

Zeitschrift: Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft

Band: 50 (1996)

Heft: 2: Literatur und Wirklichkeit = Littérature et réalités

Artikel: The dilemma of cosmopolitan culture and national identity : the case of Muhammad Ng 1888-1956

Autor: Ostle, Robin

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-147260>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. [Siehe Rechtliche Hinweise.](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. [Voir Informations légales.](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. [See Legal notice.](#)

Download PDF: 31.03.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

THE DILEMMA OF COSMOPOLITAN CULTURE AND NATIONAL IDENTITY: THE CASE OF MUḤAMMAD NĀĠĪ 1888-1956

Robin Ostle, Oxford

The great port-cities of the Arab regions of the southern and eastern Mediterranean — Algiers, Tunis, Alexandria, Beirut — had much in common in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as the Ottoman Empire rapidly approached the end of its protracted decline and Western Europe presented a daunting combination of omnipotence and omniscience. At this time, the Mediterranean functioned very much as an economic and social system in a manner that had been rare in its history. Perhaps not since the days of the Roman Empire had there been such a degree of activity linking the ports of Marseilles, Genova or Piraeus with their southern counterparts.¹ Most of these cities to the south and east of the Mediterranean saw remarkable growth and development through the 19th and into the 20th century. Those who came with the French Expedition to Egypt in 1798 could not reconcile the Alexandria of the historical imagination with what was little more than a miserable maritime village. Yet the population of Alexandria grew from 8000 inhabitants in 1798 to 180,000 in 1865 and reached 575,000 in 1927. Beirut during the same period grew from 6000 inhabitants in 1784 through 80,000 in 1865 to 125,000 in 1929.² One can observe similar demographic trajectories in Tunis and Algiers. This growth is to some extent because the ancient urban centres in the hinterlands were being overtaken as the Mediterranean became the core of the communications between European imperialism and the Mediterranean Arab World. Thus during the period under discussion, Aleppo, Damascus, Cairo or Kairouan became overshadowed by Beirut, Alexandria, or Tunis. It is also the case that these mushrooming populations are very much Mediterranean populations, because in the 19th century these cities became havens for those fleeing from conflicts, such as Greeks and Armenians. They also became the Mediterranean points of entry to new worlds of opportunity, much less re-

1 This material on port-cities, and Alexandria in particular, is taken from the article by Robert Ilbert: "De Beyrouth à Alger, La Fin d'un Ordre Urbain." *Vingtième Siècle* 1991 (32):15-24.

2 *ibid*: 16.

mote than the Americas or the Antipodes, for large numbers of relatively poor people from the Iberian Peninsula, France, Italy and Malta.

In the case of Alexandria, as the British imperial order tightened its grip over Egypt, this port-city was able to develop a significant degree of autonomy for its Mediterranean population. In 1907, there were 14 non-Muslim communities whose respective Consulates ensured a range of legal and social privileges.³ But in this array of municipal notables who effectively regulated the life of the city, it is important to stress that the indigenous Muslim notable families were in no sense excluded from this system. The scions of the prominent Muslim families went to the same schools as their Mediterranean counterparts, they were part of the same social circles and would usually converse in the same *lingua franca* which had been French since the late 19th century. Thus Alexandria from 1900-1940 represented a typically cosmopolitan Mediterranean society, other versions of which could be found in Beirut, Tripoli, Tunis and Algiers. In the upper reaches of this society, prominent Egyptians — Muslim, Coptic, or Jewish — rubbed shoulders with their Greek, Italian or Armenian counterparts. While ultimately they would pay allegiance to distinct national loyalties, this was in some cases often less important than the common cultural experience which they shared and practised. This was the type of cosmopolitan society which subverted common assumptions of ethnicity and race. It was the “levantine” society so despised by Lord Cromer, consisting, as far as he was concerned, of Muslims who had lost their Islamic essence and Europeans who had lost their own cultural backbone.⁴ For him, this was a city of semi-Europeans and semi-Egyptians, neither one thing nor another.

One result of the internationalization of culture in the Arab countries around the Mediterranean was the renaissance of Arabic literature in its modern forms. So from the late 19th century onwards the novel, the short story and the drama became established parts of modern Arab culture, following a period of translation and adaptation from European models. An important but less well known area of cultural activity was the rise of painting and sculpture which found an institutional home in 1908 in the School of Fine Arts in Cairo — the forerunner of the present Fine Arts

3 *ibid*: 19.

4 *ibid*: 20.

Faculty in the University of Cairo. Muḥammad Nāgī was a typical member of the cosmopolitan high society of Alexandria in the first half of the 20th century. He was a representative and a representor of the good life lived by the *grande bourgeoisie* of the Mediterranean port cities of this period. Lord Cromer might well have described him as a semi-Egyptian or as a Muslim who had become de-Islamized, yet both these charges would have done him an injustice.

Nāgī's family had been prominent at the highest levels of administration in the dynasty established by Muḥammad ʿAlī. His paternal grandfather was General Rashīd Kamāl Pasha who had been Governor of the Sudan and the Red Sea Coastal areas, and his father was Mūsā Nāgī Bey, the Director of Customs in Alexandria where Nāgī was born in 1888. Thus his early life was as a privileged member of the Turko-Egyptian elite of Pashas and Beys in Egypt's second city. His secondary education he obtained at the Swiss School in Alexandria where Ungaretti was one of his contemporaries. Later, Marinetti was also one of his acquaintances. 1906-1910 saw him pursuing law studies at the University of Lyon, and from 1910-1914 he developed his true passion and talent for painting at the Fine Arts Academy in Florence. In 1918 he was able to spend some time at Giverny in France as a member of the social circle of Claude Monet.⁵

It is obviously the case that Nāgī was a typical example of modern Egyptian Mediterranean man and that his background of privilege and wealth was of considerable assistance in creating this profile. Nevertheless there is much in common between his cultural and artistic formation and that experienced by most of the writers, artists and intellectuals who were prominent in Egypt from Independence until the Revolution of 1952. Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal (1888-1956), Ṭāhā Ḥusayn (1889-1973), Aḥmad Zakī Abū Shādī (1892-1955), Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm (1898-1987), ʿAlī Maḥmūd Ṭāhā (1902-1949), Maḥmūd Muḥṭar (1891-1934), and Maḥmūd Saʿīd (1897-1964) are only some of the more obvious names which one can quote in this context. While Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal or Maḥmūd Saʿīd came from social backgrounds of privilege which were at least comparable

5 For these and other biographical details on Nāgī, see Badr al-Dīn Abū Ghāzī: *Jil min al-ruwwād*, Cairo 1975:131-141. See also Effat Naghi, Christine Roussillon and others (eds.): *Mohamed Naghi*, Les Cahiers de Chabramant, Cairo n.d.: 51-59.

to that enjoyed by Nāgī, it is not the case that social background was the only factor which created this sense of cosmopolitan identity. The figures mentioned above were enthusiastic Egyptian nationalists whose cultural backgrounds were also "Mediterranean" in the broad sense of the term, but this was as much because of the opportunities provided by non-Azhari educational institutions as it was because of social origin. Nāgī was deeply involved in the national enthusiasms which gripped Egypt between the Revolution of 1919 and the proclamation of the constitutional monarchy in 1923, and through his painting he contributed much to the new national iconography of the period. His mural in the hall of the National Assembly was completed in 1922 and bears the same title as Mukḥtar's famous statue, "The Renaissance of Egypt".⁶ The pharaonic motifs shared by this mural and Mukḥtar's statue were dominant in the art and literature of the early years of Egyptian independence: the theme of resurrection symbolized the revival of the new nation state which could look forward to a renewal of the power and the glory which had once been enjoyed by Pharaonic Egypt. Such subjects abound in the poetry of Aḥmad Shawqī, the novels and plays of Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm written before 1940, and even the very earliest works by Najīb Maḥfūz.⁷ By far the most Mediterranean version of national iconography produced by Nāgī was his enormous mural "School of Alexandria":⁸ he began preliminary work on this at around the same time as Ṭāhā Ḥusayn published *Mustaqbal al-thaqāfa fī Miṣr* (1938), a book which asserts in the strongest terms Egypt's debt to Mediterranean culture.

Yet it is obvious that this Mediterranean sense of cosmopolitan identity was one which could scarcely be shared by the vast majority of the Egyptian population, for their culture was Islamic and their lives were

6 Hamed Said: *Contemporary Art in Egypt*. Ministry of Culture, Cairo 1964:116-120.

7 One of the earliest poems by Shawqī to treat Pharaonic themes was "Kabīr al-ḥawādith fī wādī'l-nīl", written in 1894 (*al-Shawqiyyāt*, Cairo n.d., Vol. 1:17-33.) In this context note also Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm's early play *Aminosā* (1922) and his novel *ʿAwdat al-rūḥ* (1933). See also the first novels by Najīb Maḥfūz which also have Pharaonic subjects: *ʿAbath al aqdār*, *Rūdābīs*, *Kifāḥ Ṭība*.

8 R.C. Ostle: "Modern Egyptian Renaissance Man". *B.S.O.A.S.* Volume LVII, Part 1, 1994: 188.

lived as peasants in the rural hinterlands of an urban centre such as Alexandria. This is the dilemma which faced most of the writers, artists and intellectuals who were at the peak of their creative powers between 1910 and 1950: while the historical legacies of the Pharaohs, the Greeks, the Romans and the Muslims were powerful motifs which inspired the new generation of Egyptian nationalists, the present which they had to confront was one of poverty, lack of education, and a society ill-equipped to meet the aspirations of the new nation state whether in a rural or an urban setting. A significant number of the major works of literature which appeared between 1910 and 1950 revolve, directly or indirectly, around the dilemma of the educated urban sophisticate struggling to come to terms with fellow countrymen with whom he has little or nothing in common from almost any point of view, apart from the fact that they inhabit the same national territorial space. In this context one can quote Haykal's novel *Zaynab*, Maḥmūd Ṭāhir Lāshīn's short story *Ḥadīth al-Qarya*, Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm's novel *Yawmiyyāt nā'ib fī'l-aryāf* or his play *Ughniyat al-mawt*, Yaḥyā Ḥaqqī's novella *Qindīl Umm Hāshim*, and this is only the beginning of a list which could be much longer.

At this point the actual spatial location of much of Nāgī's life in Egypt is worth bearing in mind: the family house in Alexandria overlooked the Maḥmūdiyya Canal which was one of the major links between the port of Alexandria and the whole north-west section of the Delta as far as the town of al-Maḥmūdiyya on the Rosetta branch of the Nile. The canal passed through the village of Abū Ḥummuṣ, in which the Nāgī family owned property and which was the site from which Nāgī made most of his observations of the Egyptian countryside. In the days of Nāgī's youth the Maḥmūdiyya Canal was a constant spectacle of the boats, the people and the produce which went to and fro between the Mediterranean port-city and the rural hinterland of the Delta, but it was from the village of Abū Ḥummuṣ itself that Nāgī was to derive his own contributions to the dominant dilemma of cosmopolitan culture and national identity.

Nāgī's canvas "The Family in the Village" (Figure 1) is usually dated 1937, coincidentally the same year in which Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm published his novel *Yawmiyyāt nā'ib fī'l-aryāf*, and both works are an eloquent comment on the cultural antitheses which were prominent in literature and in art. The occidentalized elegance of the father of the artist and his sister on the right hand side of the canvas contrasts incongruously with the naked pea-

sant child, the farm animals and birds, the mud-brick dwellings and the surrounding villagers. The common features between this painting and key literary works such as Lāshīn's *Ḥadīth al-Qarya* are striking and obvious.

If one examines the representation of the Egyptian countryside in literature between 1910 and 1950, one finds an almost constant process of alternation between pastoral and satire, between celebrating the countryside as the cradle of the virtuous community and the haven of traditional national values, and confronting it as the principal source of the problems which faced the new nation state in the form of poverty, disease and lack of modern education. While Haykal's novel *Zaynab* is in no sense devoid of social critique, the pastoral element is particularly strong, as it is in much of the nature poetry of Aḥmad Zakī Abū Shādī and other of his colleagues in the *Apollo* group.⁹ By contrast, in *Yawmiyyāt nā'ib fi'l-aryāf* the social criticism is fierce, albeit mitigated by humour.¹⁰ It is possible to trace a similar alternation in the paintings and drawings of Muḥammad Nāgī and indeed to study these alongside the literature. In view of his social background and education, it is hardly surprising that much of his work should represent an essentially urban fascination with the vibrant colours and the undoubted considerable natural beauties of rural Egypt. Works such as "Girl with Bean Flower" (1942; Figure 2), "The Basket Maker" (Date uncertain; Figure 3) or "The Fisherman" (1945?; Figure 4) are relatively untroubled visions of rural Egypt. These pictures reflect something of an air of rural charm and contentment; they do not suggest extreme poverty, social degradation, or that here we have representations of the disinherited of the earth. Rather they convey a sense of dignified and honourable labour with no negative or critical undertones to disturb a time honoured social order.

It is rare in the work of Nāgī that one of his larger oil paintings starts to disturb this relatively harmonious vision of life in the Egyptian village. "Women Making Bread" dates from 1929 (or 1934?; Figure 5): the use of vibrant colour is typical of many of his rural scenes, but here there is much

9 M.M. Badawi: *A Critical Introduction to Modern Arabic Poetry*. Cambridge 1975: 116-145.

10 For a fuller discussion of the representation of the countryside in literary texts see R.C. Ostle: "The City in Modern Arabic Literature", *B.S.O.A.S.* Vol. XLIX, Part 1, 1986.

more of a sense of the unending toil and drudgery that was the lot of most of the inhabitants of Abū Ḥummuṣ. The women all squat in various lowly postures, very much at the same level as the accompanying animals. The woman in the left-hand foreground cradles a sleeping child and stares out of the canvas with an expression that is both resignation and reproach. The large rough feet and tattooed hands of the woman on the right are manifestly made for a life of labour in which leisure has no place.

Nāgī produced hundreds of drawings in pencil, coloured crayons or pastel: many of these were essentially details which he subsequently incorporated into his larger, more finished works. Often he would produce preliminary versions in oil of some of his large murals, "School of Alexandria" being a case in point. But it is above all through the numerous drawings that one is able to follow Nāgī's obsession with representations of rural Egypt. Through these less finished spontaneous drawings, the urban sophisticate, in spite of himself, comes much closer to the unvarnished hardship of the world as it might be perceived or felt by the peasants who are the subjects of so many of these drawings. "Woman Grinding Corn" (Figure 6) or "Motherhood" (Figure 7) are only two chosen from dozens of similar examples. "Amm Gum'a with his Lamb" (Figure 8) is a remarkable study in which the soft tender docility of the animal is the natural accompaniment to the gentle expression of resigned servility which suffuses the face of the old man.

These few examples of the work of Muḥammad Nāgī have been chosen to illustrate the extent to which he shared the dilemma of the countryside with many Egyptian writers and intellectuals between 1910-1950: on the one hand the countryside was an essential theme of national authenticity; on the other hand it was a hidden world of poverty and deprivation which they viewed essentially as outside observers, in many cases alienated by their cultural formations. The paintings and drawings also demonstrate the manner in which they can be "read" alongside the literary texts which were produced in similar historical and cultural circumstances. The Mediterranean cosmopolitanism to which Nāgī belonged has now almost disappeared from Alexandria, his native city. Since World War II demographic increase has continued to affect the city, but the cultural effects of this are dramatically different from those which created the cosmopolitanism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. By 1975, the population of Alexandria had reached 2.5 millions, and since 1950 these increases coin-

cided with the departure of most of the non-Arab elements of the population. The old limits of the city are hemmed in by bidonvilles. Abū Ḥumuṣ has come to Alexandria. The city which was known by Muḥammad Nāgī, Maḥmūd Saʿīd, Constantine Cavafy, and E. M. Forster, is more and more a city of the historical imagination.



Figure 1: "The Family in the Village"



Figure 2: "Girl with Bean Flower"



Figure 3: "The Basket Maker"



Figure 4: "The Fisherman"

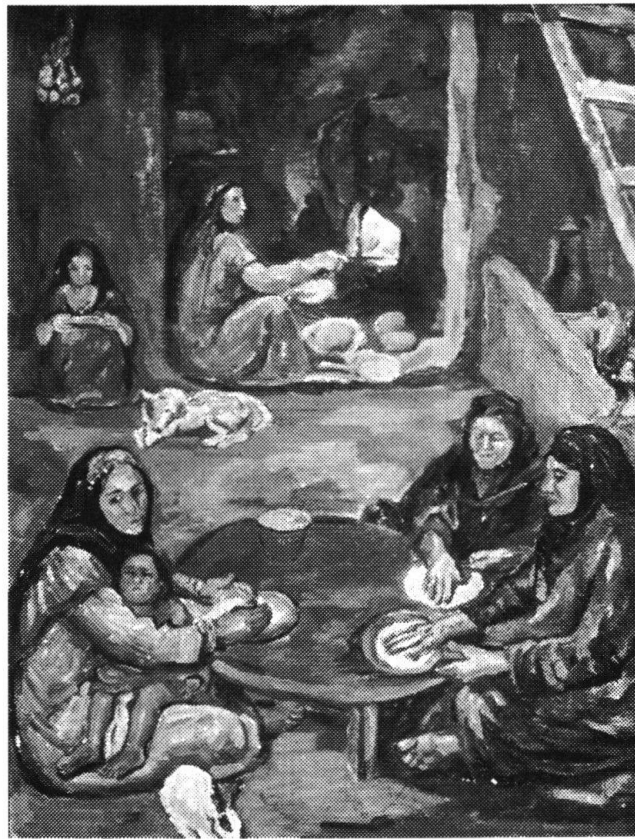


Figure 5: "Women Making Bread"



Figure 6: "Woman Grinding Corn"

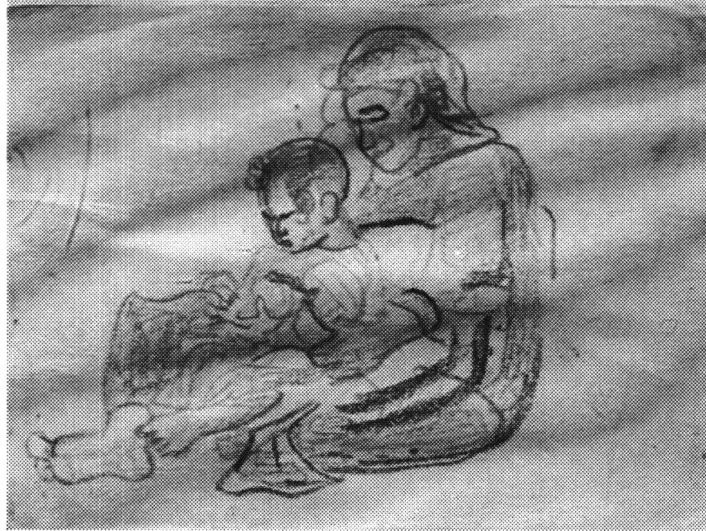


Figure 7: "Motherhood"



Figure 8: "Amm Gum'a with his Lamb"