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AFRICAN ECHOES IN THE ARAB UNIVERSE

Bahadur Tejani

It is revealing to draw a parallel between the common concerns of Africa's first two Nobel Laureates for literature, Wole Soyinka from Nigeria (1986) and Naguib Mahfouz from Egypt (1988). In their Prize acceptance addresses both writers focus upon the issue of freedom from tyranny and dwell on South Africa as the last bastion of imperialism on the continent. Soyinka in particular discusses the issue of European hegemony extensively, as this has been a perennial, though submerged, theme in his work. In his Nobel speech, he started with the anecdote of his personal beginnings as an actor in London, dwelling upon his reluctant participation of having to enact a scene from the Hola camp tragedy in Kenya, involving the Kenyan freedom fighters in the 1950s. Historically, the Hola tragedy was one of the central events in the British-imposed "emergency" in Kenya, when dictatorship reigned and human rights were ceaselessly abused. From the podium of the Nobel ceremony, Soyinka chose to speak to the world at large in a personal tone about this early scene in his distinguished career, which by then spanned a quarter of a century.

The message he communicated to the world went something like this: In the 1960s it was young Wole, a Nigerian and an African, who had to don a new identity as a jail warden on the stage and enact the oppression of the Kenyans to a British audience. In retrospect this showed profound irony since the British ruling class was responsible for the oppression. Now here was the same Nigerian African in front of a world-wide audience, receiving the Nobel prize for literature as the first African writer to do so. This symbolized the recognition of Africa on the world literary scene. Yet the continent of Africa itself was under the yoke of oppression, with the cancer of apartheid gnawing at its body politic.

The irony of African independence and freedom was pervasively felt by Soyinka the artist. And he was the living embodiment of the contrast between the possibility of freedom and the reality of oppression. In the 1950s the British theatrical world had provided him a pathway to intellectual protest enabling him to address the moral issues of tyranny in Kenya. Yet doubt lingered as to how much of a real choice was available to the artist and the actor. Was any of the action controlled by him? How did the audience and the world perceive him in the role of a jail-warden? How much of a contribution was he making to the cause of Kenya's freedom in a context in which his participation was reluctant?

These moral questions remained persistent and haunting a generation later, in Sweden, in the writer's memory. Here Soyinka was free to address the whole world, not just the theatrical audience in London. Yet Nelson Mandela remained shackled, with hundreds of others like him, on Robben Island in apartheid dominated South Africa. Through a personal anecdote and artistic synthesis, Soyinka had made it clear to the world that the issue of freedom in the 1950s paralleled that of the 1980s. Soyinka said:

Hola Camp provides a convenient means of approaching that aspect of my continent's reality which, for us whom it directly affronts, constitutes the greatest threat to global peace in our actual existence. For there is a gruesome appropriateness in the fact that an African, a black man, should stand here today, in the same year that the progressive prime minister [Olof Palme] of the host country was murdered, in the same year as Samora Machel was brought down on the territory of the desperate last-ditch guardians of the theory of racial superiority which has brought so much misery to our common humanity."¹

Time and again, Soyinka's vision had pointed to these common concerns of humanity, both for the Africans and to the world at large. With lyrical passion and unflinching courage, he had jolted the conscience of his own countrymen:

The situation in Africa today is the same as the rest of the world; it is not one of the tragedies which come out of isolated human failures, but the very collapse of humanity. Nevertheless the African writer has done nothing to vindicate his existence, nothing to indicate that he is even aware that this awful collapse has taken place. For he has been generally without a vision.²

Wole Soyinka was looking at the post world war global situation, where millions had died and many more were uprooted and divided from each other permanently. It was a time of civil wars all over Africa, Bangladesh, and Indo-China. The vision of a suffering humanity caught in arms of steel and crushed by ethnic and national wars was and has always been an urgent issue for this outspoken writer who underwent solitary confinement under Yakubu Gowon's regime for the sake of national peace in Nigeria. Without this fundamental understanding, that nations and power brokers needed to co-operate with one another for mutual respect and for the limitation of armaments, freedom for the masses in Africa and elsewhere had no meaning.

This largesse of vision and awareness of well formed historical patterns is present with remarkable power and clarity in Naguib Mahfouz. Being older than Soyinka and less known than him at the time when he received the Nobel prize, the tone in Mahfouz's acceptance speech was more mellow. He was more persuasive than analytic. But the concern and the worldview was equally well defined, drawing references from South Africa, the Palestinian cause, and the third world generally. Defining his tragic vision for the suffering masses of the world, Mahfouz drew references from the Asian, African and the Arab world, but particularly from South Africa and the Palestinian issues:

In South Africa millions have been undone with rejection and with deprivation of all human rights in the age of human rights, as though they were not counted among humans. In the West Bank and Gaza there are people who are lost in spite of the fact that they are living on their own land; land of their fathers, grandfathers, and great grandfathers. They have risen to demand the first right secured by primitive man; namely, that they should have their proper place recognized by others as their own.³

As with Soyinka, who intimated to his audience that art and imagination bridge the gap between political divisiveness and the common concerns of humanity, Mahfouz emphasized the depth and intricacy by which the written world harmonized the contrariness in life:

Fortunately, art is generous and sympathetic. In the same way that it dwells with the happy ones it does not desert the wretched. It offers both alike the convenient means for expressing what swells in their bosom.⁴

Soyinka's work was well known internationally prior to the Nobel award. Mahfouz, however, was almost unknown outside the Arab world prior to his international recognition. In any case, the similarities between the Arab universe and some of the concerns explored in his work and those which exist in African art and imagination are fascinating for us to explore. We can begin the exploration by looking at some common general concerns which connect the Arab and African cultures.

The historical realities explored in the tragic visions of Soyinka and Mahfouz are epitomized in the poetic images of Okigbo; images which are garnered from differing aesthetic traditions of the world while simultaneously analyzing powerful forces of nationalism, militarism,

and racism affecting the third world. Below we see the artist's voice rise in a threnody just before the Nigerian Civil War; a war in which the world at large was perforce drawn because the world had been responsible for the creation of the chaos in the first place. Thus mused Okigbo:

for we are talking of such common places
and on the brink of such great events. . .⁵

This need to understand the pressures of modernity and to come to terms with them is an important part of the African artistic sensibility. Sometimes the need is expressed in the re-affirmation of the communal values and long-established traditions of the African way of life. Lawino's memorable words to Ocol to respect his ancestral ways and customs, exemplifies this especially well. She summarized her argument to Ocol in evocative words:

Listen Ocol my old friend
the ways of your ancestors
their customs are solid
and not hollow
they are not thin, not easily breakable
they cannot be blown away
by the wind
because their roots reach deep into the soil⁶

Through the voice of his female persona, Okot was putting under the artistic microscope a whole range of disruptive influences which had shaken the African social equilibrium. Euro-centrism, African powerlessness, and acquired cultural habits were destroying genuine independence, self-development, and creativity of the masses. This flashback to the agrarian ethos and communal self sufficiency can also be seen in the Afro-Islamic writing, where the relationship between the individual, the land and the culture is shown as interdependent and self-sufficient. Anwar Sadat, an eminent Egyptian, writes of the deeply cherished attachment to the soil of his village and to the tradition of inter-dependence by people in his autobiography. Here we have a description of Mit Abu el Kom, the village in which Sadat was born. In lyrical prose he explores the organic existence and the undeniably optimistic sense of security, which nurtured him to the presidency of Egypt:

Everything made me happy in Mit Abu el Kom. . . . we worked
on the land of one of us for a whole day then moved to

another's. That kind of collective work—with no profit, or any kind of individual reward in prospect—made me feel that I belonged not merely in my immediate family at home, or even the big family in the village, but in something more vast and more significant: the land. It was that feeling that made me, on the way home at sunset, watch the evening scene with a rare warmth, recognizing an invisible bond of love and friendship with everything around me.⁷

Taking some representative samples from Mahfouz and Soyinka, we can explore the nature of this communal vision and its implications in art. In Soyinka's poetry, in the early light of dawn, a mood of serenity blends with rhythm of nature and pervades the village life. People till the fields, "shadows stretch with sap" and a poetic invocation celebrates the positive vitality of country life:

This soft kindling, soft receding breeds
racing joys and apprehensions for
a naked day. . . .⁸

In the midst of this is thrust the violent, anti-life force of the automobile creating "sudden winter at the death of dawn's lone trumpeter." The unexpected death of the bird symbolically destroys the serene tone of agrarian life and makes the poet muse of the tragedy of mechanical perversity thrust in the middle over the African countryside:

But such another wraith! Brother
Silenced in the startled hug of
Your invention — is this mocked grimace
This closed contortion — I⁹

Symbolism of this nature creates an extensive range of associations. Of industrialization, modern weaponry and violent war, of the futility of human life, of the destruction wrought in the culture and community of African life through increased mechanization and military might. This sharp contrast between cultural homogeneity and self-sufficiency on the one hand and the destruction of the social fabric on the other hand, can also be discovered in Mahfouz's pre-eminent work *Midaq Alley*. Although the setting of the novel is urban Cairo, the ethos of a closely knit community with collective values as seen above in Soyinka, Sadat, and Okot p'Bitek, is well-expressed by Mahfouz. In the words of one of the elders of this "urban-village" to a youngster living in Midaq Alley, "Never forget that you come from the alley and it's here you will return."¹⁰ Mahfouz creates a community

with strong interpersonal relationships which is full of humor and has a well-defined cosmic view. There are constant reflections on the life after death, on community support systems, and on the nature of good and evil in daily life by the characters. At the same time, Mahfouz's tragic vision manifests itself in the depiction of the economic poverty, personal neurosis and an imminent World War precipitated by European territorial tensions, intruding into Egyptian national life. We find a large number of the characters in the alley caught in the snares of capitalism, materialism and war-profiteering. This leads to tragedies of various sorts. A representative sample of this negation, symbolic of the desperation in the alleys of the third world, whether in Cairo, Lagos or distant Calcutta, is to be found in the form of a homeless man. This manifestation of the wretched of the earth is called Zaita, an orphan and a pretty well hopeless human being. He endows an identity upon himself, and onto others like him, through a perverse kind of poetic lyricism. In the drawing of Zaita's portrait and in the definition of the social forces affecting his growth, Mahfouz shows fine psychological insight and visionary compassion. Below we see the searing soliloquy of this man-child in the promised land in the modern metropolis, suffused with existential pathos:

Oh, what memories I have of my childhood! I still remember my resting place by the sidewalk. I could crawl on all fours until I reached the street curb. I'd rest at a spot where there was a mud hole. All kinds of scum and insects floated on its surface. It was a beautiful sight! The water was full of garbage and its shores consisted of rubbish of all colors—tomato skins, fruit-stains, beans, filth and flies floating all around it and falling in. I would lift my eyelids, weighed down with flies, and I'd wallow about in that delightful summer resort. I'd be the happiest person alive.¹¹

Zaita's extreme alienation is related to imbalance in the lives of the majority of the other characters. Even though they rely on their communal culture for sustenance, the forces in the city dominate, disrupt and upset their equilibrium. Parallel disruptions of this nature arising out of enforced urbanization of the predominantly rural folks can be readily found in other areas of African life and in literature. It is the theme treated in novels from diverse regions, ranging from Achebe's *A Man of the People* to Kenyan Kibera's *Voices in the Dark* and Abraham's *Mine Boy* in South Africa. Referring to Soyinka's poetry, we can find a succinct image which sums up this assessment of the process of forced migration and urbanization. "The city reared itself in the air, and with the strength of its legs of brass kicked the adventurer

in the small of his back."¹² The city is shown as an independent, personified force with a violent power of its own, capable of crippling a man. In *The Road*, one of his early plays, the setting is an urban motor-park, full of traumatized figures searching for existential footing in the culturally confusing metropolis of Lagos. Likewise in *Midaq Alley* the urban environment leads to the seduction of the innocent, the destruction of the hopeful and the displacement of the prophetic. Both Soyinka and Mahfouz share this concern for the displaced and the dispossessed.

Thus the deep-set urge to bear witness to human struggle and to point to the futility of wasted lives forms an essential part of vision of Soyinka and Mahfouz. Separated as they are by geography, language and cultural contexts, the synthesizing power of their imagination creates a unified and compassionate vision. It is a vision which extends to the four corners of the earth and embraces issues which are fundamental to global existence. In Naguib Mahfouz's words in the Nobel speech:

In this decisive moment in the history of civilization it is inconceivable and unacceptable that the moan of mankind should die out in the void. There is no doubt that mankind has at least come of age, and our era carries the expectations of entente between the Super Powers. The human mind now assumes the task of eliminating all causes of destruction and annihilation. And just as scientists exert themselves to cleanse the environment of industrial pollution, intellectuals ought to exert themselves to cleanse humanity of moral pollution.¹³

And in Soyinka's words, which complement the above:

Whatever the choice, this inhuman affront [apartheid] cannot be allowed to pursue our twentieth century conscience into the twenty-first, that symbolic coming of age which peoples of all cultures appear to celebrate with rites of passage. That calendar, we know, is not universal, but time is, and so are the imperatives of time. And of those imperatives that challenge our being, our presence, and our human definition at this time, none can be considered more pervasive than the end of racism, the eradication of human inequality and the dismantling of all its structures. The prize is the consequent enthronement of its complement: universal suffrage—and peace.¹⁴

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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- ⁴*Ibid.*, p. 4.
- ⁵C. Okigbo, *Labyrinths* (London: Heinemann, 1971), p. 54.
- ⁶Okot p'Bitek, *Song of Lawino* (Nairobi: E. A. P. H., 1966), p. 29.
- ⁷Anwar Sadat, cited in *Time*, January 2, 1978, p. 21.
- ⁸Soyinka, "Death in the Dawn," in *Idanre and Other Poems* (London: Methuen, 1967), p. 10.
- ⁹*Ibid.*
- ¹⁰Naguib Mahfouz, *Middaq Alley*. English translation by Trevor Le Gassick (Washington D. C.: Three Continents, 1988), p. 95.
- ¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 114.
- ¹²Wole Soyinka, "The Swamp Dwellers," *Collected Plays* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967) p. 32.
- ¹³Mahfouz, Nobel Address, p. 3.
- ¹⁴Soyinka, Nobel Address, p. 10.