

Communist Nightmares
in
Louis Awad's Novel
The Phoenix or The History of Hassan Mouftah

by

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The Phoenix or The History of Hassan Mouftah

was written between October 1946 and September 1947 but was published twenty years later in 1966. In his introduction to the novel, Louis Awad tells the story of how he jealously guarded the manuscript of the novel for the period of twenty years during which time he allowed only about ten of his closest friends to read it. "For twenty years", he writes, "this novel has seldom been away from my thoughts or my heart". 1 He considers it to be a witness to a stage in his life which came to an end in 1947. This was an important stage in his life since it was during this period that he decided to renounce public and political activities altogether and to dedicate himself whole - heartedly to a life of scientific enquiry and research.

It is a matter to be wondered at that very little critical attention has been paid to Louis Awad's novel since its publication. The significance of this novel does not merely reside in its artistic merits, which are no doubt considerable, but also in the way it faithfully reproduces and chronicles an important era in Egyptian history. The nineteen forties saw an unprecedented fascination on the part of Egyptian intellectuals for socialist and communist ideologies. It was also an era of unrest and violence. Secret camps were set up in the desert and young Moslem brothers were trained to use arms there. On the other hand, elements from the armed forces were discovered handing out communist leaflets. Discontent with social conditions as well as protest against the alliance between the Palace and the British resulted in sentiments of bitterness which vented themselves, broadly speaking, in one of two ways. Young Egyptian intellectuals found themselves faced with the necessity of choosing between socialism and fundamental Islam, two poles which are diametrically opposed. 2 The solution of the pressing problems of the Egyptian society seemed to lie with either the one camp or the other. The

adherents of each party had the necessary ideological arguments with which to fight their opponents. For a young intellectual to decide to follow one rather than the other was by no means an easy choice. Many opted for fundamental Islam since religious sentiments have always been deeply rooted in the Egyptian character. There were others, however, who found the answer to lie in socialist and communist doctrines. Like their counterparts in Europe, their fascination with the doctrine was nothing but the response to the political and economic conditions of their society. "The political writings of the thirties", writes Raymond Williams, "was primarily a response to actual conditions in England and Europe, rather than a conscious development of Marxist studies".³ The same can very well be said to apply to the leftist movement in Egypt in the forties of this century.

The history of underground leftist movements in Egypt dates back to the twenties when, for a brief period, there was a growing belief among a limited number of Egyptian intellectuals that the socialist ideal might be the proper panacea for most of the problems facing Egypt at the time. But with the onslaught of the Second World War, there was a noticeable proliferation of communist organizations and cells which mostly hid behind the facade of cultural clubs. Louis Awad notes that in 1940, the year he came back home from a study scholarship in Britain, most of the members of these groups and clubs were local foreigners or Egyptians of foreign extraction. The Jewish element was noticeably high. These gatherings were made up of men as well as of women, a phenomenon which was virtually unknown in Egyptian cultural life at the time. The percentage of Egyptians getting involved in these activities was gradually on the increase. The working class element, however, was conspicuously missing and most of the Egyptians frequenting these clubs were a mixture of

young people of aristocratic descent and young intellectuals with a middle class background.

Louis Awad's novel **The Phoenix or The History of Hassan Mouftah** draws on his involvement with the Egyptian left of the forties. The main character in the novel, a man named Hassan Mouftah, is the secretary of the Central Committee of the Egyptian Communist Party. The questions of violence and the legitimacy of undertaking violent actions are posed very urgently by the novel. "I wrote **The Phoenix**", affirms Louis Awad, "as a symbolic message against the philosophy of violence". (p.46)

The novel opens on the death, or suicide, of Fouad Mankarios, a coptic friend of Hassan Mouftah's. On his death bed, the dying man tells his communist friend, Hassan Mouftah, about his firm belief in the reincarnation of the soul. The spirit of the dead person, he tells him, roams aimlessly for forty days looking for a new body to inhabit in order to live again. If it does not find the required body, it vanishes eternally. Fouad Mankarios asks Hassan to perform the task of killing a man who resembles him in looks so that he may be able to live again. At first, Hassan believes it to be no more than the hallucinations of a dying man. Later, he becomes obsessed with the idea of Fouad's soul haunting him and pushing him to commit murder. It is easy for Hassan Mouftah to refuse to undertake such a violent action since it does not touch him personally.

Shortly afterwards, Hassan is made to face the test. On a visit to Alexandria and in the company of two ladies, Hassan Mouftah meets his death drowning in the waters of the Mediterranean. His death is rendered in a superbly ironic manner:

And then an insignificant event happened: In the morning, Hassan Mouftah woke up and went on a sea trip. He went in the company of the beautiful Mrs Kladakis and her niece, the beautiful Miss Kaptnakis, the daughter of the beautiful Mrs Fotis from her first husband, the beautiful navy officer who got eaten up by the fish in the area between Dakkar and the Immortal Islands. The weather was beautiful according to plan. They went out at ten according to plan, bought the lovely sandwiches from the beautiful Tournazkis according to plan, reached the beautiful harbour according to plan and boarded the beautiful boat also according to plan. They did not, however, come back according to plan. The only person to come back was the lovely boatman who did not take part in laying out the plan.

The boat having hit rock got filled with water and sank. The boatman who knew his duty very well swam to the nearest rock and clung to it. As for Hassan Mouftah who could not swim, he beat the water with his arms several times and then went under. He floated again, beat the water with his arms several times and coughed badly a few times. The last thing he saw was Mona Rabie sitting among the rocks. Then he disappeared under water not to come back again. Mrs Kladakis swam one meter and her left leg stiffened in the January water. She cried out for help in Greek but the boatman sitting on

the rock could not understand Greek and he kept sitting on the rock. The rest of her body stiffened and she disappeared under water. As for Kaptnakis, she did not beat the water, nor coughed, nor cried out in Greek. Her dress got hooked in the boat and she went down with it for ever. Everything disappeared under the water except for a couple of sandwiches, Mrs Kladakis's scarf, Hassan Mouftah's newspaper and the beautiful boatman who did not understand any Greek. Everything was over in ten minutes, and with as little noise as possible. The sea was beautifully blue and the sky was also beautifully blue and the rocks were beautifully black. Everything remained just as beautiful despite what had happened. And had anything really happened? The boatman on the rocks sat contemplating but he hardly seemed to be contemplating the destruction of life. he was twice about to jump into the water to save the drowning but he persuaded his good self against its inclination because he remembered how he was about to drown a month earlier while trying to save a drowning lady. . . .
(pp.181 - 82)

This is the manner in which Hassan Mouftah meets his death, an event which cuts short his ambitions and his struggle. It is significant that his death takes place in the salty waters of the Mediterranean and not in the waters of the Nile. A rebirth is a distant, if not an impossible, event.

But is he going to give up life that easily? Is his soul

going to roam as aimlessly and stupidly as the souls of Kladakis and Kaptanakis had done and eventually surrender itself to eternal darkness? This is certainly not the way for Hassan Mouftah. 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 this decision to murder and usurp the body of a living human as an altruistic act to be undertaken for the sake of the people:

No. The soul of Hassan Mouftah will not flutter, will not wander, will not spend itself and will not depart. The soul of Hassan Mouftah will do nothing of the kind. It thought incessantly of crime and did not know the reason. Now it understands. The Central Committee is waiting for it. If Hassan Mouftah's soul disappeared from the Central Committee, the Committee would simply disintegrate. Its members will seem to fight over ideologies while in fact they will be fighting over power and end up ruining the creed as well as the movement. If Leaders competed and fought against each other, they would destroy the creed and would multiply programmes. The members of the Central Committee would no doubt compete and fight with each other. Without him, they would fight over power since they all stand on an equal footing. They needed a successful and flexible leader, a strong personality whom they could rally around and who would command their allegiance. This personality would lead the way, shoulder

the responsibilities and take the consequences. They needed Hassan Mouftah and Hassan Mouftah would come back to them. Yes, he would come back to them even though he might have to trample on the graves of millions. Crime was inevitable. The destiny of the people was in danger and the people must be saved. This was the first serious sacrifice the people would ask of him and how could he turn them down? This was the first difficult test he had to pass in order to prove his worth. He was no killer but he would kill. Was he a killer? Certainly not. If he were, he would have killed Aly Abdullah as a token of friendship for Fouad Mankarios. But he did not kill Aly Abdullah and neither would he kill Rabie Bey for the sake of Mona Rabie. He was not a killer but a saviour. . .

All this the soul of Hassan Mouftah would do for the people because the end was near and the day of salvation was close by. His death was a blunder of fate and he would redress the wrong. This was the will of the people and the will of the people was the will of God. He would murder on divine orders, on commands from the high heavens above. (pp.192-93)

Hassan Mouftah's willingness to commit murder places him in a comparable position to that occupied by the numerous dictators and corrupt politicians the history of mankind is full of. How many crimes in history have been committed in the name of the people and in the name of divine will? The

seeds of corruption arising from an unbalanced emphasis on the self are presented as the reason behind the corruptions underlying totalitarian systems.

Hassan Mouftah's arguments for the necessity of killing his peasant cousin who resembles him in looks finally win the day. Sayed Kandil, he argues, is no more than a number whose very presence is of no significance whatsoever:

Sayed Kandil's is an old repeated existence. He is just one copy of the eternal peasant in the world of Ideals. He may not be Sayed Kandil at all but Gaby Hurtib who wandered near this stream four thousand years ago. If so, he had lived longer than he should. He will have to die, then, to make way for a new generation. Sayed Kandil will always stay at the cross-roads of time and space. But the shadow must turn into matter and the matter must learn to move in time and space. Sayed Kandil is a hollow, two-dimensional spectre. He must acquire a third dimension. Otherwise, his place will be within one of the frames decorating the walls of museums and not between the earth and the sky. Sayed Kandil is the ancient symbol of twenty million Sayed Kandils. This symbol has to go to make way for a new symbol. (pp. 204 - 205)

With this piece of rationalization, Hassan Mouftah has taken his first step towards committing a crime. By depriving Sayed Kandil of his individuality and uniqueness, he has made it easy for himself to undertake the murder of that

helpless and innocent man . Taking advantage of kandil's closeness to a canal, he pushes him into the water and kills him. The man that emerges from the water has the body of Sayed Kandil and the mind of Hassan Mouftah.

On the train that carries the new Hassan Mouftah from the countryside to Cairo, the violence lying at the core of totalitarian dogma is exposed through the reveries of the re-born communist. The vision is no doubt horrifying:

The countryside looks beautiful from the window of the train, at a distance. At close quarters, however, it is depressingly ugly and polluted. {Hassan Mouftah} will say to the Committee: "The People's Commissariat will destroy all the villages, all four thousand of them, together with neighbouring hamlets and shack houses. The People's Commissariat will mobilize ten per cent of the people of every village to work on the re-building of Egypt. It will supply them with all the necessary maps, builders and engineers. It will give each family a house of stone or red brick surrounded by a small garden. . . The People's Commissariat will make people work day and night. Good productive work will have to be done even through compulsion, whippings or hangings. In the past, compulsion had built the graves of kings, so let it build houses for the people now . . . Laws are not enough . . . Legislations are not enough. Guillotines are the answer. The new generation will have to be kept at a distance. That's right. Guillotines for the old generation and

sanatoriums for the young. Sanatoriums all along the Red Sea and all along the Mediterranean. The air of the valley has become infested and its land has turned into an open grave. The people of the valley are corpses. Guillotines should be placed everywhere, in every square and on the dung heaps of every village. The first five-year plan will consist of guillotines and sanatoriums. . . The People's Commissariat will not put statues in the squares. It will put guillotines first. Guillotines first, statues second and whippers last. Who has ever heard of whippers? This is a new invention for lazy employees and people who sit languidly at cafes in the day - time. The guillotines are for the conscious enemies of the people and the whippers for the unconscious enemies.

(pp. 227-28)

What is terrifying about Hassan Mouftah's futuristic vision is the degree of generality it attempts. It is the nightmare Machiavellian world where the end justifies the means and where the niceties of moral judgement are overlooked for a purportedly higher good. The picture of Egypt scattered all over with guillotines and sanatoriums is dimly terrifying, to say the least. Hassan Mouftah also gives his own interpretation of the socio-economic factors shaping the history of Egypt, an interpretation which is largely based on the view of history from the perspective of dialectical materialism:

Capitalists and land-owners have deprived the people of basic sustenance, clothes,

education and the fruits of civilization. The people are nonetheless still patient. They understand all this but stay patient. They bubble over like a bottle of soda water which dies down fast. They should have erupted instead like a volcano. Are these the offspring of giants? The giants were giants when they felled down forests, turned swamps into solid earth and changed the course of the River Nile. They were giants when they tamed nature. They got their strength from the struggle with nature. Once they succeeded in taming nature, they threw the seeds of love and they bore fruit. They sowed love but have been reaping evil for four thousand years. They lost their vitality and meekness became their mark. The giants have died out little by little and their offspring are these mild and meek people. The struggle with nature will give back these people their lost strength. When they manage to build the Industry in the same way they developed agriculture, the struggle with nature will start all over again. (p. 229)

Thousands of years of history, according to Hassan Mouftah, have emasculated the Egyptian people and led them to a state of docile submission. A little savagery is needed to redress the balance and return the rights of the people. The call for violence is thus given a rational backing.

When Hassan Mouftah arrives in Cairo, he has the healthy and muscular body of the dead peasant but the mind

of an intellectual, a mind that can appreciate not only the best of human thought but also the refinement of culture. In his last meeting with the Devil, Hassan mouftah argues that he has not killed but has given life. The encounter between him and Mephistopholes represents the climax of the novel. The devil comes to him as an uninvited guest, a limping dwarf wearing a curious necktie on which two intersecting bones are woven:

"And who is the gentleman?"

"A messenger from Heaven. I am Mephistopholes, King of Hades, Gapo, the darkness and the extinguished five towers," the visitor said with infinite gentleness.

"Just what I thought"

"Do you forgive me for disturbing you ?"

Hassan Mouftah did not answer him but said instead, "Why do you come, then?"

Hassan Moutah had a strange thought which left him in a state of extreme anger. He thought that he was looking at a scene from the Bible, Christ on top of Mount Zion arguing with the Devil. He remembered what he had read about the conversation between Faustus and Mephistopholes.

"You have come to bargain with me", he said. Mephistopholes looked up into Hassan Mouftah's face and realized what was going on inside him. He answered laughing, "No, Hassao Mouftah".

Hassan Mouftah did not hear a word said but continued in his reveries, "Then get lost. Tell your master that neither the treasures of the earth and skies nor the devils of Heaven and Hell are capable of shaking Hassan Mouftah's heart. Tell him that the Revolution is no doubt coming. And will the people forgive Hassan Mouftah if he betrayed the great cause? At dawn the day after tomorrow, the rats will emerge from their holes and the caged lions will roar and break down the bars. The owls will sing and human beings will befriend snakes. The heavy elephants will fly in freedom and the slaves will dance round the graves of their masters and every debased liar will be hanged. After tomorrow all the fingers will be the same size and the miracle will happen. . . Hassan Mouftah has said, "At dawn the day after tomorrow the miracle will happen" and what he has said is true. He has said "At dawn after tomorrow heavenly justice will recede before earthly justice and the gods will know that they have spoilt the peaceful valley" (pp. 345 - 46)

Hassan Mouftah's encounter with the devil seems to owe a good deal to Dostoevsky. Like Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* who is "prostrate with guilt and the yearning for punishment"⁴, Hassan Mouftah's sense of guilt is made concrete through the externalized figure of the devil. The figure that sits on judgement on him is no other than a part of himself which may be called conscience. to borrow a

religious word, or super-ego, to use a favourite Freudian term.

In **The Phoenix** Louis Awad draws on three different sets of symbols. In the first place, he 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. In the second place, he draws extensively on the Christian idea of resurrection and at one point Hassan Mouftah compares himself to Christ when, before the end, he expresses his regret at not being able to have his last supper with his comrades. In the third place he draws on the Western intellectual heritage represented by Faustus who bargains away his soul to the Devil. In the novel, the three sets of symbols fuse together to make plain Louis Awad's abhorrence of violence and to show the extent to which Hassan's existence falls short of what all these myths represent. Firstly, the cycle of Hassan Mouftah's life, death and re-birth is a distortion of the Ancient Egyptian myth of Osiris which is basically a myth of vegetation, growth and life. He develops in the course of the novel into a figure of darkness and death. His new life is not a life of renewal and growth. It is tainted by greed and egoism. Secondly, although he compares himself to Christ, it is made quite clear that all the Christian virtues of humility are absent in him. The act of murdering his peasant cousin is a flagrant transgression against one of the ten Commandments. Thirdly, when compared to Faustus, he appears all the more selfish. Faustus' thirst for Knowledge, though going beyond the bounds of normal human aspirations, is basically rooted in a healthy human demand. Hassan Mouftah's actions, on the other hand, are shown to be utterly selfish and therefore completely unworthy of respect.

Hassan Mouftah's final suicide is seen as the only way

open before him to atone for his crime. It is represented as an admission on his part that crime has to be punished even if this crime has been committed for the best and most elevated of reasons. Violence is, and will always be, a transgression against the laws of nature and can never be morally justified. The whole-sale destruction envisaged by Hassan Mouftah and, implicitly, by the Communists of the forties contains Louis Awad's most vehement critique of communist practice as he himself witnessed it during the period of his involvement with the Left. The novel is, perhaps, the most outspoken document on the Egyptian Left at a very difficult era in Egyptian history.

NOTES

- 1 - Louis Awad, "Introduction" to **The Phoenix or The History Of Hassan Mouftah**, Al Taliaa Publishing House (Beirut, 1966), p.7. This quotation as well as subsequent quotations are translated from the Arabic by the writer. All page references will be given after quotations in the text.

- 2 - Latifa El Zayyat, a contemporary of Louis Awad's, writes about this era : "At university there were two options open before anyone wishing to oppose the government in the hope of a better alternative. There were the Moslem Brothers and there were the communists, the Wafd having already begun to relinquish its revolutionary ideals. It was natural for me to choose the communists, being a woman of a special bent of mind who was fascinated by the idea of equality among all men, males and females, an equality which extends beyond colour, race or creed. The beautiful future of humanity envisaged by the Marxists and picturing man as engaging with all his energy in the rebuilding of his world, made communism appear as a superb utopia. "See"Latifa El Zayyat in the Mirror of Latifa El Zayyat", *Ibdaa*, 1, Janaary 1993, p.55.

The quoted text has been translated from the Arabic by the writer.

- 3 - Raymond Williams, **Culture and Society 1780-1950** (Harmondsworth, 1961), p.262.

- 4 - Philip Rav, "Dostoevsky in **Crime and Punishment**" in **Dostoevsky, Twentieth Century Views**, ed Rene Wellek (N.J., 1962). p.35