

**Ancient Egyptian Heritage: Reverberations in
Modern and Contemporary Egyptian Arts**

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Abstract:

Ancient Egyptian reverberations can be easily detected in the works of modern and contemporary Egyptian writers, sculptors and filmmakers. Naguib Mahfouz, Louis Awad, Mahmoud Moukhtar, Adam Henein, Shadi Abd Elsalam, Salwa Bakr and Sahar Elmougy, to name but a few, are some of the Egyptian artists who resorted to Ancient Egyptian heritage and used it resourcefully in their works. By contrast, the majority of Egyptian laymen hardly know anything about their Ancient Egyptian past, though they take pride in being the descendants of the Pharaohs. This paper aims at exposing the reasons behind this sense of alienation and disconnection between Egyptians and their past, and exploring the discrepancy between Egyptian laymen, who are oblivious to their great past, and many Egyptian artists and writers, who often reclaim their heritage, and go back to their roots. It will also unveil how those writers and artists creatively made use of that rich heritage, and uncover the political and historical undertones underlying their works which draw on Ancient Egypt.

Keywords:

Ancient Egypt, heritage, identity, pan-Arabism, Pharaonism, efendi, Naguib Mahfouz, Louis Awad, Mahmoud Moukhtar, Adam Henein, Shadi Abd Elsalam, Salwa Bakr, Sahar Elmougy.

الملخص

من السهل تتبع أصداء التاريخ المصري القديم في أعمال كتاب ونحاتين ومخرجين مصريين حديثين ومعاصرين، فنجيب محفوظ، لويس عوض، محمود مختار، آدم حنين، شادي عبد السلام، سلوى بكر، وسحر الموجي يمثلن بعض من تلك النماذج، حيث نجد إنهم استلهموا التاريخ المصري القديم واستخدموه ببراعة في أعمالهم. على النقيض من ذلك، نجد أن عامة المصريين بالكاد يعرفون شيئا عن تاريخهم رغم اعتزازهم بكونهم أحفاد الفراعنة. يهدف البحث إلى الوقوف على الأسباب التي أدت لهذه القطيعة بين المصريين وتاريخهم، والتناقض بين موقف عامة الشعب من ذلك التاريخ وموقف الكثير من الفنانين والكتاب المصريين الذين تمسكوا بتراثهم وجذورهم، كما سيعرض البحث لإبداعات هؤلاء الفنانين المستلهمة من التاريخ المصري القديم، ويكشف عن الجوانب التاريخية والسياسية لتلك الأعمال.

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Introduction

To speak of a single Egyptian identity is to oversimplify matters, for Egypt has gone through different historical periods, with each period definitely leaving a different indelible imprint on its character. Egypt is part of Africa, so Egypt is African, but Egypt has its unique Ancient Egyptian history (3100 -322 B.C), which was followed by many other historical periods: the Ptolemaic period (332BC-30 BC), Roman period (30 BC– 646 AD), Arab and Ottoman period (641-1882), British occupation (1882–1952), and then Republican Egypt. These broad and sweeping period divisions are just a guideline but they, in no way, do justice to the true essence of each period, which is definitely much more varied and multi-coloured. If anything, they roughly indicate that Egypt has gone through many different historical changes which have definitely contributed to the formulation of its identity.

Of all those periods, the Ancient Egyptian period is the most Egyptian of all for it was fabricated by indigenous Egyptians, who lived on both sides of the River Nile, while the following periods, with their incoming cultures, religions and languages,

came to Egypt in the form of invasion, conquest, or interaction, and as such are outer influences and shades which did not emanate primarily from Egyptian land.

The different periods that followed the Ancient Egyptian period distanced the Egyptians from their Ancient Egyptian identity. Egyptians nowadays hardly know anything about their Ancient Egyptian past or culture; Ancient Egyptian motifs are used everywhere on stamps, coins, banknotes, medals, trophies, logos, architectural designs, but most Egyptians do not know what they stand for or even the names of the gods or kings who feature in those designs. Egyptians boast and brag about that outstanding civilisation, and the pyramids and the sphinx remain Egypt's symbol and pride, but foreigners would know more about Egyptian history than Egyptians do.

The aim of this paper is to probe the depth of this issue and to find out the reasons why Egyptians have developed this sense of disconnection and detachment from their past, by shedding light on some historical factors which have played an important role in severing the ties between Egyptians and their past. Then, the paper will move on to investigate how this issue was pronounced by many intellectuals, artists and writers, who used Ancient Egyptian heritage in their works. It is worth mentioning that this paper is in no way comprehensive or all-inclusive; the chosen figures are representatives of different

disciplines: literature, sculpture, the cinema; both genders: male/female and come from two different periods: modern and contemporary. The writers, who have been chosen for the purpose of this paper, are established voices whose works have been published and circulated in Egypt, or internationally as well. Similarly, many of the artworks of the artists in question have become iconic, hence their importance and influence.

Reasons for the Disconnection between Egyptians and their Past

Ancient Egyptian Heritage and the Question of Polytheism

Ancient Egyptian civilization lasted for almost 3000 years on this land, and the legacy it left behind was far-reaching. Strangely enough, Egyptians seem to have severed their relationship with that past. One reason for that would be the clash between the polytheistic spirit of Ancient Egyptian mythology and the monotheism of the Abrahamic religions. Ancient Egyptian mythology boasted of a multiplicity of gods and goddesses each in charge of a particular role or function: Isis, goddess of magic and marriage, Osiris, god of the underworld and afterlife, Set, god of chaos and deserts, Anubis,

god of the dead, Hathor, goddess of love and marriage, Horus, god of the sky, Khonsu, god of the moon, Maat, goddess of justice, to name but a few, are some of those numerous gods and goddesses, which Ancient Egyptians revered and offered sacrifices to. The multiplicity of those gods was part of the polytheistic nature of Ancient Egyptian mythology, and was regarded as enriching as those gods and goddesses were considered different manifestations of one god, and one truth. However, the polytheistic nature of Ancient Egyptian mythology was not in keeping with the nature of the Abrahamic religions, since they were quintessentially monotheistic.

For example, Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti (1753-1826), who is considered “Egypt’s chief chronicler of the early nineteenth century” (Colla 72), often refers in his writings to the pagan nature of those monuments. Though he uses the word *temthal*, the Arabic equivalent of “statue”, he also uses the word *sanam* (al-Jabarti 440) which is the equivalent of “idol”. His “reference to the Ancient statue as an idol shows that, from his standpoint, it mattered that the civilization that produced them was pagan”(Colla 74). His discourse exposes his deeply-rooted convictions; “the term *sanam*- a statue formed for the purpose of worship-is in no small part pejorative, associated with idolatry (*taghut*) and polytheism (*shirk*)” (73).

Moreover, the Pharaoh, the son of god, was also considered a tyrant, who assumed absolute divine right. “Within Jewish and Coptic traditions, the image of Pharaoh was associated with unholy tyranny” (74). In Islam, the Pharaoh was “a uniquely arrogant, sinful figure in the Quran” (75).

Thus, with the advent of the monotheistic religions, Ancient Egyptian heritage was penalized for its polytheistic nature, hence marginalized and pushed to the corner, and this could be one of the reasons behind the sense of alienation which most Egyptians feel, or were made to feel, wittingly or unwittingly towards their civilization.

While Western fascination with Ancient Egyptian civilization and achievements, commonly known as Egyptomania, was soaring out through the ages, Egyptians were already distanced from their past; Egyptomania is not a modern trend, but dates back to Classical antiquity and the time of Herodotus, and was refueled with the publication of *Description de l’Egypte*, which was composed by the archaeologists and scholars who accompanied Napoleon Bonaparte’s campaign in Egypt (1798-1801). Interest was to soar once more when the eyes of the world were reset on the glories of Ancient Egypt with the discovery of King Tutankhamun’s tomb intact with all its treasures in 1922. The world’s fascination with Ancient

Egyptian history definitely stands in sharp contrast with the way Egyptians themselves relate to that history.

Historical Currents: Pharaonism versus Arabism

In the 1920s and 1930s, Egyptian identity was being reformulated in response to political and cultural factors. The British occupation of Egypt fuelled Egyptian nationalist feelings and anti-colonial sentiments. This was accompanied by a renewed interest in history. Digging into history and taking an interest in it was directly linked to “the nationalistic awakening” (Chejne 383). The reason was that,

history has become to some degree an instrument in the hands of the newly-arising states. It aims at the diffusion of an historical consciousness through the revival of the past and the glorification of its heroes and accomplishments. History has a definite orientation for improving the present and setting firm foundations for the future. (Chejne 383)

It is worthwhile noting that there were two different ways of appropriating history in response to that nationalistic awakening. First, for some Egyptians the answer was Pharaonism, which meant claiming Ancient Egyptian identity to resist and stand up to the British occupation. In this case, Ancient Egyptian history became terra firma, which could

provide those nationalists with pride, dignity and hope for triumph:

In their search for "historical respectability," the historians of this school stress primarily the ancient pre-Islamic roots of their respective past and cultures. As a result, one can discern the stress of the Pharaonism of Egypt, the Syrianism of the Fertile Crescent, the Phoenicianism of Lebanon, the Assyrianism of Iraq, and the Berberism of North-West Africa. (Chejne 384).

In Egypt, the new social class known as the "efendis", which was the fruit of Mohamed Ali's educational reforms and missions to Europe (Ryzova 19), the accountants, lawyers, doctors, architects, teachers, journalists, writers and intellectuals (4) of the time, were to become the cornerstone of that nationalist movement.

Historians are familiar with the efendis as key players in the political development of modern Egypt. They were central to the nationalist movement that emerged in the last decade of the nineteenth century in the context of the British occupation, and led to the creation of a nominally independent Egyptian national state as a constitutional monarchy in 1923. The efendis were the makers of this national

movement—its brains and muscles, its ideologues, popularizers, and its majority publics. (18)

Though the intellectuals, artists and cultural figures of that class played a major role in furthering the ancient Egyptian tradition within Egyptian society, there was a parallel tradition which furthered a completely different discourse, that of the Islamic and Arab elements of Egyptian society; it tended “to overemphasize the bright side of Islamic history, and to assert its strong belief in the regenerative powers of Islam (Chejne 384). It is noteworthy that Arabism was to prepare the ground for the rise of pan-Arabism, which was to silence Pharaonism to a great extent.

The Rise of Pan-Arabism

The rise of pan-Arabism (unity of the countries of North Africa and West Asia from the Atlantic Ocean to the Arabian Sea based on language and religion) is another important factor that has to be taken into consideration when discussing the status accorded to Ancient Egyptian history. Despite the fact that pan-Arabism came to the forefront during World War 1, it was not a prominent part of the Egyptian national discourse during the 1930s and 1940s, but was to come to prominence during the Nasserite regime (1956-70):

For the next eighteen years, Cairo guided the Arab states in such a resolute manner that many observers came to believe that Egyptian leadership of the Arab side was a natural and permanent component of the Middle Eastern scene. (Doran 3)

Egypt was now seen as tied to the Arab Nation by geography, history, religion, language and the struggle against imperialism, a discourse which was heavily propagated by the Nasserite regime, and which became the basis of Egypt's foreign policy at the time. Clearly, Nasser's pan-Arabist discourse was grounded in Arab rather than Ancient Egyptian history and was to further distance Egyptians from their Ancient Egyptian roots.

The Advent of Wahhabism

During the 1970s and 1980s, many Egyptians went to work in Saudi Arabia and the gulf area, and this was to introduce another outer influence, that of Wahhabism, an extremely conservative and narrow-minded outlook to life, which was definitely intolerant to Ancient Egyptian civilization. Moreover, the mushrooming of fanatical Islamist groups in Egypt has definitely been detrimental to Ancient Egyptian culture.

To sum up, the polytheistic nature of Ancient Egyptian civilisation, the twinkling of Arab and Islamic discourses during the 1920s and 1930s, the rise of pan-Arabism during the

Nasserite regime, and the advent of Wahhabism in the 1970s and 1980s were some of the main factors which contributed, in varying degrees, to the disconnection between Egyptians and their Ancient Egyptian roots.

The Stand of Some Artists and Writers concerning their Ancient Egyptian Past

Though the above-mentioned historical factors have gradually led to the dissociation between Egyptian laymen and their Ancient Egyptian heritage, the Egyptian intelligentsia seems to have had a different stance towards its Ancient heritage; Ancient Egyptian reverberations can be easily traced in the works of modern and contemporary Egyptian writers, filmmakers, painters and sculptors, who were aware of this sense of disconnection from Ancient Egyptian past and attempted to bridge that gap. Naguib Mahfouz, Louis Awad, Mahmoud Moukhtar, Shadi Abd Elsalam, Adam Henein, Salwa Bakr, Sahar Elmougy, to name but a few, are some of the Egyptian writers and artists who drew on Ancient Egyptian heritage and integrated it into their works. Many questions pose themselves at this point: Why did they reclaim their heritage and go back to their roots? And what was the driving force behind that?

The following will be an attempt at exploring how those artists made use of that heritage, and at showing how some of them creatively interwove it in their works, or even made it the very essence of their work, while simultaneously unveiling the reasons for that in relation to the political and historical undertones underlying their works. The works of the intellectual figures discussed in this paper are to be presented in a chronological order: the modern period followed by the contemporary period.

Naguib Mahfouz (1911-2006)

Egyptian Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz was extremely interested in Ancient Egyptian heritage. In fact, his first book was a translation of James Baikie's *Peeps at Many Lands: Ancient Egypt*, which traced images of Ancient Egyptian history and culture. The fact that his first published book was about Ancient Egypt clearly reveals his fascination with that period; it is also noteworthy that the book was a translation of a foreign book, which attests to the fact that foreigners are much more interested in Ancient Egyptian history than Egyptians themselves and that the latter often seek information about their own history and culture from foreign sources and references, which have become an authority.

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, Mahfouz was to write a trilogy of novels set in Ancient Egyptian times, but which were related to contemporary political, historical and social themes: *Ābath al-Aqdār [The Game of Fates](1939)*¹, *Radobys [Radubis] (1943)* and *Kefah Tyba [The Struggle of Thebes](1944)*.

It is interesting to find out the reasons why the young Mahfouz resorted to Ancient Egyptian history at the beginning of his career. One such reason would be as El-Enany states: “This interest must also be placed within the context of a main intellectual current at the time which found in the face of foreign rule a sense of national and cultural pride in Ancient Egyptian history” (35). Thus, Mahfouz was among the intellectuals of the Efendi class, who resorted to Pharaonism rather than Arabism to fortify the Egyptian identity in its battle against occupation:

Mahfouz, of course, had an obvious agenda. His fiction was not only about his country, but about his very identity. He took transparent pride in Egypt's extraordinary historical heritage and—to an obviously lesser extent—in its leadership role among the Arab states, and prominence in Islam. (Stock 322)

Salama Moussa (1887-1958) was to have a tremendous impact on Mahfouz at the time. Moussa, the well-established journalist

¹ This paper follows the IJMES transliteration system.

and writer, who was so passionate about Ancient Egyptian history, took Mahfouz under his wing and some of Mahfouz's very early writings were printed during the 1930s in *Al-Majalla al- Jadida [The New Review]* published by Salama Moussa. He was also to publish Mahfouz's translation of Baiki's book on Ancient Egypt, and his first novel, *The Game of Fates* (El-Enany, 12- 13). As such Moussa supported Mahfouz tremendously at this stage and helped pave the way for the publication of his Ancient Egyptian pieces at the time.

Right before the publication of Mahfouz's Ancient Egyptian-oriented books, many archaeological discoveries came to light, topped by the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb in 1922, which received worldwide attention and ignited renewed interest in Ancient Egyptian history. Mahfouz was to witness the rebirth of Ancient Egyptian glory and recognize the world's infatuation with it, which was also a major influence on him at the time.

Interestingly, though Mahfouz started writing novels immersed in contemporary times after that, he was to go back to Ancient Egyptian history every now and then. *Al-Āsh fi al-ḥaqiqa [Akhenaten, Dweller in Truth]* (1985) is a case in point; it is a polyphonic novel which displays different views concerning Akhenaten's controversial life with the ultimate aim of showing that there is no absolute truth, hence presenting that historical figure from a new philosophic outlook; no wonder for Mahfouz

held a major in philosophy and was so passionate about Ancient Egyptian history.

Some of the texts of his last literary work, *Aḥlam Fatret al-Naqaha* [*Dreams of the Period of Recovery*] also draw on that period. If anything his fiction reveals “a determinedly (and permanently) Egyptian territorial nationalist, at the dawn of modern pan-Arab and pan-Islamic ideology—and continuing to his death” (Stock 2).

Louis Awad (1915-1990)

Louis Awad, the intellectual and writer, wrote *Al-ʿanqʿ* [*The Phoenix or The History of Hassan Mouftah*] in 1947, but was to publish it some twenty years later in 1966. Though the novel mainly revolves around the socialist and communist movements which gathered momentum in Egypt during the 1940s, the Ancient Egyptian myth of resurrection lies at the core of the novel, hence the title of the novel. In Ancient Egyptian mythology, the nest of this mythical bird caught fire, and was consumed by the flames, but the phoenix still managed to rise once more from the ashes. The myth is an allegory of resurrection, rebirth, and the cyclic interchange of life and death.

The question of resurrection is brought up at the very beginning of the novel when Fouad Mankarious, on his

deathbed, tells Hassan Mouftah that his soul will remain in a state of unrest for forty days until it finds a body to come back to life, and asks Mouftah to help him by murdering someone who looks like him so that he could be reincarnated. Later in the novel, Hassan Mouftah himself dies in Alexandria, but is restored to life in the figure of his peasant cousin Sayed Kandil, whom he murders to come back to life.

In his disembodied state he roams madly around, thinking of nothing but coming back to life. His only means of achieving this goal is murder. He does not call it murder, though. Instead he justifies the decision to murder and usurp the body of a living human as an altruistic act to be undertaken for the sake of the people. (Nowaira 54)

It becomes obvious that Awad “relies quite heavily on Ancient Egyptian mythology and the novel abounds in references to the myth of Isis and Osiris, the Ancient Egyptian myth of death and resurrection” (Nowaira 62). Awad is another writer who interwove Ancient Egyptian heritage into the fabric of his work at a time when Pharaonism was a prominent intellectual trend, and as such is one of the writers who furthered that tradition.

Mahmoud Moukhtar (1891-1934)

The masterpiece of Egypt's foremost sculptor Mahmoud Moukhtar *Nahdet Masr [The Awakening of Egypt]* (1928), which happens to be one of Egypt's modern seminal works of sculpture, represents an Egyptian peasant girl looking towards the future while holding on to the past (her hand rests on a sphinx). The fact that Moukhtar chose the Ancient Egyptian period in particular and not any other period is proof enough that he tapped into the tradition of Pharaonism, which was gathering momentum at the time. He carved it in 1918-19, and it was first installed in 1928 at Bab Elhadid Square, to be later moved to Cairo University Square. For Moukhtar, carving a statue, which evoked Ancient Egyptian identity, was an act of resistance against British occupation. Working with his chisel on that huge piece of granite, he was fuelled by patriotic and nationalist feelings. Interestingly, he chose granite from Aswan to be the material out of which he carved his statue, hence becoming the first Egyptian to follow in the footsteps of his ancestors and use the very same material which they used.

Another important statue of his is *Katemat al-asrar [The Secret Keeper]* (1926) which represents an Egyptian woman holding the secrets of Egypt and watching over them. Again Moukhtar was to adorn her forehead with an amulet, like the ones Ancient

Egyptian kings used to wear. Interestingly, it is a scarab, which is another Ancient Egyptian symbol.

Thus, Moukhtar's artistic choices and the philosophy of his artworks rested on his love and passion for Ancient Egyptian heritage and this was evident in many of his works. His pioneering work was to influence other sculptors as well, who looked up to the master and learned from his works. Adam Henein is one such disciple.

Adam Henein (1929-)

Speaking of Mahmoud Moukhtar's influence on him, Henein says:

The real value of this man is that he opened the way to Ancient Egyptian art and Egypt's special arts for us. He was the one who called for Egyptianizing Modern Egyptian art and I carried on his vision, unlike some artists who instead of following Ancient Egyptian art itself, imitated Moukhtar, and the result was low-quality art". (Interview)

Henein first visited the Egyptian museum at the age of 18 on a school trip. This visit was to leave an ever-lasting impact on him. There, he stood astounded before one of Akhenton's statues. At home, he used clay to copy what he had seen at the museum. His father, a jeweler, put his figurines on display in his

shop window, and boasted and bragged about his son's talent; at the age of twenty, Henein decided to become a sculptor.

Not only do his artworks include Ancient Egyptian influences, but one of his major achievements is establishing Aswan International Sculpture Symposium (AISS) in 1996, which invites sculptors from all over the world to carve statues from granite blocks in an open air location in Aswan. The symposium is meant to revive the “art of sculpting and architecture which are Egypt's identity” (*Sculptures on Display*). The choice of Upper Egypt as a location clearly reveals his Ancient Egyptian sympathies for it was in this location that the Ancient Egyptians carved their statues and built their temples.

Another important milestone in his life is the restoration of the Sphinx with a group of architects (1988-1989), a task which he was commissioned to carry out by the ministry of culture. It is as if the dream of the little boy who stood dumbfounded in the Egyptian Museum before all of those monuments had fallen into place for he was to become the savior of those monuments.

Interestingly, Adam Henein's works were to feature in Shadi Abd Elsalam's documentary *āfāq [Horizons]*, which was an attempt at tracing the efforts of enlightened Egyptian artists and organizations, whose work could have changed the face of Egyptian culture, and as such they were new “horizons”, hence the title of the film. Cairo Symphony Orchestra, Elharania

School, Arabic Music Ensemble, Cairo Opera Ballet Company, and the works of artists such as Hassan Soliman, Youssef Kamel, and Hamed Nada were among the contributions which Shadi shed light on in his documentary.

Shadi Abd Elsalam (1930-1986)

Shadi Abd Elsalam, more than any other artist, was completely taken in by Ancient Egyptian history. In fact all of his cinematic works are directly connected to that theme, or heavily coloured by it. He felt he had some sort of calling or vocation, and acted accordingly. Speaking of his vocation, he said: “I think the people of my country are ignorant of our history and I feel that it is my mission to make them know some of it and let the others go on with the rest. I regard cinema not as a consumerist art, but as a historical document for the next generations” (Awad & Hamouda 85). As is clear from his words, he wanted to reeducate the people of his country by making them aware of their outstanding history in order to instill in them a sense of pride and dignity which they deserve. It hurt him deeply to see how modern Egyptians were completely ignorant of their past, and so he was to use cinema to counter that deficiency.

In his only feature-length film, *al-mūmyā'* [*The Night of Counting the Years* or *The Mummy*] (1969), Abd Elsalam tackles

the relationship between Egyptians and their past through the conflict of Wanis, the hero of the film. Abd Elsalam was greatly inspired by the discovery of a cache of mummies in El Deir El Bahari in 1881, and was to use this event as the cornerstone of his film.

The plot revolves around the conflict which Wanis experiences right after his father Selim, the chief of the Hurabat clan, passes away. It all starts when the elders of the family take him, along with his elder brother, to the depth of the mountain to distribute the property of the family. When Wanis and his brother come face to face with the sarcophagi of their Ancient Egyptian ancestors in the cache, and when they learn that their money comes from that vile trade, trouble begins. His brother boldly refuses that trade, which invokes the fury of his mother, who considers it a revolt against the orthodoxies of the family. Later, he is killed by his uncle in cold blood as he is considered a threat. Wanis is overcome by confusion; Abd Elsalam superbly manages to convey that feeling to the spectators through the hurried movement of Wanis up and down narrow passages. We also see him wandering in the temples and gazing confusedly at their vague inscriptions. Abd Elsalam also uses long shots in which the figure of Wanis is dwarfed by the grand temples. The size of the shots highlights the distance which separates Wanis, like all Egyptians, from his past and stresses

his alienation and detachment from his true authentic self. Matters have deteriorated so much so that Egyptians think of their ancestors as “only dust or wood from thousands of years ago” as their uncle puts it in the film.

Towards the end of the film, Wanis finally pulls himself together and refuses to sell the history of his ancestors by reporting the location of the cache to the authorities; it is then that he is finally restored to his true self.

The film premiered in 1969, two years after the 1967 defeat, commonly referred to as “setback” as an attempt to temper its traumatic impact. Egyptian spirits were in the doldrums, but Abd Elsalam drew on his past out of the belief that Egyptians were to be resurrected, only if they reclaimed their authentic identity.

His following documentaries revolved around Ancient Egyptian history, whether directly or indirectly: *Al-fallaḥ al-fasiḥ [The Eloquent Peasant]* (1970), *Giyūsh al-Shams [Armies of the Sun]* (1974), *Korsi Tout Ankh āmoun [Tutankhamun’s Chair]* (1982), *Al-ahram wa ma Qablahā [The Pyramids and before it]* (1984), *Ramsis al-thāni [Ramsis II]* (1986).

He diligently worked on his second feature film *Ikhnaton [Akhenaton, The Tragedy of the Great House]* with his assistants over a decade, carefully preparing the costumes, set décor and casting the actors, with the hope of ultimately making the film,

but due to lack of funding, his dream never materialized. A number of foreign countries offered to produce the film, but he turned down their proposals as he wanted the film to be a purely Egyptian production, a desire which obviously stemmed from his nationalistic fervor. As is evident from the title of the film, it also tackled a purely Ancient Egyptian story, that of Akhenaton.

Abd Elsalam accumulated many disciples over the years, among whom were Salah Marei, Ounsi Abou Seif and Magdy Abd Elraham, who lovingly helped him, and were to reverently uphold the mentor's vision long after his death.

Salwa Bakr (1949-)

Salwa Bakr is an Egyptian novelist who is interested in neglected histories, rather than the official or institutionalized narratives of history. Her writings offer new insights into reading and interpreting history. In a personal interview with her, she said:

I write historical novels to inquire about history. I don't use the narratives proposed by historians; I want to know what they said and what they left unsaid. I have to seek knowledge myself. I don't write historical novels, I write novels of knowledge.

In her novel *Shawq al-Mostaham*, a monk, who lives in the 9th century, tries to track down a medical papyrus because of a disease which was ravaging his town. The papyrus dates back to Ancient Egyptian times, and is located in Amhetop's temple in Memphis, the first Egyptian capital after Egypt was unified under a centralized government about 5200 years ago. On his journey, he comes face to face with Ancient Egyptian history. The journey allows the hero to rediscover his past and, in the process, his own self, through reconnecting with his roots. He also rediscovers the greatness of that civilization and its impact on the entire world. In fact, Bakr wonders why the achievements of Ancient Egypt have been muted and ignored:

Why have the scientific and philosophical legacies of Ancient Egypt been ignored? I agree with the American thinker George. G. M. James author of *Stolen Legacy: Greek Philosophy is Stolen Egyptian philosophy* that some of the Greek philosophers such as Aristotle and Pythagoras have stolen a great deal of knowledge and science from Egyptian temples and claimed it was theirs. (*Interview with the Novelist Salwa Bakr: I look for Unknown Aspects*)

It is worthwhile noting that on its release, the book *Stolen Legacy* evoked huge controversy and still remains quite controversial for it shook the very foundations of Western

civilization, namely the Graeco-Roman tradition which was believed to be the source and solid basis of Western civilization. Among the many theories which the book proposes is that Aristotle plagiarized most of his work from Egyptian temples, in fact the book starts with the shocking sentence: “The term Greek philosophy, to begin with is a misnomer, for there is no such philosophy in existence” (9). One of the main goals of the book is to reveal the fraudulence of Western civilization, whose supremacy and superiority are baseless, with the ultimate aim of exposing how the imperialist West found it to its best interest to depict Africans as inferior in order to hold them in subjugation and captivity and to provide a pretext for slavery. Egyptian history has been effaced and stolen by the West so that the latter could legitimize its power and authority over the entire globe.

In her novel, Bakr clearly explores the rift between Egyptians and their past, and what got between them and their history, in an attempt to make them reconnect with their roots and origins. The monk and his journey are metaphorical, for it is a journey which all Egyptians should go on to dig out their history which was written on papyri and housed in the temples. As such, Bakr tries to rewrite history or, to use her words, offer a new knowledge of history rather than present the traditional mainstream narrative. In digging out one’s history, one is able

to restore one's relationship with it and is able to embrace the future.

Sahar Elmougy (1963-)

Sahar Elmougy's novels abound in Ancient Egyptian metaphors and motifs, which she interweaves into the very fabric of her novel. For instance, her novel *Nūn* is interlaced with religious, philosophical and poetic excerpts, many of which take us back to Ancient Egyptian times and mythology. They are also in keeping with the states of mind of the characters. More importantly, Elmougy delves into Ancient Egyptian mythology with a feminist spirit to unearth elements which could support her arguments and help her better understand herself and life in general. Speaking of the Ancient Egyptian aspect of her novels, Elmougy says:

I used Ancient Egyptian mythology intentionally. I have done lots of research. I was moved totally by the awareness that in this area there is a more humanistic approach to understanding my life. In the Ancient Egyptian pantheon, there are gods and goddesses and this, to me, reveals an important element in Ancient Egyptian culture, the fact that women were not degraded as today. They held positions in the collective consciousness as goddesses,

givers and powerful women. The latter in particular was a motif since my first book *Sayedat al-Manam [The Lady of the Dream]*; there is the motif of Isis as a strong woman, not just as symbolic of motherhood and giving and all that stuff, which is the mainstream interpretation of the myth. In the same myth of Isis, I found the aspect of strength which was sort of pushed away and neglected in contemporary public awareness. Consequently, Hathor in *Nūn*, was a mover, mainly an archetype in the collective unconscious of everyone. In archetypal Jungian psychology, there are the archetypes and one of them is the goddess. For me Hathor was the goddess of love and dance and music, so she is joy and love and at the same time she has another side Sekhmet, the goddess of anger, war and blood. Hathor/Sekhmet are one being, which is very human. Ancient Egyptian myths provide me with a framework of understanding, which is very humane; we are not one thing, we're so many things, and those things are to a great extent made by female power, whether it is the power of love, or the power of revenge and destruction. Both of them are there and both of them are to be accepted, both of them are elevated to a sacred niche. Through

that I could understand and explain to myself and through my characters those phases of love, loss, revenge, and at the same time accept being in pain and realizing the goddess within, being in hell and realizing that there is another shore somewhere to be reached. I think that Sara, at the end of the novel *Nūn* reaches this state of acceptance of hurt, lost love, complexity of ourselves and of life (Interview).

As her words clearly show, Elmougy reconnected with her Ancient Egyptian roots to better understand her very essence and being, and to be able to deal with the upheavals which her characters go through. In a way, Ancient Egyptian mythology empowered her with the necessary tools to better delineate her characters.

It is worth while noting that Elmougy fights against patriarchal perceptions of Ancient Egyptian mythology. Speaking of that, she says,

I was trying to inject the mainstream mind with some female power, which according to me should, in a way, balance our vision of ourselves as humans, not just women. Even Hossam in *Nūn* heals when he gets in touch with his goddess, female side (Interview).

Conclusion

It becomes obvious that unlike the majority of Egyptians, those modern and contemporary Egyptian artists and writers, who drew on Ancient Egyptian history, were aware of the singularity and uniqueness of that purely Egyptian heritage, and were highly proud of it. Some of them were to use it to instill pride and confidence in the Egyptians in order to back them in their struggle against British occupation (as was the case with Mahfouz and Moukhtar), or the Egyptian-Israeli conflict (as was the case with Shadi Abd Elsalam). Additionally, Abd Elsalam felt it was his vocation to reeducate the Egyptians about their past, shake them out of their lethargy and make them reclaim their true identity through his films, an issue which Bakr clearly raises in her novel *Shawq al-Mostaham*, in the person of the monk who goes on a journey to find the remedy and salvation of his people in Ancient Egyptian temples. There were also those who were inspired by Ancient Egyptian metaphors and motifs, such as Louis Awad, or inspired by Ancient Egyptian sculpture, such as Adam Henein, and reproduced it creatively in their works. Henein also attempted to keep that tradition alive through establishing an international symposium for sculpture in the very territory where Ancient Egyptian civilisation flourished: Aswan. Finally, Elmougy was to appropriate that heritage from a feminist

perspective in order to use it as a means of female empowerment. The cultural and historical currents of each period were discussed in relation to the work in question in order to show the reasons that drove each writer or artist to appropriate Ancient Egyptian history in his/her works.

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