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DANIEL PIPES

EGYPTIAN FAMILY LIFE IN 1919

It is relatively simple to study the impact of modernity on Middle East aristocrats (for they came in contact with Europeans) and on intellectuals (who wrote books), but what about the mass of the population? Ethnographic studies provide important information, as do government surveys. But comprehending the ways in which individuals thought, felt, and acted is almost impossible to glean from such sources.

Fortunately, some of the finest Middle Eastern writers of the twentieth century have devoted considerable energy to explaining the challenge of modernity and describing the responses to it. For Egypt, the outstanding social novel is the *Thulathiya* (Trilogy) of Najib Mahfuz (b. 1912), a long and very comprehensive account of the manner in which modernization affects three generations of a rather typical, if prosperous, Cairene family, the ‘Abd al-Jawads. Examining the first volume of this novel, *Bayn al-Qasrayn*¹ (“Between the Two Palaces”, the name of a major street in the old part of Cairo) provides insights into the mentality and customs of urban Egyptians in 1917–19. Mahfuz finds three main points of friction between traditional Egyptian and modern cultures among non-elite urbanites (the *baladi* folk): family relations, sexual attitudes, and the pattern of political allegiances.

Family relations. True to a long-standing Muslim pattern, the father, Ahmad, completely dominates the lives of his wife, two daughters, and three sons. He not only has absolute jurisdiction over the family, but he routinely demands acts of servility of them: the children must kiss his hands when he is angry with them; his wife Amina sits by his feet each night when he returns home from his philandering to take off his shoes and socks (p. 13). The family is so fearful of Ahmad that none of them can lie to him, even if they plan to do so in advance (p. 22); at best they procrastinate briefly (p. 351) or cry (p. 487). Yasin, the eldest son, one time witnesses his father involved with a mistress, but he cannot exploit this knowledge; he is unable even to use it in self-defense when he himself is caught with a woman (pp. 323, 362, 444). While members of the family sense Ahmad’s power, regardless of his

distance (p. 189), Ahmad himself freely indulges in infidelities without concern for Amina’s awareness of sensibilities. He is not accountable, yet maintains full control over everyone else.

While Ahmad’s authority overwhelms his relations with his wife and children, it also compels them to ally themselves with each other. The whole family, including the mother and the ten-year-old child, fear Ahmad in like manner; a common sympathy arises and sustains them, a sympathy that is renewed daily when all the family but Ahmad drink coffee together in the afternoon (pp. 61, etc.), deriving deep relief from the common bonds forged living under Ahmad’s dominion. Despite the very different personalities and activities of the individual members, they share a wide range of hopes and fears.

According to Mahfuz, then, the traditional Muslim family structure still stands firmly in Cairo at the time of the First World War. Yet signs of impending change are clear: when Fahmy, the second son, refuses to comply with Ahmad’s order to stop his nationalistic activities (p. 487), he acts as a modern son. Fahmy is not merely disobedient; he is inspired by moral principles that Ahmad can neither share nor overrule through the force of personal authority. Such a conflict between generations was almost inconceivable in the more static society of earlier periods, when both father and son would have been similarly attuned to the traditional loyalties. Nationalism, then, stimulates the first major defiance of Ahmad’s authority; once the precedent has been set, repetitions will no doubt recur with increasing frequency and diminishing justification. As Ahmad’s power diminishes, family relations are on their way towards modernity.

Sexual attitudes. Relations between the sexes make up a major portion of *Bayn al-Qasrayn*. Three aspects of this problem receive particular emphasis: the inferiority of women, the “double standard,” and the seclusion of women. Amina embodies the characteristics of a traditional woman, while Yasin’s wife, Zaynab, represents the new breed.

In the view of traditional Muslims, women are inferior

to men. Ahmad sums up this view when he tells Amina, "You are nothing but a woman and all women are mentally deficient" (p. 179). Amina does not argue the point; she has always heard that she is inferior and she believes it, as the obedience she pays Ahmad shows very clearly. Once, in the first year of their marriage, Amina expressed displeasure at Ahmad's nightly outings and he replied, "I am a man. The matter is settled; I will not accept any comments on my behavior. You must obey me and take care not to compel me to discipline you." Amina then "learned from this and the other lessons that followed it to endure everything — even the presence of goblins — in order not arouse his anger. She was supposed to be obedient without restriction or condition; and she was" (p. 9). In another passage, Yasin tells Zaynab "about men's absolute right to do as they wish and women's duty to obey" (p. 382).

Women living in traditional Egypt accepted the right of men to lead separate night lives. While the wife stays at home, many husbands (among those who can afford it) go out every evening. They sit in cafes, attend musical performances, and often end up with whores or mistresses. The husband might not return until dawn, but no matter when he does come home, the wife awaits him and the two of them retire together (pp. 1–18). One time, when Amina wonders where her husband goes at night, she is informed that a man like Ahmad "with his continuous nightly amusements cannot live without women" (p. 10). At the same time, Amina's mother reminds her that Ahmad "married you after divorcing his first wife; it is in his power to reclaim her if he wishes, or to marry a second, third, or fourth wife... so thank God that you are still an only wife" (p. 10).

Husbands with the means to pay for servants and a private bath usually forbade their wives to leave the home; secluding women indoors assured their fidelity. For a woman this could mean not leaving the house from the moment she married; in twenty-five years Amina stepped outdoors only to visit her mother on rare occasions, and even then was chaperoned by her husband. As Yasin told Zaynab, "since time immemorial, the home is the domain of women, the world that of men" (p. 382). On another occasion, Yasin reflects on how women "are domestic animals and should be treated as such. They should not be allowed to intrude in our private lives, but should wait at home until we are finished with our amusement" (p. 388).

Female seclusion and the double standard combine to create the extremes of marital life realized in the 'Abd al-Jawad family. The husband spends every evening out,

enjoying the cheerful company of male peers and loose women, while the wife remains at home for decades without interruption. This arrangement clearly cannot survive modernization.

Zaynab, the daughter of an Egypto-Turkish friend of Ahmad's and briefly Yasin's wife, wants to change her position as a woman. She enjoyed unusual freedom in her youth, even going to the movies on occasion with her father (p. 360), and this deeply affected her subsequent development. One day, not long after Zaynab married Yasin, she offers to accompany him on his nightly outing. Yasin accepts and they spend the evening out together. On hearing this, the rest of the family is shocked — and no one more so than Amina or her elder daughter Khadija, who have so much invested in the old way. The two of them discuss Zaynab's audacity, Khadija remarking that Yasin "has a perfect right to love the night clubs that he enjoys so much or to remain out until dawn, if he wishes, but the idea of his wife accompanying him could not have been his own" because it is not traditionally acceptable (p. 355). Khadija accurately perceives that it was Zaynab, with her modern ideas, who instigated the episode.

But Zaynab's rebellion against seclusion is of minor importance compared with her refusal to recognize the male prerogative to a double standard. One day Zaynab discovers Yasin in the room of her own black servant girl; stunned by this blatant infidelity, she retreats to her father's house and demands a divorce. Zaynab's mother advises her against this, reminding her that "all men go out for nightly entertainment and they also drink — including her father, though his home was always filled with virtue. He always returned home, no matter what the entertainment, no matter how drunk" (p. 442). Amina has, of course, no sympathy for Zaynab, but is shocked by her presumption: "How can she claim for herself rights which belong to no woman?" (p. 448). As for the men, both Ahmad and Zaynab's father are more incensed by the object of Yasin's infidelity (an elderly servant) than by the act as such (p. 446). Had Yasin chosen a more desirable woman, they would not have seriously considered Zaynab's insistence on divorce.

Just as Fahmy introduces the first modern element into family relations, so Zaynab brings it to sexual relations. She is alone in her attempt to achieve a different sort of life — the other women oppose her even more than the men do. Like Fahmy, Zaynab gets her way, however; Yasin divorces her, and she is released from an intolerable marriage.

Politics. The question of changing political allegiances dominates the last third of *Bayn al-Qasrayn*. The year is 1919. A truce is announced (p. 365) and the Wafd Party emerges with Saʿd Zaghlul as leader (pp. 368f.). As the year unfolds, the ʿAbd al-Jawad family reacts to Zaghlul’s repeated attempts to go to Britain, his exile to Malta (p. 402), the military occupation of Cairo (p. 422), Zaghlul’s release from Malta (p. 553), and the ensuing celebrations (pp. 565f.). These political events strike strong and disparate responses among the members of the family. The extremes range from Amina who believes that the long-dead Queen Victoria should be politely asked to release Zaghlul (p. 373) to Fahmy who is eager to lay down his life for Egyptian independence (p. 488). In the intermediate positions, Yasin takes an interest in politics (pp. 374, 398) and Ahmad signs a nationalist petition (p. 377).

Such differences in reaction would have been almost unthinkable in an earlier period. Traditionally, an Egyptian Muslim devoted his full loyalty to the *umma* (the community of Muslims), not to Egypt. Despite Egypt’s homogeneous and unified character, regional loyalty was especially weak there, a result of rule by foreigners for two and a half millennia (since 525 B.C.). The rise of the Wafd Party marks the first time a national ideology competed with traditional Islamic allegiance to the *umma*, and even surpassed it. Nineteen-nineteen signaled a turning point; since that time, most Egyptians have had a more directed loyalty to Egypt than to the *umma*.

While the behavior of aristocrats and the books of intellectuals do not reflect the general manners and mentality of Egypt at the time of World War I, it was those two groups who stimulated the family, sexual, and politi-

cal changes outlined above by responding to European stimuli. They in turn influenced the *baladi* class in Egypt. The ʿAbd al-Jawads are at the top of the *baladi* hierarchy: Ahmad is a successful merchant, one son marries the daughter of a Turko-Egyptian line, and another goes to law school. Mahfuz implies that, just as aristocrats and intellectuals function as intermediaries of modern culture between Europeans and the *baladi* classes, so families such as the ʿAbd al-Jawad pick up modern influences and transmit them to the poorer strata. This process still continues; one finds even today the urban poor and peasants of Egypt only marginally affected by modernization.

Bayn al-Qasrayn portrays Egypt at the moment when the *baladi* classes are initially affected by modernization in vital ways. Family relations are first influenced when new circumstances lead to a decrease in the authority of the *pater familias*. Sexual attitudes and the position of women both undergo disruption when Egyptian women demand more equality. Nationalistic fervor overtakes allegiance to the *umma*. The old ways of life continue at the time of World War I, but several crucial elements of modernity have begun to wreck traditional structures.

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NOTES

1. *Bayn al-Qasrayn* (Between the Two Palaces) (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qahira, 1960). The page numbers in parentheses refer to this edition. *Bayn al-Qasrayn* has been translated into English by William M. Hutchins and Olive E. Kenny under the title *Palace Walk* (New York: Doubleday, 1990).