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LOOKING AT EGYPT FROM AFAR: BAHĀ' TĀHIR'S EXILE AND *DHAHABTU ILĀ SHALLĀL* In Search for Unity and Reform for the Arabs' Sake

Paola Viviani

Abstract

Many contemporary Egyptian writers have experienced exile. Among them Bahā' Tāhir (*1936) who, during this period (which lasted twenty long years), visited his homeland many times and could watch great changes take place therein. He had always thought of his native land as if of a sort of Paradise, at least as far as close human relationship was concerned. Both his sorrow and homesickness would suggest him such a feeling, especially if life there was compared with that in the West, where an atmosphere of hopelessness and despair seemed to prevail. In particular, he was shocked by the loss of the sense of family in Egypt, a disaster caused by a spiritual malady, which, in turn, has its roots in the wider feeling of not being members of one greater family (or community).

Many contemporary Egyptian writers have experienced exile. Among them Bahā' Tāhir (1936), who spent twenty years in exile. A good deal of Tāhir's works was written during the difficult period of his separation from his native land, namely in Switzerland, Italy and France, and it is also the case of five of the seven short stories contained in *Dhahabtu ilā shallāl* (I Went to a Waterfall, 1998)¹. This collection appeared three years after the author's return home.

In the sixth short story of *Dhahabtu ilā shallāl*, entitled *Wa-lākin* (But)², which was created in Geneva, the reader may find an answer to the thorny

1 See TĀHIR (1998) in the Bibliography.

2 In TĀHIR (1998):95–111. This short story was translated into Italian: TĀHIR (2004). See also al-INĀNī (2001). On the Egyptian writer and the 'Generation of the Sixties', in the Italian language, see BARRESI (1978), CAMERA D'AFFLITTO (2007):262ff., CAMERA D'AFFLITTO (2000):34–7, CASINI (2003), VIVIANI (2002). Other translations of the author's works into Italian: Baha TAHER, *Ieri ti ho sognato*, in: *Narratori arabi del Novecento*, a cura di Isabella Camera d'Afflitto, Milano: Bompiani etc., 1994 (1st ed.), 2 vols.:225–244 (translated by Giuseppe Margherita) – this anthology was republished under the the title of *Scrittori arabi del Novecento* (2002); ID., *Zia Safia e il monastero* (trad. di G. Margherita), Roma: Jouvene, 1994; ID., *Il pugno*, in: *Silensi. Storie dal mondo arabo*, a cura di Isabella Camera

dilemma that had been tormenting Bahā' Ṭāhir for a long time: what has happened to Egypt?

Ṭāhir visited Egypt many times during his long exile and he could watch, in the course of those twenty years, great and shocking changes take place in his homeland, which instilled into his soul a profound sadness as well as an innermost downheartedness. The writer maintained:

As I wish to explain what the middle class is, the first thing I notice is that the middle class, as I intend it, does not exist anymore. I mean, this class was made of government officials and of educated people, namely serious writers and dramatists, and serious politicians, too. This sort of middle class does not exist any longer. As I belong to it, I am searching for it, but I do not find it.³

Wa-lākin is the story of the meeting between an Egyptian man in his forties/fifties, who has been living abroad for a long time and who is back home on a visit, and an old Nubian taxi-driver. On their way from the airport to town, they have a conversation ranging over themes of primary importance in Egyptian contemporary society. In fact, from the dialogue, it seems possible for the reader to infer that, in Ṭāhir's opinion, these troubles might be described as the worst consequence of the life Egyptians – and all Arabs – are, as it were, 'obliged' to live. But what exactly does the writer worry about (and his characters with him)? In short, it is the loss of the true meaning of the word 'family', a disaster taking its origins in a spiritual malady, which, in turn, has its roots in the wider feeling of not being member of one greater family (or community). Strangely enough, however immersed one is in the so-called 'global village', the individual is uneasy the moment he tries to peruse all the data afforded him by reality. Although this is a problem shared by most societies, none may deny that, it is clearly a completely unknown feature in Ṭāhir's objective as well as subjective world. That is to say, before he fully realized what change Egypt had gone through, he had thought of his native land as if it were a sort of Paradise, at least as far as close human relations were concerned. Both his sorrow and his homesickness would suggest him such a feeling, especially if life there was compared with that in the Western part of the world, where an atmosphere of

d'Afflitto, Salerno: Avagliano, 1999:101–116 (translated by Leonardo Capezzzone); Bahaa TAHER, *Amore in esilio* (trad. di P. Viviani), Nuoro: Glisso, 2008; Bahā' ṬĀHIR, "Dai racconti di 'Armān il Grande", in: *Figli del Nilo. Undici scrittori egiziani si raccontano*, a cura di Francesca PREVEDELLO, Messina: Mesogea, 2006:21–29.

3 See HUSAYN (2004):151.

hopelessness and despair seemed to prevail. That is, then, why he is surprised and dejected.

[The taxi-driver said:] 'Bulaq is all grace, and its people are the best ones [in the world]. Why did you leave Bulaq, sir?'

[...] 'I've never had one single day of rest, since I left Bulaq', [the taxi-driver] continued without waiting for my reply. "We all lived in one building: we were five families in five different flats [...] and yet we all formed one single family. [...] Can you see what I mean?"

'Yes. But what happened after Bulaq? Weren't your neighbours good?'

'You didn't understand, then', he replied with renewed excitement. 'I'm telling you that we were one only family. Five flats, one family. Tell me, now: what has happened? [...] I brought up three children and sent them all to University. I wished they would stay near me in my hoary age so that someone of them can lay me in the grave, when time comes. But now all of them are in Saudi Arabia. They bought me three recorders and four TV sets. What a joy!'

[...]

'If time could come back!', I exclaimed, looking out of the window [...].

[...]

'What has gone, *effendi*, cannot come back. But ...'⁴

But if the Egyptian people were given the concrete chance to forget trivialities and concentrate on significant matters, if they had a concrete 'plan' (*mashrū*) to fulfil, and a constructive dialogue existed among them, the disastrous loss of faith in family, in all good values and in politics could be avoided. As a matter of fact, it would not perhaps be proper to say that the cause of all contemporary evils lies in the blind adoption of Western ways of living, and so on. It would probably be more correct, instead, to admit that the fundamental cause of such a difficult situation shared by all men and women on earth resides both in the lack of justice and in the want of mutual comprehension. In a long interview in book form, published in 2004, the Egyptian writer claims that he intends neither to 'denounce' nor 'condemn' the West and the East, for he has always been interested in making out what reality displays before him. Notwithstanding, he patiently hints at the basic difficulty and contradiction inherent in the relationship between the two worlds. Moreover, we can see him intent on explaining to what extent the concept of Western democracy is blurry and indefinite. As a matter of fact, he remarks, it has never been duly applied, not even in the most advanced and developed countries. The basic element it lacks,

4 See TĀHIR (1998):103–111.

Ṭāhir maintains, is justice, especially towards women, the poor and the weak, who are not respected as they ought to be.

“Now I dream of some kind of social justice”, Ṭāhir confesses, rather than what we call Socialism, whether scientific or not. [I mean] some kind of justice which Socialism tried to carry out. I also dream of some kind of unity of aims and principles, within the Arab community, [even though] not necessarily the political unity or a caliphate. Simply, a perfect integration in economics, for instance. [...] Our enemies are very strongly united among one another [...]. They say Arabs, but how can we face up with this enemy closely-knit against our *ummah*, we who are so scanty and divided [...]?⁵

Bahā’ Ṭāhir’s statements may remind his readers of another famous Arab man of letters who experienced exile, the Syro-Lebanese Farah Antūn (1874–1922)⁶, whom the outstanding writer and critic Mārūn ‘Abbūd (1885–1962) described as “the father of the new intellectual Renaissance of the Mashriq”⁷. Antūn undoubtedly revealed the secrets of modern Western culture and civilization to the Arabs, while at the same time warning his ‘brothers’ of the perils hidden behind imperialism and capitalism. Besides, he profoundly respected the principle of Western democracy, though, like Ṭāhir, he could devise in it a profound incoherence. Not only, however, did Antūn resort to such ideals, but also to Socialism, looking with admiration at those thinkers who had worked, and were still working, towards the creation of communities where co-operation was the keyword. In his opinion, *ta’āwun* among people is not charity at all: it is, instead, mutual love, sympathy and understanding, elements which should represent the prelude to, and the consequence of, the adoption of those religious values shared by all faiths. Finally, he endeavoured to create unity among the Arabs, whose unforgivable fault was that of not trying to overcome their division, a feature also observed by Ṭāhir, as it has been remarked above.

Moreover, one cannot avoid thinking of the Egyptian intellectual Salāmah Mūsā (1887–1958) who, in his autobiography, pinpointed how deep and relevant for his own formation as a man and a scholar, and for all his generation, the reading of Antūn’s works had been. Published originally in 1947, *Tarbiyat Salāmah Mūsā* (The Education of Salāmah Mūsā)⁸ was re-edited in 1958, only one year before the hero in Bahā’ Ṭāhir’s short story *Shitā’ al-khawf* (Winter of

5 See HUSAYN (2004):155.

6 See al-MUNĀŠIRAH (1994):1. See also AVINO (2002):44–51, 149–157; VIVIANI (2004a+b), VIVIANI (2006).

7 See ‘ABBŪD (1947):1737.

8 See MŪSĀ (1958).

Fear)⁹ throws it into the Nile, that is, before he is able to thoroughly study it, so as to fathom its most profound significance and perspectives.

The name of Bahā' Tāhir's character is Șalāh 'Umrān, which may be translated as 'Goodness (of) Civilization'. Needless to say, the term *salāh* also stands for 'virtue' as well as for 'religiosity'. Besides, considering its semantic root, it is obviously linked to a word expressing a concept of paramount relevance in modern and contemporary Arab society, namely *islāh*, reform. Farah Anṭūn and Salāmah Mūsā worked hard so as to arouse a taste for reform in their East. Exactly the same taste as the one felt by Bahā' Tāhir's young hero Șalāh, whom the author describes as a communist and a pious Muslim at the same time. The peculiar mingling, in his personality, of the genuinely sincere belief in two seemingly opposite types of faith allows him to look at the truth of things with very particular insight and sensitiveness, which are improbable in the other characters of the short story. He is not torn between communism and religion; nor does he reject the former in favour of the latter, or viceversa. He is sure of what he can see through his inner eyes, after assimilating the assertions found in his favourite books, first of all Marx's and Engel's *Correspondence*. As far as *Tarbiyat Salāmah Mūsā* is concerned, this work seems to be the final step in Șalāh 'Umrān's formation. He does still trust in the teachings contained therein, but he must get rid of them, because he is afraid of being accused of communism, one of the main and most frequent causes of imprisonment during Jamāl 'Abd al-Nāṣir's difficult régime. Thus, Șalāh consigns all the written words he has been studying with avidity, the very source of his spiritual nourishment which are as pure as drops of crystal-clear water, to the floods of the Nile. Nevertheless, he wants to understand the reason why it is forbidden to be a communist and replies to his brother, who scolds him for mixing Marx's and Arab modernist intellectuals' works with Koran exegesis and traditionalists' books, by crying out:

[These books] are no poison and no atheism. Oppression is atheism [...].¹⁰

Dhahabtu ilā shallāl is absorbed in a peculiar atmosphere fluctuating between reality and dream, while the heroes of the seven short stories seem to lack serenity and spirituality. In this way, they represent Egyptians who, as Tāhir sees them, are in search of a social and intimate tranquillity. It is not by means of a

9 See TĀHIR (1998):63–93. See also al-'INĀNī (2001).

10 See TĀHIR (1998):77.

never-ending fight between modernists (or leftists or communists) and traditionalists (or religious devotees) that harmony may be reached, but by resorting to justice. This ought to be the chief aim of politics, and not the rekindling of never placated divergences.

Ṭāhir's *manfā* was characterized by a deep suffering and by a recurrent dream: to go back home. He had always meant to make it come true, that is since the very day he left Cairo in 1975. Although on the personal level exile, or *ghurbah*, was marked by much pain¹¹, it turned out to be absolutely important for him as a writer. As a matter of fact, his creative work provided him with the necessary lucidity and input to go on observing, questioning and trying to find answers. Moreover, in Ṭāhir's opinion, he who devotes himself to literature needs to stand afar from everyday worries so as to be able to look clearly at what surrounds him.

[While abroad,] I did not live, even for a single moment, the way men of letters in exile are accustomed to. I never plunged into [...] life, there, in the West, and maybe that was a fault. Had I completely plunged into it, I would have certainly had many more experiences than I actually did have. I remained on the margin. [...] That was a loss, but I gained something of great importance: I did not go astray, I did not lose myself.¹²

The passage above is drawn from *Qarīb^{an} min Bahā' Ṭāhir*. In 1998, however, on the occasion of the publication of *Dhahabtu ilā shallāl*, he had already highlighted his point of view explaining:

All the time I was away [...] I was totally engrossed by Egypt. Doubtless the experience of living abroad gives you an opportunity to see your society in a fresh light and that is, of course, if you genuinely belong to that society. Whereas you know as well as I do that many Egyptians who travel to the West simply dissolve and forget their homeland. I feel it is a question of belonging, whether or not you belong somewhere. Even at the personal level, you know, in everyday life, I belonged wholly to Egypt. Living abroad was only a way of confirming that.¹³

Thus, by willingly being an 'outsider', he managed not to forget where he belonged to, who he really was. However, that did not imply a thorough and stubborn denial or refusal of the environment and of the people he had come in touch with. On the contrary, he tried to understand. According to Ṭāhir,

11 See HUSAYN (2004):141.

12 Ibid.

13 See RAKHA (1998):3.

understanding is one of the two main goals of literature (and culture) – the other being mutual approach. Exile, then, seems to have granted Tāhir the necessary distance so as to let him love Egypt – and all the Arab community – more and more. This deep affection is evident in *Dhahabtu ilā shallāl*, and so is his plea to his own people: do not let division and insane resentment wipe your world out. Rather, mutual comprehension may help you not to lose your way.

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