ENGLISH WRITERS ON THE ARAB WORLD

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Many English writers have begun to tackle foreign themes after failing-for a variety of reasons-to find anything attractive in the home-scene that might be used as material for their literary works. This new phenomenon can clearly be seen if we look at the literary achievements in England from the first quarter of the Twentieth century when almost all the works dealt exclusively with the home-scene. This was, of course a reflection of the existing social, political and economic conditions in England at that time, and the many lively themes and the burning issues that had been used as the source and stimulation for English literature. This period, the late Victorian, heralded the disintegration that became the dominant aspect of Britain's social, economic and political life after the period of stability and economic prosperity ushered by the Industrial Revolution. The period following the First World War was marked by a literature embracing the revolt against the Victorian social order, against the Victorian ethics. Thus at the beginning of this century writers were deeply involved in a battle with the values of their society to pay the least attention to the values of another world beyond Britain's frontiers :

> « But it was also an era of desperation — of a hectic and bloody imperial race against new upstart competitors, of the first modern economic slump, of the rise of the Labour movement as we know it, of

the dock strike and Bloody Sunday, of the impact of Darwin and T.H. Huxley, of William Morris and Bernand Shaw....» (1)

And during the period of the 193o's and the years before and after the Second World War English literature went through a crisis that left its marks on the attitudes to life of writers, on their social and economic status, and on the form and content of their literary works. This period manifested deeper changes than any other transition period in previous historical changes in Britain. The present transition period has produced more deeply-felt effects in the ranks of writers because it demanded from them a clearer vision of the new period :

«In former transitions the elements of similarity between the old and the new cushioned the shocks of change; but now there seems to be no comfortable continuity.» (2)

This transition period has sown the seeds of crisis in the cultural life of Britain, affecting all aspects of its creative process. Thus the new values of life in Britain, with all the complications of economic growth, began to demand from the writer an explanation of the new changes, an act that implies on the part of the writer a solid vision of the future. The imapct of this demand on the writers had evidently increased in the period of the Second World War as the British people began to assert the necessity of explaining their world through literature. The response to this demand varied from one writer to another. In addition, the spiritual condition of post-war Britain was clouded with gloomy signs threatening the status of the writer whose exsitence in this society brought him face to face with almost insoluble problems:

«As for professional full-time writers, 'there seems no doubt that their number is decreasing rapidly', while as for persons who write only in their spare time, they 'are losing their freedom to write as and how they wish, which the security of a job apart from writing gave them'.»(3)

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(1)—Kettle, Arnold : An Introduction to the English Novel, Huschinson's University Library, London 1953, Vol. II, pp. 9-10.

(2)—Lindsay, Jack : After the' Thirties, The Novel in Britain and its Future, Lawrence & Wishart, Lonodon 1956, P. 12.

(3)— Ibid., P. 70.

Thus, as we have witnessed, many writers in the years following the Second World War faced a serious challenge in their literary creation, a challenge which can be formulated in the question, «What shall I write about ?» Many writers were inclined to write on their childhood, on the war or other themes. Those who began to write on such themes as their childhood experiences had, in fact, lost their relationship to the people and their problems and their purpose as writers, by failing to depict the man of their era in the new social and economic conditions. (4) They were ensnared by the 'mass-media' which flourished under the prevailing conditions of their society. But other writers began to look for their literary material in other countries, showing special interests in the British colonies. (5)

This inclination was stimulated by many motives. It was an outcome of the desire of the people in Britain to take an active part in cultural life in the post-war period. (6) As the home-scene became so complicated it required from the writer full équipment and clear vision to withstand the hectic pressure of the world around him, but the events that swept the British colonies provided a source of new material and values. In addition, life in such countries of Asia and Africa had not yet become as complicated as in a fully developed society in Europe. The other important factor behind this tendency was the steadily growing impact of the national liberation movement in the Afro-Asian countries which attracted many writers, in addition to its impact on the British people itself. And as the home-scene lost its heroic content, to put it in other words, as it became difficult for many writers to discern the heroic in the events within their own country they began to look for the heroic abroad. (7) The

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(4)— «He (Anthony Quinton-NMB) went on to stress the tendency to write about childhood days-anything that happened before 1939, anything that did not involve really looking at what was happening in post-war Britain.» Ibid., p. 102.

(5)— «Still, it is significant that writers like Orwell, Greene, Waugh, have had much interest in colonial areas and are among the few contemporay British writers who have gone to see.» Ibid., P.99.

(6)— «Then, after 1945, this positive attitude to the arts, this widening participation of the people in both enjoyment and creation, began rapidly withering away.» Ibid., P. 76.

(7)— «In these years, on the whole, the books about the home-scene tend to be weaker than those dealing with the colonial issues, where the struggle of values is so much clearer.» Ibid., P. 131.

structure in the colonized countries had not reached the stage of development and sharp-edged antagonism known in imperial states, a fact that has simplified the task of a foreign observer.

As the Arab world is an indivisible part of the third world which is witnessing such an upsurge, it has received its share of attention from many British writers. And as the Arab world has become a link in the chain of events sweeping over all Asia and Africa, it has found its echo in the literary life of Britain. It has been recorded in books dealing with diverse aspects of life in this part of the world, mostly economic and political works. But amidst all these travel books and chronicles there stands a group of writers who tried to recreate this world in fiction. A number of novels which have been set in the Arab world and drew their material from it have appeared. But there emerges the question of an aesthetic evaluation of these works and of whether they have really succeeded in portraying the life of the people in these countries in an artistic form.

Many of these novels written about the Arab world are set in wartime Egypt, Libya or in Iraq and deal either with the behaviour of the English Diplomats (8), or with differences of opinion between those who are fighting for a common cause-i.e. the war against Germany. (9) In each case the characters are exclusively English and the background is interesting because of its picturesque, exotic quality. Agatha Cristie has also given the Arab world no little share as a background for her detective stories. (10) Three out of four of Lawrence Durrell's quartet are set in Alexandria and deal with the problems of 'modern love' and the 'prevailing spirit' of Alexandria, yet fail to convey any clear picture of its people. The reader will never be able to trace any sense of space or time in these novels. Such writers have only been interested in depicting the side issues, charming or filthy, while the vital ones remain untouched.

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(8)— Wadham, Ruth: Weekend in Baghdad, Gollancz, Londaon 1958.

(9)— Davis, Dan : For the Rest of Our Lives, Michael Joseph, London (Reprint) 1966.

— Wallis, Dave : Tram-Stop by the Nile, Heinemann, London 1958.

— Riddle, Robert: The Rivers of Babylon, Cape, London 1959.

(10)— Christie, Agatha : Death on the Nile, Dodd, London 1954.

Ibid., : Murder in Mesopotamia, Dodd, London 1954.

Ibid., : They Came to Baghdad, Collins, London 1954.

Ibid., : Cat Among Pigeons, Collins, London 1954.

Some other English writers have even used the facts known about the history of old Egypt as a theme for their literary works. They exaggerated by romanticizing the few historical facts known about Egypt at that time, endowing them with colours and passions. Such a one is Jacquette Hawkes's novel, « King of Two Lands», which is based on the facts known about the Pharoah King Akhenaten. (11) Another novel set in ancient Egypt is Miss Macgraw's, «Mara, the Daughter of the Nile». The heroine of the novel, Mara, has been used as a spy by two antagonistic parties in the Royal palace to overthrow a woman Pharaoh. (12)

There are other writers who have written books dealing with more solid problms in the Arab world and displaying a vivid skill in penetrating the differnt aspects of life in these countries. Such writers as George Tabori, James Aldridge and Desmond Stewart have tried to depict the conflict of values in these countries, confusion of loyalties and the search for a belief or a new faith. (13) Such novels derive their power from the accuracy and vigour with which they present people living their everyday life. They have tried to depict the Arabs as characters emerging in well-knit narratives.

There are even some Arab writers who have written not insignificant novels about their own world and in the English language. Jabra I. Jabra tries in his novel, « Hunters in a Narrow Street », to depict the fortunes of a Palestinian Arab — a Cambridge graduate — who goes back home to

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(11)— Hawkes, Jacquette : King of Two Lands, London 1966.

(12)— Macgraw, J. Eloise : Mara, The Daughter of the Nile, Longmans, London 1960.

(13)— Tabori, George : The Caravan Passes, Collins, London 1954.

— Aldridge, James : Heroes of the Empty View, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1954.

Ibid., : The Last Exile, Doubleday & Co. Inc., New York 1961.

— Stewart, Desmond : The Sequence of Roles, a trilogy. The first book is published under the title «The Round Mosaic». The book gives a moving picture of a whole family and the action takes place in many Arab countries especially Egypt and Libya.

Ibid., : The Men of Friday. Heineman, London 1961.

(14)— Jabra I. Jabra: Hunters in a Narrow Street, Henineman, London 1960.

teach English in his country after the Israelis have driven the Arabs out of Palestine. (14) The novel is more or less about the conditions of Arab intellectuals whose dreams and arguments fill a big part of it.

As the space of this article is limited, it makes it difficult for me to present a full picture of the subject under discussion; I would like, however, to refer to certain aspects concerning the literary works of only one writer : Desmond Stewart. In the meantime I would like to evoke a further discussion of the works of this writer in the future. No doubt the réader of these literary works will find, concerning the themes dealt with in these novels, many points covering different aspects of life in the Arab world.

Stewart's world outlook apparently originates from liberal motives. Stewart felt a spiritual 'vacuum' and an urgent desire to get out of it. His character was marked by two opposed attitudes-the religious and the rebellious — which left their stamp on his literary works. One part of his divided-self adheres to religion and the other part wanders in the realm of individualism and seeks refuge in another world away from our own. The influence of religion is explicit in many of his literary works especially when he models a religious character; with the Arab character Nimr in « Leopard in the Grass » he displays a rare skill in picturing Nimr's religious fervour. It is also apparent in his professed attempts to clarify the maxims of other religions, like Islam, as a force playing a big role in shaping the attitudes of the Arabs to life. This is shown by the portrayal of Dari Selman, in'The Unsuitable Englishman' or in one of his articles on Islam, or the deep penetraton into the semi-primitive religion of the Yezidis in his other novel 'A Woman Besieged'.

Stewart's only manifest attitude is a lack of interest in the events of his country after finding in the Arab world a less complicated society which exerts fewer demands on his spiritual state. His experiences in this new world as he came face to face with new problems different from those 'manufactured problems of an upper middle class youth in England' (15)

(15— «My real education began in Iraq in October 1948, when I saw bitterer, more concrete problems..... « Stewart's Letter of April 11 th, 1964.

initiated a new pattern of thinking. He began to see the reality of the new life. His religious motivation, based on the propagative maxim of St. Paul that 'all mankind are one' (16) helped him to overcome any prejudices towards other peoples. After his acquaintance with the new world by penetrating the economic, social and political realites of it, he began to experience a kind of sympathy that later took on the form of a commitment to the side of the Arabs. Thus we witness a comprehensive interest in the problems and history of the Arabs in all of Stewart's books as shown by the lasting rejection of the distortion and under — estimation of their national potential.

Stewart has written many books which cannot be considered as novels in the proper sense. They are non-fiction books conveying a day-to-day account of certain events that took place in one of the Arab countries, (17) an historical survey of one particular country, (18) or a collection of articles ranging over historical, social, and political topics. In fact some of these books, with their selected topics covering many aspects of life in the Arab world, laid the foudation for Stewart's later novels.

'Leopard in the Grass' is Stewart's first novel with an Arab setting. Despite this fact the novel fails to convey to the reader the atmosphere of in an Arab country. This, confirmed by the writer himself, is due to his limited knowledge of people and their life:

« You are right that it shows little of the Iraqi people, whom I had hardly come to know when I wrote this book. » (19)

It is, in fact, more a rebellion against the complication of life in an advanced country in which the individual finds that all values are distorted and only money counts, than a portrayal of life in an Arab country. 'Leopard in the Grass' registers the protest of a defeated intellectual who imagines that he might find in another country, where life is still not as complicated as in Europe, a relaxation of his inner instability. But what the hero experiences in an Arab country does not hlep to illuminate a new path sufficiently, and the novel thus becomes more a reiteration of the he-

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(16)— Ibid.,

(17)— Stewart, Desmond: Young Egypt, Allan Wingate, London 1958.

(18)— Ibid., : Tourmoil in Beirut (A Personal Account), Allan Wingate, London 1958.

(19) — Stewart's Letter dated 6th November, 1963

ro's disappointment with his life than a lively picture of a people and a country :

« It is much more a book of disgust with the west, than enthusiasm with the east (i.e. the Arab countries-My remark). » (20)

However, in his next novel, ' The Unsuitable Englishman', Stewart shows, through his choice of theme and his portrayal of Arab life and Arab characters, that he has been able to develope the somewhat negative attitude displayed in ' Leopard in the Grass '. ' The Unsuitable Englishman ' succeeds in revealing to us a pattern in life similar to that of E.M. Forester's novel' A Passage to India ' in which the writer also tries — on the basis of personal intercourse — to deal with the problem of the establishment of a relationship between an Englishman and an Indian. But Forester does not really succeed in achieving this end because he tries to abstract the human relationship from the actual situation in India and the role of Britain there. Stewart attempts to tackle the case of his hero on nearly the same lines as Forester : to be first of all'honest' and all will be well. But Stewart's hero opens his eyes at the end after finding out for himself that there is nothing to fight about between him and the Medians (Iraquis). On the contrary, he begins to identify his enemies as those of the Medians. And this, I think, is the most positive value of 'The Unsuitable Englishman', that of not stooping to Mr. Forester's notion of a touch of genuine regret which will change the essence of things. This novel shows more clearly the writer's real narrative energy, his feeling and his sensitivity for the social, economic and political life of the people in Media (Iraq). The characters of Jason, Dari Selman, Flodden and Hassan are depicted with plain, direct and finely achieved fullness, emerging in the narrative as distinctive personalities. We do not experince, in this novel, the fumbling and analytical discourse on the individual or the intellectual's dilemma in our present world that was evident in the former novel.

In ' A Woman Besieged ' the writer depicts the Arab characters on quite different lines in contrast to the English characters. The latter are lost in a confusion ; seeking a formula that will give a significance to their lives, but they are not against life like the host of the outsiders in world literature. Their mistake in life had been to escape into super-

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(20) — Ibid.,

ficial things. But the Arab characters : Ali, Hussein and Afeefa are living under different cricumstances in a world with different values. Their world, with all its strains whether local or foreign, influences all their reactions to this world. None of them is sophisticated or troubled by such notions as those torturing many European intellectuals in advanced societies.

Ali had adopted — during his university years and through the influence of his English teacher (Jeremy) — a similar individualistic attitude towards his world. He used to speak with anger of his own people and their problems. But the development of events in his country and the Arab world force Ali to abandon his former detachment. The tripartite aggression in Egypt awakens his political consciousness and forces him to take part in the fight that is going on in the defence of Egypt and every Arab country. Ali's service in the army enables him to feel more closely the chaos in which his people are living and to abandon his former attitude based on self interest. For him life takes on a new significance when he finds a purpose. Thus he volunteers to fight for Egypt while Afeefa and Hussein take part in the demonstrations that swept Media (Iraq) in support of Egypt. The writer shows — by flash back to the events in Egypt during the military invasion and the reaction of the Medians towards these events — the unity of struggle and the figting spirit of the Arabs towards a common enemy.

The portrayal of the Arab characters in this novel is more convincing because they are not idealised. They are typical of the intelligentsia in the present Arab world.' woven into the texture of their people. Such people cannot be obsessed by the petty inconveniences facing the other characters in the novel, but have areal direction and purpose to their lives. And despite the novel's many shortcomings, its treatment of a specific time and place — in respect to the Arab background — it achieves some success by its treatment of the events and the portrayal of the Arab characters. It also reveals, to a greater degree than in any preceding novel, Stewart's increasing knowledge of Arab society and the new forces in it.

' The Men of Friday' is set in Cairo and deals with postwar Egypt. This novel provides us with a new type of a hero different from what we are used to seeing in many novels dealing with the Arab world. In Stewart's former novels an Englishman is usually the dominant figure. But in 'The

Men of Friday' we encounter for the first time an Arab character who has not been in his country since early childhood and who has been brought up in a foreign country. Though, Layth, the hero, has sometimes felt deeply that he is a kind of a resident alien among the English in their country, yet he cannot define his real feelings towards his native country and its people. The curiosity he feels while still in England gives his later experiences in Egypt and his conversion extraordinary significance.

Layth's first impression on his arrival in Egypt is that of disgust and pity for the poverty-stricken people. His first strong reaction comes when, accompanied by his father's agent, he visits the Egyptian countryside and the estates of his father which are still financing Farhan Beg's luxurious life in Europe. He is repelled by the cruel and inhuman ways in which his father gets his money. (21) He decides to reject his monthly allowance, refusing to live on money taken from these poverty-stricken peasants, starts looking for a job to provide himself with an independent livelihood. This decision is the first brick laid in the formation of an attitude to life on Layth's part that ultimately enables him to face his own and his country's future. Layth's life develops a new significance on the threshhold of a long path of wakening consciousness. He begins, for the first time, to experience a kind of confusion resulting from the conflict between his beckground and the blunt realities of life in Egypt. He feels a growing sense of belonging to the world of these shabby people, and not to any other world:

« In shabby Shubra lived another people, to them, and them alone, he felt related. » (22)

And through his visit to Palestine and Lebanon to collect material for a treatise, he also came in contact with the spirit of the Arabs during the decisive days in the modern history when the fate of Palestine was decided. Layth's interview with the leader of the Arab defenders in Palestine, Adnan Husseini, sharpens his confusion about his attitude towards the people to whom he has committed himself. He remains detached, despite Adnan's bitter accusations about his reluctance to under-

(21) —« The village was improvished. The tall men had, many of them, chests so articulate that it pained one's own to look at them ; where they remained, were often egg-white from malady, women were shrivelled, grey. » The Men of Friday, p. 111.

(22) — Ibid., P. 250.

stand the seriousness of their desperate situation. Layth does not want, at the beginning, to surrender to the logic of Adnan Husseini about Palestine, yet his detachment, based on his European education, is inflexible in the face of the arguments of a person who, seeing the situation of the Arabs in Palestine more clearly than himself, reveals all the elements that helped to bring about this tragedy. Unlike Hameed, who immediately joins the fighters, Layth finds it difficult at once to follow this course and contract 'the Oxford voice' inside him :

« That would have been throwing off of his education, a repudation of the voices that said : analyse, digest, assess, don't leap to certainties. » (23)

In Lebanon Layth is isolated from the events in Palestine until the arrival of his cousin, Délice, from Haifa. Délice has left Palestine as a refugees, abandoning all her possessions there to the mercy of the Zionists' bombardment. Layth also hears about the fate of Adnan Husseini, killed in the battle, and Hameed, injured and carried back to Egypt where he is put in prison. After hearing about the Zionist takeover in Palestine and the fate of his friends, detachment is no longer possible or bearable for Layth. The Arab cause becomes closer tohim than at any time befor Layth. The Arab cause becomes closer to him than at any time before, while his detachment begins to crumble. The man of leisure becomes a man with a cause :

« I have an idea you are a man of leisure. Am I right ? Layth shook his head.

« I was. But now that the Arabs face this crisis, I am employed. »

« No, I fell sick. In Cairo, I was a newcomer, a tourist. But I cannot remain like that, not after Palestine. » (24)

The new awareness and consequent changes in Layth have a great effect on his future career. He begins, with Hameed and others, to think about ways and means of action. His character emerges from the plot as a fully shaped personality absorbing the lessons of life and inflamed by a desire to act. And, thus, he embraces Hameed's ideas of quick action and immediate results. Then comes the Army revolution on the 23rd of july, 1952, as a confirmation of Hameed's way of action and a response to the

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(23) — The Men of Friday, p. 195.

(24) — Ibid., PP. 200-201.

desires of all the embitered and disillusioned people who want change.

'The Men of Friday' is Stewart's best novel with an Arab setting. With distinct ease the plot moves towards its destination — that of justifying the Army Revolt in Egypt as an expression of a popular demand symbolized by the men of Friday. Each character acts in a way that fulfils this end. The novel's remarkable feature is the portrayal of Layth as typical of many Arabs who move from a state of indignation to one of action. Two alternatives conflict within Layth : either to strike out in personal violence or to be condemned to personal despair. How many Arabs are there who have not been faced, in different ways, with this same challenge ?

Stewart, in his novels on the Arab world, seems to be successful in depicting Arab life and milieu through his Arab characters. He has made many successful attempts to probe deeply into the Arab soul, revealing the way in which the Arab thinks and his reaction to the world around him. We learn a lot about Arab mentality, passion and sentiments from his novels on the Arab world. Stewart's experriences in and his close acquaintance with the Arab world have helped to bring about a more solid and truthful picture of the Arab in his day-to-day life. He has succeeded in giving us a fully rounded portrait of the Arab characters, depicting the Arab personality more from within than from outside ; and has put emphasis on showing the urgent desire of the Arab to create a new life free from foreign suppression and exploitation and the desire for a dignified and just life.

Finally, I hope that this simple effort has achieved some success in showing the angle from which this English writer has dealt with the Arab characters in a literary framework.

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