
In the introduction to her book the author laments the fact that 'in European languages there are no monographic studies devoted to individual works of modern Arabic literature', the implication being that her present study is intended to be a first step to remedy this deficiency. While we should certainly welcome Dr. Malti-Douglas' effort, it is only fair to point out that in English alone there are at least two such works: Roger Allen's excellent A Study of al-Muwaylihi's Ḥadīth Ḥaḍīth Isā ibn Hishām (State University of New York Press, 1974) and the volume devoted to al-Ṭayyib Ṣālīḥ's Season of Migration to the North (Mawsim al-Hijra ilā 'l-Shamāl)—A Casebook, edited by M. T. Amyuni, published by AUB in 1985, albeit a study by several hands.

Armed with a vast amount of reading on the twin subjects of blindness and autobiography, Dr. Malti-Douglas sets out to produce a structuralist study of the three volumes of Tāḥā Husayn's autobiography. The book is symmetrically arranged: it is divided into two parts, with five chapters each. Part I is entitled Blindness and Society: in the first three chapters she traces what she describes as Tāḥā Ḥusayn's Recognition of his blindness in Volume I of al-Ayyam, his Conflict with society in Volume II and the Resolution of this conflict in the third and last volume. In the last two chapters she deals respectively with the theme of Power and the Traditional/Modern, East/West antitheses. Part II, entitled Blindness and Writing, analyses the text of Tāḥā Husayn's autobiography under the following headings: Narration; Blind Writing and Blind Rhetoric; Humor; Narrative Technique; Time.

Blindness and Autobiography is a serious study of the three volumes of Tāḥā Husayn's autobiography, based on close textual reading and stylistic analysis, but, alas, in total isolation from his other literary works. Besides rectifying errors in Edward Said's unscholarly remarks on the subject (in his Beginnings), the book is full of insights which shed considerable light on the text. It is illuminating particularly on the relation between what she calls personal blindness and social blindness. She sensitively traces Tāḥā Ḥusayn's reluctant recognition of his personal blindness which begins to be squarely faced remarkably late in the narrative (in Vol. I):

Once this personal blindness has been clearly situated, however, the central problem of social blindness can be posed: the young man's identification with the social category and the social roles of the blind in Egypt. (p. 31)

In the second volume this awareness of blindness is used 'as the basis for the forceful presentation of the conflict between social and personal blindness' (p. 40), while the resolution to this conflict is triumphantly achieved in the third volume, but not without the sort of tension which 'rescues the autobiography from being the sentimental or maudlin work that its subject matter might otherwise have made it' (p. 184), in other words from being a cheap success story, 'a naively optimistic children's story, showing that all things turn out for the best and that any problem can be conquered with sufficient will'.

Dr. Malti-Douglas has interesting things to say about Tāḥā Ḥusayn's choice of al-Ayyam as a title for his book, about the development of his relationship with the blind Abbasid poet al-Ma‘ārī, the significance of his attitude to eating in
public: "There could be no more alienating image than that of eating alone" in the modern Arab world (p. 172). Her remarks on the power implications in the autobiographer's different attitude to his educational environment in the East and the West, are perceptive "in a way, the dichotomy of the East and the West is like that of the sighted and the blind. The hero conquers his blindness as he conquers the West" (p. 88). She provides a full and detailed analysis of Tāhā Husayn's verbal humour, although she is a little simplistic when she states categorically that "Humor in al-Ayyām is never innocent" (p. 143), and that "the discourse of humor is subtle and transmits an ideological message. Laughter is directed at traditional figures" (p. 140) but not at western orientalists. In fact, Tāhā Husayn pokes fun at himself in Vol. I. It is not true that only in the Sorbonne he becomes "a potential subject for humor" (p. 142).

The book, however, has the weaknesses as well as the merits of the structuralist approach. Often the exhausting stylistic analysis of narrative technique is directed merely at the external features of the work, it does not seem to go beyond the surface of writing. It is not always easy to see the point of the subtle distinctions in her classification of the various types of narrative. At times, as in her discussion of stylistic repetition, beneath a farrago of neo-scholastic technical terms, she seems to be doing no more than labouring the obvious. In the course of the full and sophisticated description of the third-person narration Dr. Malti-Douglas does not ask the question whether or not there were any deeper unconscious reasons which impelled Tāhā Husayn to use this method of narration. She is content with his conscious artistic motivation: "The sighted narrator is a ruse on the part of a blind author to bypass his handicap in the text when he desires". She does not ask why Tāhā Husayn should feel the need to distance himself from his subject, why he should want 'to place himself above the text, when in fact he is quite involved in it' (p. 112).

Yet the clue, totally ignored, seems to be there in the account given on p. 73, which is based on the recently published Memoirs of Suzanne Tāhā Husayn, the author's late widow, Ma'qak, regarding the circumstances of his writing the first volume of al-Ayyām. "The reaction that the work (his book on Pre-Islamic Poetry) inspired shocked him ... and he did not understand it. He was attacked in the newspapers, his life was threatened, and his health worsened. In order for him "to conquer his bitterness and regain his health" he travelled to France, to a village in the Haute-Savoie, in the company of his wife. It was there, according to her account, that he wrote, in nine days, the book entitled al-Ayyām". This is surely the background against which al-Ayyām must be seen. Tāhā Husayn was a man with an extraordinarily developed sense of destiny who, as I have tried to show (in Modern Arabic Literature and the West) from the very beginning of his literary career, viewed himself primarily as someone with a message and an important role to play in the cultural history of his country. He was therefore understandably bitterly disappointed at the reaction to his work on Pre-Islamic Poetry, at finding his mission apparently in ruins. What could be more natural for such a man, in this state of despair than to take stock of his life, not so much to find out where he has gone wrong as primarily in an attempt to derive solace and courage to, as his widow said, "conquer his bitterness and regain his health", and resume the fight. He had to convince himself that all was not lost and that he had not done badly after all. In his pursuit of consolation, going through the events of his early childhood, he tried to maintain a stoic stance. But the extent of pain and suffering he experienced in his