many years, has privileged the colonising centre over the colonised margin.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> De Lesseps was able to get the concession with the help of his friend M. S. W. Ruysenaers who persuaded Muhammad Said Pasha to sign it.

<sup>2</sup> The choice of the novels is, in no way, all inclusive. The paper is limited to a few works by prominent Egyptian authors.

<sup>3</sup> Examples of these works include Jules Verne's *Le Tour du Monde en Quatre-vingts Jours* (1873), Emile Zola's *L'argent* (1891), Guy Boothby's *Pharos, the Egyptian* (1899), and E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924).

<sup>4</sup> All translations from Arabic into English are done by the present writer, *unless* otherwise indicated.

<sup>5</sup> The transliteration *system* used in this article is the ALA-LC (1997) Romanization for Arabic.

<sup>6</sup> Also named the “Tripartite Aggression,” the Suez Crisis was an invasion of Egypt in late 1956 by Israel, followed by Britain and France.

<sup>7</sup> See “Canal *History*” at: <http://www.suezcanal.gov.eg>.

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