

# GREAT ARAB MODERNIST THINKERS OF THE 20TH CENTURY. THE CASE OF ṬAHĀ ḤUSAYN

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The struggle between the then-called modernists (*muğaddidūn*) and traditionalists (*qudamā'* or *salafīyyūn*) could be traced back to late 19th and early 20th century. It was the time, when the revivalist thinkers (*nabḍawīyyūn*) reached the end of their lives, leaving their messages to be continued by the next generation. So, 'Abdarrahmān al-Kawākibī parted in 1903 after publishing in Cairo his *Umm al-Qurā*, while Muḥammad 'Abdu lectured at al-Azhar until his death in 1905. Earlier, Gamāl ad-Dīn al-Afġānī ends his life in his "golden cage" in Istanbul as the guest-captive of the despotic Ottoman Sultan.

Perhaps the publication of the work of Qāsim Amin *Tahrīr al-mar'a* (Emancipation of the woman) in 1899, followed later by *al-Mar'a al-ġadīda* (The new woman), could be regarded as the dawn of new 20th century enlightened orientation. Then we have a series of ideas and demands for social and cultural reforms, propagated by successive thinkers (to mention Muḥammad Rašīd Ridā, Luṭfī as-Sayyid, 'Alī 'Abdar-rāziq). It was demanded to cancel religious courts (*šarī'a*), which meant the introduction of civil laws based upon modern legislative foundations; or the innovation of modern secular (both state and private) education: schools and universities were hitherto subject to the nearly sole domination of religious education supervised by the religious institution; or above all the application of parliamentary and party political life to replace the absolute power of kings and rulers.

Among the other major themes of thought to be singled out were: the compatibility of civilization with Islam, education as the path towards modernism, the relationship between modern statehood and the caliphate, the idea of an Egyptian *umma* instead or alongside the Arab or Islamic *umma*, Arab and Islamic identity. A quite comprehensive reflection of all that is found in the life and ideas of Ṭahā Ḥusayn.

Ṭahā Ḥusayn was born in 1889 in a small locality Kīlo, so called because of being one kilometre far from Maġāġa, an administrative centre in the department of al-Minyā in central Ṣa'īd. His father Ḥusayn 'Alī was an official at the local sugar plant. As the seventh among thirteen children, Ṭahā learned above all how to fight and defend himself. This consideration explains to some of his biographers the polemic nature of the writing of this Egyptian thinker — among others in the press (Šaraf 1977: 17–18). At the age of six he was unfortunate to lose his sight as a consequence of trachoma — badly treated by the barber (Ḥusayn, *al-Ayyām* I, 20; 1–3; 145–6). After this accident he joined the circle of the local *faqīh*, who headed a Quranic school, leading the boy to know the Quran at the age of nine and receive the title of *šayḥ*.

At this stage of life, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn was brought up in a traditional society, characterised — according to his own autobiography — by low culture and feeble level of education, as well as susceptibility to superstition (*ibid.* 93; 96). At the next stage, he left his home to study at the famous al-Azhar. This religious educational centre was not keen on listening to calls for reform or innovation. Here, during the years 1903–1905 he is found among the beginners (Šaraf 1977: 23).

At al-Azhar, in spite of the prevailing rigidity and unjustified excessive duties (Samīḥ 1977: 29–30), a live intellectual life was focused around Imām Muḥammad ʿAbdu. Ṭāhā Ḥusayn points out the impact of the movement inspired by the Imām upon the very conservative university and beyond it (Sallāma 1927). He mentions about his own generation of Azharites that they were strong adherents of the freedom of speech, antagonists of obsolete opinions, and supporters of the right to interpret the sources of faith (*iğtibād*). He reminds himself too about attending the lectures of ʿAbdu in the field of Quran interpretation (*tafsīr*), rhetoric (*balāġa*) and logic (*mantiq*). Together with friends, they believed to be distinguished from other students. They regarded themselves as messengers of reform, modernity and revivalism. They decided to wage a struggle against backwardness and polygyny, also to endeavour for limiting the right to divorce. Their plans envisaged the innovation of the philosophy of Ibn Sīnā and Ibn Rušd, besides the complete neglect of obsolete scriptures that had hitherto devastated the mentality of al-Azhar and the minds of Azharites (Ḥusayn, *Riḥla* 134–135).

With the death of Muḥammad ʿAbdu, al-Azhar introduced substantial restrictions against supporters of innovation. For this reason, Ṭāhā and two of his colleagues (Ahmad Ḥasan az-Zayyāt and šayḥ Maḥmūd az-Zanātī) stopped attending lectures with the exception of selected ones — for which they were relegated from the list of students; and students rights were restored to them only due to the intervention of Luṭfī as-Sayyid. However, even then he shifted from one group to another, showing simultaneously dislike for the atmosphere of combating the innovation movement and ideas on the part of traditionalists. Hence, we note an early readiness on his side to reject the traditionalist mode of thinking, while years spent at al-Azhar he regarded as an exceptionally dark period in his life<sup>1</sup>.

Shortly, in 1908 a private Egyptian University, also called the Old University (*al-Ġāmiʿa al-Miṣriyya al-Qadīma*) was established. Without interrupting studies at al-Azhar, where he continued his education until 1912, he started to attend lectures at the Egyptian University. In contrast to al-Azhar, here lectures explained issues and it was not necessary to explain the very lectures (Ḥusayn, *Mudakkirāt* 11). The general intellectual transformation he underwent directed his interests towards the

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<sup>1</sup> He used to polemise with Azharite professors, and they did not spare him invectives (Ḥusayn, *Mudakkirāt*; Samīḥ 1977: 35–36).

knowledge of sources, as against the acceptance of the opinions of self-declared authorities. He focused his main attention upon literature, and not theology as his father wished. The gap in the substance and method of teaching between al-Azhar and the Old University, as well as his increasing adherence to the latter, lead Ṭāhā Ḥusayn to the path of revolt against the religious university and collision with its *ṣaybs*. He expresses this clearly in press publications on the need to reform this institution and its curriculum (Samīḥ 1977: 29).

At *al-Ġāmiʿa al-Miṣriyya* he was among listeners to lectures of Aḥmad Zakī on Islamic civilization and of Aḥmad Kamāl on ancient Egyptian civilization. Thinking about attaining a scientific grant to France, he learns the French language. At the same time he prepares a doctoral thesis "*Dikrā Abū l-ʿAlā*" (In memory of Abū l-ʿAlā), devoted to the also blind Arab poet-philosopher of the 10th-11th century. The public discussion on the dissertation took place in May 1914, and he was granted the title of doctor with distinction. It was the first Ph.D. title granted by the so-called Old University.

Ṭāhā was granted a stipend to France, and instead of Paris he travelled in 1914 to Montpellier (after the outbreak of World War I, the French capital came within the war zone). After a brake in studies in connection with the bankruptcy of the Egyptian University, he again returns to France (1915), this time to the Paris Sorbonne, where he attends lectures of the history of ancient Greece, Rome and Byzantium, as well as modern history, philosophy, sociology and French literature. In addition to these, he attended lectures on the Quran and the field of psychology, delivered at *Collège de France*. Moreover, he was often present at the Library of St. Genovef. He learned Latin, too. Everywhere he was educated under the guidance of prominent professors, and the doctoral thesis on the social philosophy of Ibn Ḥaldūn was prepared at the seminar of Emile Durkheim.

The sources that shaped Ṭāhā Ḥusayn intellectually were:

- a) Egyptian sources such as literature and folk writing, and also the heritage of ancient Egypt; for him new Egypt shall rise upon the eternal pillars of old Egypt, including antic culture (Ḥusayn *Mustaqbal* IX, 16);
- b) Arab sources, which are composed, according to him, of language, literature, religion and civilization (*ḥadāra*);
- c) foreign sources, always present and influential in the history and life of Egypt; however, in the individual case of the discussed thinker, the primary factors are French culture, next Latin civilization.

It is difficult, even briefly, to present the works of Ṭāhā Ḥusayn. None the less, it is necessary to point to some of them, posing upon the most significant one for our deliberations, namely: "*Mustaqbal at-taqāfa fi Miṣr*" (The future of culture in Egypt). We find among them the Arabic translation from Greek of Aristotle's "The Athenian System", translations of Greek dramas (including "Electra" and "Antigone" of Sophocles), an autobiography *al-Ayyām*, works from the field of

literary criticism, fiction and short stories, commentary to the life of the Prophet Muḥammad, history of the Rightly Guided Caliphs. In 1926 his controversial book *Fī š-šīr al-ḡābilī* (On the literature of the ḡābiliyya period) appeared. Soon, it was withdrawn from bookshops, and the author had to face a judicial trial against the background of hostile intimidation carried out for religious, political and scientific or rational considerations (Šiblī 1972: 70).

The professional career of Ṭāhā Ḥusayn was as spectacular as his writings. After his return from France in October 1919 he was appointed lecturer of ancient history of Greece and Rome at the Egyptian University, and when in 1925 it attained the status of a government institution (from that time it became called the New University: *al-Ġāmi'a al-Ġadīda*) he was nominated lecturer of Arabic literature at the Department of Humanities (*kulliyat al-ādāb*). Next, he occupied the post of Dean of that Department, but had to resign when the political and religious elites reminded themselves about the mentioned work "*Fī š-šīr al-ḡābilī*", to return to that function in 1930. However, in 1932 another scandal broke out, because — in the name of preserving the prestige of academic titles — Ṭāhā Ḥusayn rejected the requests to grant four ministers of the time the title of doctor honoris causa (°Alī Māhir, Ibrāhīm Yaḥyā, °Abdal°azīz Fahmī, Tawfīq Rif°at). It should be noted that the four received doctoral honorary degrees from the University's College of Law, and Ṭāhā Ḥusayn was altogether dismissed from the posts of Dean and lecturer (1932) (Samīḥ 1977a: 56–57).

During the following years, he worked as editor-in-chief of the newspaper *al-Wadī*, again as lecturer at the Department/College of Humanities (since 1934), Dean of that College (1936–1939), simultaneously inspector of culture at the Ministry of Education (1939–1942), adviser to the Minister of Education and at the same time Rector of the Alexandria University (1942–1944). It is worthwhile to add, that he played an important role in the establishment of this University. This was in line with his concept of creating an academic-didactic centre, free from government and party pressures, capable to draw its own criteria and goals and to attract the best students, open to Mediterranean culture, and able to become a centre of humanistic and classical studies (Hourani 1977: 404).

He was however dismissed from rectorship in 1944, because the King disfavoured him and Alexandria was then the summer capital of Egypt. After this date he worked at non-governmental posts until 1950, when he received the post of Minister of Education in the *Wafd* Party government. He occupied the post until January 26, 1952 (the known Cairo fire). In the capacity of Minister, he soon decided to introduce free intermediate and technical education (primary education became free in 1944). He attempted to cover higher education by his decision, but King Farūq rejected the idea. Besides, Minister Ḥusayn brought about a change in the status of a huge number of semi-primary schools (*awwalīyya*) into primary, and opened thousands of new classes. His motto was: "Education is as necessary for people as water and air", for which he

was mockingly called “minister of water and air” (*wazīr al-mā’ wa-l-hawā’*) (Samīh 1977: 97–110).

These activities for the cause of educational reform, also his later activity after the Egyptian July Revolution of 1952 (membership of the Supreme Council for Arts, Literatures and Social Sciences, chairmanship of the Academy of Arabic Language in Cairo, membership of the Egyptian Academy, correspondent membership of numerous foreign academies of sciences), in addition to his incessant intellectual creativity — were an embodiment of his convictions and thoughts declared since his return from studies in France. The arising deep thoughts took the shape of a detailed programme in his work: “*Mustaqbal at-taqāfa fi Miṣr*”.

The background for the book were such historical events as the signing in 1936 of the British–Egyptian Treaty that granted Egypt formal independence, the liquidation of the capitulation system in 1937 by the Montreux international conference that hitherto crippled Egypt’s economic life, the joining by Egypt of the League of Nations in the same year, in addition to the expectations and hopes that at last Egypt will follow the example of democratic countries (Ḥusayn, *Mustaqbal* 7; Cleveland 1994: 185–186; Hourani 1977: 390).

The work *Mustaqbal*, which was first published in 1938, was accompanied by intense widely-published discussions, not less than those that accompanied the publication of “*Fi ṣ-ṣīr al-ḡābilī*” in 1926. *Mustaqbal* however occupies an exceptional place among the attainments of the author. It has consolidated his position as an outstanding writer, also in the capacity of a reformist and modernist thinker — author of an original socio-political thought. He remained a steadfast continuator of the work of ‘Alī ‘Abdarrāziq<sup>2</sup>.

The work published in 1938 is an important milestone in Ṭāhā Ḥusayn’s intellectual development. In the previous period, he was inspired by literature as well as by ancient thought and culture. After the publication of this book, his writings started to become dominated by interest in the political, social and educational life of his times and society (Sa‘īd n.d.: 210). Here we find the basic elements of ideas, which he developed later in academic lectures published, among others, in such collections as *Ḥadīṭ al-arbi‘ā’* (Wednesday talks), *Qādat al-fikr* (Pioneers of thought), *Min ḥadīṭ aṣ-ṣīr* (Talks on poetry).

The ideas covered by the analysed book could be very briefly presented as follows:

The Egyptian path towards the future and progress will definitely be the same as the one followed at present by Europeans. Proceeding in that direction we will become their partners, and consequently participants in the creation of human

<sup>2</sup> During the wide campaign of fierce attacks against ‘Alī ‘Abdarrāziq, the author of *al-Islām wa-usūl al-ḥukm*, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn publicly and steadfastly defended him.

civilization. Since the dawn of history, the Egyptian mind had been functioning within the sphere of Mediterranean culture; in ancient times the Egyptian mind did not possess an oriental nature.

We have undertaken an obligation towards Europe (meaning the treaty with Britain and the Egyptian constitution) to apply the same doctrine of government, a similar administrative system, analogical legislation, and so on. Now, if we reject these obligations and return to our archaic system or pattern, we can entangle ourselves into serious troubles. The next important case is the old-fashioned thought of al-Azhar and Azharites. This consideration, against the background of the strong position of the institution in the Egyptian educational system, creates a barrier that encounters the introduction of patriotic and citizenship ideas in the modern European sense (*Mustaqbal* 438-440).

For Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, neither faith nor language are an adequate basis for the formation or functioning of the state. It should be remembered that in the past Muslims arranged their relations with the outer world, and formulated their policies, on the basis of the category of practical benefits (*ibid.* 21) — and not religious, linguistic or ethnic arguments. In other words, a long time ago believers in Islam discovered one of the foundations of our contemporary life, i.e.: politics is one thing, while faith is something else.

Ṭāhā Ḥusayn refutes the idea which puts the allegedly materialist West in opposition to the spiritual East (*ibid.* ch. 12). According to him, the opinion regarding the material civilization as the sole product of matter is unjustified. Surely, it is the product of imagination (*ḥayāl*) and spirit (*rūḥ*), the outcome of live spirit attached to the mind, and the result of thought that generates activity. Thus, he regarded the mentioned opposition of East and West as ridiculous.

In general terms, the work is an "attempt to outline Egyptian identity" (al-Ġariyā 1995-96: 208). The strong sympathy for the Egyptian society was coupled with an excellent awareness of its weaknesses or shortcomings, as well as the ways of their correction. A central moment of his thought is culture and its value. "Had it not been for Egypt's carelessness, willingly or not, towards the essence of culture and science, it would not have lost its freedom, and would not have needed such a glorious relentless fight for the restoration of freedom and independence" (*Mustaqbal* 12-13).

The book works out then a comprehensive programme of reforming the entire sphere of culture, a programme bringing in effect the regeneration of culture and the nation. Emphasis is laid too upon the historical role of Egypt in defence of humanity's intellectual heritage; and that happened twice: once, when Egypt acquired, and took care of for over ten centuries, Greek philosophy and civilization; a second time, when she accepted and defended the civilization of Islam, lasting until contemporary times.

The development of education has to be the first remedy, and only the state in the foreseen future should be assigned with educational issues. Due to the fact that

the decisive majority of Egyptians were illiterate, it is the state which has to prepare them to understanding the fundamentals and goals of democracy (*ibid.* 81). It is worth while to add that the insignificant number of literates among Egyptians (Ṭāhā Ḥusayn estimates them as about 20% of the population) were subjected to diversified types of education.

First, there was the state-secular type. The British had seriously limited its range and lowered its level. "For years we have been doing what we can to repair what the English had put out of order" (*ibid.* 82). There was besides the foreign education, established as a result of granted concessions, which were not subjected to Egyptian government jurisdiction. In this case, the idea was to emancipate Egypt from alien biased education. The same idea applied to French religious teaching, and to French, Italian, British, American and German secular schools. Among the functioning types, there were also the private Egyptian educational institutions of different levels; a type of education that disseminated widely at times when the few state schools and institutes could not satisfy the nation's rising demands in this field.

Finally, there existed the religious education carried out by al-Azhar, to which the author devoted a substantial part of his work. The religious status of this institution and the great allegiance of people towards it protects it from the supervision of civil authorities. The nature of this educational institution, the conservative attitude of its leadership and their application of medieval practices, bring about a situation whereas al-Azhar educates pupils and students in a specific manner, contradictory to what is done by secular education. Thereby, two divergent visions of events and issues arise.

al-Azhar desires against all rules to impose its will upon public life in the name of faith. This higher educational institution attempts to monopolise scientific and practical life (*al-ʿilmiyya wa-l-ʿamaliyya*): the state introduces new branches of higher studies, then al-Azhar introduces the same; the state defines higher academic degrees, al-Azhar does the same. Subsequently, it directs to the state categoric demands; for, since it has the same institutes and academic degrees, its graduates should then have the same rights to governmental posts. Otherwise, it claims that the state inflicts damage upon religious hierarchy and faith. The result is the establishment of a dual educational system. "Nowhere outside Egypt is it attempted to achieve such absurd demands" (*ibid.* 44).

He did not intend to radically curtail the rights of al-Azhar, but merely to adjust them to requirements of the "proper democratic system, so that al-Azhar would not become a state within a state (...)" (*ibid.* 95). He postulates then the formation of the educational profile there in compliance with the determinants of the country's endeavour for national unity, and also the requirements of consolidating democracy and independence (*ibid.* 94).

To the demand of al-Azhar to secure sole responsibility for teaching the Arabic language, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn replies: "Those who hold the opinion that only al-Azhar can

be trustworthy in caring for the Arabic language, they uphold a naive view. It is not al-Azhar that introduced the sciences of Arabic. Rather al-Azhar is an incident in the sciences of Arabic" (*ibid.* 291). It is true that al-Azhar preserved these studies for centuries, but it did not develop them nor added anything new. Thereby, it is not prepared to monopolise supervision upon teaching the Arabic language; it cannot match the requirements of modern life (*ibid.* 293). Hence, this institution cannot be assigned with the task of teaching the Arabic language, nor preparing teachers for the subject. The state has to do that, and the state has to prepare for its performance.

The central place of the general access to education in the thought of Ṭāhā Ḥusayn is connected with the consideration that for him freedom could not coexist with ignorance, while education makes the individual conscious about his rights and duties. Freedom depends on the possession of so-defined consciousness, however, democracy has to ensure freedom. A further conclusive idea: only a free individual could possess the consciousness of affinity to the wide national community (*umma*), having Egypt as its geographical boundaries (*ibid.* 101-106).

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