INTRODUCTION

Born in Cairo in 1935, Bahaaʾ Taher began publishing fiction in 1964. He has to his credit several collections of short stories and three novels, of which *Aunt Safiyya and the Monastery,* published in Egypt in 1991, is the third. Raised and educated in the city of his birth, Taher nevertheless feels a strong connection with the geographical setting of this novel: the region of Luxor, where his parents came from. In his introduction to the original work, the author pays tribute to his mother, a gifted storyteller whom he credits with inspiring his own narrative talents. Taher himself is both a first-rate storyteller and a shrewd observer of the world in which he lives, revealing through his fiction a great deal about a broad range of Egyptian experience: from the struggle of daily life in Cairo to the difficulties facing an Egyptian emigrant in Europe to a conflict of ethics and tradition in an Upper Egyptian village.

Taher began his literary career in the wake of the revolution of 1952, which overthrew the monarchy and led to Gamal

Abdel-Nasser's rise to power in 1954, when Taher was a student at Cairo University. In his introduction to *Aunt Safiyya*'s Arabic original, he describes the political demonstrations, in which he participated, against the monarchy and its corrupt administration. He writes of the elation he and his classmates felt at the success of the revolution, as well as their subsequent rapid disillusionment with the new regime.

This was evidently a painfully confusing time for those who had actively supported the revolution and believed in the ideals it represented, which were essentially socialist in character. On the one hand, Taher and his colleagues continued wholeheartedly to believe in the revolution and what it stood for in principle, as long as the struggle was directed toward such goals as restoring Egypt's self-reliance through the rejection of Western interference in the country's affairs—particularly Britain's paternalistic control, which had flourished under the monarchy. On the other hand, if those who had supported the revolution hoped for a strong voice in the new administration, they were largely disappointed, for Nasser's accession to the presidency of Egypt was soon followed by severe crackdowns on individuals and groups that were perceived as in any way threatening to the regime. Thus a period of social reform and a striving for political autonomy in Egypt was also one of political purges and radio broadcasts of the trials of alleged subversives. In his introduction, Taher refers eloquently to the contradictory feelings of loyalty and horror this situation evoked in him and his contemporaries. It was in this atmosphere, he tells us, that he and many others began their literary careers, without fully understanding at the time why they were so confused. Only later, he says, did they gain a more useful perspective on their conflicting feelings.

Many of Taher's earlier stories, written in the 1960s, express the anguish and frustration that came out of that period. A number of them feature characters whose hopes for a prosperous future are dashed in one way or another, or who endure some senseless setback. The characters seem to be more or less paralyzed, as all attempts to reverse their fate have met with defeat; the result is a sense of resigned despair. The reader might read their plight as analogous to the hopes and disappointments the Egyptian people felt in connection with the revolution of 1952.

In Egypt social criticism, ranging from the gently allusive to the scathingly satirical, often finds expression in fiction. A number of Egyptian writers, such as Yusuf Idris and Naguib Mahfouz—who are among the Egyptian authors best known outside the Arab world—have at various times suffered censorship, or worse, as a result of expressing their views too freely. Taher himself, in the mid-1970s (during the administration of Anwar Sadat), was dismissed from his job in radio broadcasting and prevented from publishing his writing. He tells us in his introduction that in his fiction he had generally avoided direct criticism of the political system, but the climate of the times was such that the smallest suggestion of realism in an author's work, implying a less than rosy picture of life in contemporary Egypt, was enough to attract the attention of critics who worked for what Taher calls "the establishment." Using methods chillingly reminiscent of our own McCarthy era, such critics would target these writers and publicly denounce them as Communists, among other things. Having thus come under the critics' fire and been deprived of the opportunity to work, Taher was eventually obliged to leave his beloved Egypt to seek a livelihood

elsewhere; in 1981 he moved to Geneva. There he found a position as a translator for the United Nations, where he is employed to this day, although he continues to regard writing as his most important occupation.

Bahaa' Taher is a storyteller first and a social commentator second. The commentary underlying his clear and direct prose is certainly integral to his stories, but the language is kept deliberately simple, with a strong emphasis on descriptive detail, punctuated by action depicted in straightforward narrative style. There is plenty of scope for analysis, but such probing is left mainly to the reader, for the narrator of the story is generally himself a participant in the events and thus expresses a limited, not omniscient, viewpoint.

The simplicity and directness of Taher's prose do not, however, preclude a delicate ambiguity. This is expressed in the characterization of the people who come to life in his novels and short stories, for they cannot be said to stand unequivocally for such qualities as innocence, honesty, corruption, ambition, guile, and so forth. Neither Taher's characters nor the narrative context in which they exist can be pinned down to a system of values in which right and wrong, good and bad, or true and false are defined in absolute terms. In other words, Taher poses questions, setting out certain problems in high relief for the reader's consideration, but—although he has an unmistakable purpose in mind—he does not serve up tidy resolutions or sweeping conclusions.

For example, consider "In an Unusual Park," a short story depicting a chance meeting between an Egyptian expatriate and a native of the unnamed European country in which the Egyp-

tian has settled. The story begins when the protagonist accidentally wanders into a park that has been specially created for people to walk their dogs. On realizing where he is, he reacts first with dismay, then with rage as he thinks how many starving Egyptian children could be fed on what these Europeans feed their dogs. Before he can get away, however, he is drawn unwillingly into a conversation with an elderly woman, who is walking her dog in the park. He tries repeatedly to extricate himself from this conversation, in the course of which the woman soon reveals her own naïveté about foreigners in general and Egyptians in particular. Yet she is fully as sympathetic a character as the protagonist himself, even though she and her dog represent the culture in which he feels so alienated. As the old woman's story unfolds, she becomes for the protagonist an object of respect and compassion, a compassion that extends even to her dog, despite the Egyptian's profound fear of dogs and his resentment of the attention lavished on them in the affluent society of his adopted country.

Like this story, many of Taher's writings are about reconciling human differences across boundaries of culture, nationality, and ideology. Taher proposes no facile solutions to the persistent divisiveness of human society. Nevertheless, his stories and novels—peopled as they often are by diverse characters whose improbable alliances are as compelling as they are unusual—bespeak the author's commitment to the idea that differences may be resolved, boundaries transcended.

As to specific themes in Taher's works, these naturally reflect to a considerable degree his own experiences: first of all as an Egyptian in Egypt, during periods of transition and upheaval

under both Nasser (1954–70) and Sadat (1970–81); later as an Egyptian living abroad (under virtual exile) in a Western country; and finally as an Egyptian returning—in spirit if not actuality—to the land of his birth.

A striking feature in Taher's writing is the recurrence of ancient Egyptian symbols and themes. Several of his protagonists, in seeking to understand themselves and their experiences, encounter aspects of pharaonic Egypt, whether in dreams, through desert wanderings, or by other means.* The regular repetition of this motif stresses the idea that the identity of the modern Egyptian is inseparably linked to Egypt's ancient culture. A number of Taher's literary works following his move to Switzerland (such as the story described above) deal with the gaps in understanding between Eastern and Western cultures, from the point of view of a displaced Egyptian trying to adjust to life in European society. These pieces express a sense of alienation from both the homeland and the adopted country, and simultaneously a striving toward reconciliation with the homeland and with the adopted country as well.

Aunt Safiyya and the Monastery, which Taher in fact dedicates to his country—as well as to his two daughters—is preceded by

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*One of the short stories ("The Trial of the Priest Kai-Nun") is set in the fourteenth century b.c. and concerns a priest accused of heresy for maintaining his adherence to the pacifist ideals and sun-god theology of the Pharaoh Akhenaton, even after the succession of Tutankhamun and the reversion to worship of Amun and the other old gods. The revolutionary monotheistic vision of Akhenaton had not been widely accepted, and its subsequent repudiation under his successor Tutankhamun led to the persecution of Akhenaton's remaining followers.

East of the Palm (first published in its entirety in 1985) and *Duha Said* (also published in 1985). In each of the two earlier novels, the narrator is a young man coming of age in Egypt, trying to establish his identity as an Egyptian and an Arab in an atmosphere of political and societal confusion and angst. Both characters are frustrated with the status quo and disillusioned with a society that offers them little in the way of future prospects or opportunities for self-expression. In some respects, these novels are thematically reminiscent of the stories Taher wrote in the 1960s; but they speak much more directly to such questions as the Palestinian cause and Egypt's ongoing struggle with Israel, as well as to the effect of these issues on Egyptian morale, which is explored in depth through the transformations experienced by the central characters as they grapple with their problems.

The narrator of *Aunt Safiyya and the Monastery* is a man approaching middle age, looking back on a period of his childhood. His story is in part sentimental reminiscence, but it is also much more than that, for the storyteller's narrative depicts a tragedy whose repercussions disrupt the pattern of life in his village, bringing about profound and unexpected changes. All this is set clearly in the broader context of the events surrounding the Arab-Israeli hostilities, and in particular the war of 1967. The novel also implicitly concerns itself with the problem of sectarian relations within Egypt.

It is no coincidence that Bahaa' Taher's *Aunt Safiyya and the Monastery* made its initial appearance at a time of increasingly frequent eruptions of communal strife between Muslims and Copts, when tension was rising throughout Egypt in part because of these incidents. This period—the late 1980s to mid-

1990s—is not the first in which Muslim and Coptic groups have come into conflict; indeed, this is a recurring phenomenon that can be seen as symptomatic of other divisive influences affecting Egyptian society as a whole. Here it is helpful to be at least moderately conversant with the history of the Copts in Egypt and the way in which Muslim-Coptic relations have developed since the Islamicization of that country.

The identification of the Copts as a distinct religious group was an outgrowth of a confusing controversy concerning the nature of Christ that rocked Christianity in the fourth and fifth centuries. The main participants in the dispute were the Orthodox Church itself and two other groups, known as the Nestorians and the Monophysites. The Monophysites lived mainly in Egypt, Syria, and Armenia, and those who dwelled in Egypt were known as Copts. The Monophysites argued that the nature of Christ was wholly divine, whereas the Nestorians maintained that Christ had two entirely discrete natures, one divine and one human. Officials of the Orthodox Church, who held a position midway between the two, persecuted both dissenting groups.

Under Byzantine rule, the Copts continued to suffer persecution from the Orthodox Church. But in the seventh century, the Arab conquest spread from the Arabian peninsula to Egypt: under the leadership of Amr Ibn al-As, the Arabs wrested Egypt from the Byzantine empire. Many Copts at this time saw in the relatively tolerant Muslim government of Amr Ibn al-As an attractive alternative to Byzantine oppression, and thus they readily converted to Islam. Nevertheless, the Coptic community did not disappear but has survived to this day as a distinct reli-

gious minority in Egypt, with a strong communal identity. The Copts' sense of identity rests partially in the common belief that they, as distinct from the Arabs whose ancestors invaded Egypt, are the true descendants of the Pharaohs.*

The question of identity—Coptic, Muslim, Egyptian—is a complex one, yet it is arguably *not* primarily the issue of religious identity that has historically given rise to conflict between Muslim and Coptic communities. In fact, the most serious trouble between Coptic and Muslim groups has occurred at times when external or internal political forces have disrupted Egypt's social fabric to such a degree that its citizens have found themselves in a struggle to assert their identity as *Egyptians*. Egypt has many times been challenged in this way, whether as the result of an East-West power struggle, as during the British occupation from 1882 to 1922 and after the 1967 war in which Israel (with the support of Western powers) occupied Sinai, or because the government has failed to serve the needs of the majority of the population—as is currently the case.

It is certainly true that the Copts, owing to their minority status following the establishment of Islam in Egypt, have suffered a certain amount of hardship and persecution—sometimes quite severe—over the course of the centuries leading up to our

*The word "Copt" is itself related to our word "Egypt," which comes from the Greek name for that country. The Greeks called it *Aigyptos,* which is in turn derived from the ancient Egyptian word *Hikuptah.* These are the antecedents of the Arabic word for Copt: *qibt.* (Entirely unrelated to this is the Arabic word for Egypt: *Misr.*) The Coptic language, now restricted to liturgical use, is based on an ancient Egyptian dialect and written in a variant of Greek script.

own.* During the last hundred years, however, recurrent confrontations have reached unprecedented levels of violence. During the British occupation both Copts and Muslims felt disempowered as a result of the British co-optation of government authority. The nationalist movement taken over by Mustafa Kamil in 1906 attempted to unite Egyptians, without reference to religious identity, against the British occupiers. But the Copts, fearing the development of pan-Islamic tendencies in the Muslim-led nationalist movement, had their own agenda. Perceiving themselves now as a minority threatened specifically by the Muslim majority, they sought to advance their own interests under British protection. Consequently, tension between Muslim and Coptic communities rose sharply, as each group strove to assert its place in society and politics. Although a nominal truce was achieved when Copts and Muslims came together in Cairo to try to resolve their differences at the General Egyptian Congress of 1911, the fact remains that what had previously been, for the most part, a cooperative relationship between the two groups had now become a decidedly competitive one, sowing the seeds of a mutual mistrust that has plagued the two communities ever since.

One effect of Egypt's loss in the war of 1967 was an extremist Islamic backlash that, by the time Anwar Sadat came to power in 1970, had reached a degree of intolerance threatening to the Copts. Although in the early years of his presidency Sadat tried

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*Between 1012 and 1015 a Muslim leader, the caliph al-Hakim, sometimes described as insane, ruthlessly persecuted the Copts; he was succeeded, however, by al-Zahir, a caliph whose tolerance extended to allowing Copts who had been forced to convert to Islam to resume their Christian faith.

to work with at least some of the Islamic groups, his ultimate response to the conflict between Muslims and Copts was not to mediate disputes but to crack down harshly on both sides, thus further aggravating an already tense situation; violent clashes between the two groups escalated during the years leading up to and following his assassination in 1981.

Conditions in Egypt today are in some respects similar to those of the period just after the 1967 war, although the immediate causes are somewhat different. The country's population has expanded to well beyond what it can comfortably support. Meanwhile, high unemployment increasingly leads those who can to seek work outside Egypt, draining the country of crucial human resources for which the imported income does not adequately compensate. To some extent, the latter problem can be traced to the mid-1970s, when the first major waves of emigration began after Sadat's policies failed to reverse Egypt's economic decline.

The large-scale emigration of highly qualified workers from a country whose population can no longer maintain itself is a vicious circle from which Egypt has so far not managed to escape. As if that were not enough, Egypt—not unlike the other Arab states that were involved—has never fully recovered from the 1967 war (despite the Arabs' relative success in the subsequent confrontation of 1973). Already strained by the series of Arab-Israeli clashes that had come before, Egypt after 1967 was left economically depleted and thoroughly demoralized by the loss of Sinai—as well as the loss of thousands of Egyptian lives. Sinai it has regained, but at a bitter price, for the "separate peace" between Egypt and Israel that was the outcome of the Camp David Accords in 1979 incurred the censure of the Arab

states whose lands were not restored by that agreement and the alienation of the Egyptians from many of their fellow Arabs.

The intensity of the conflict between Arabs (both Muslim and Christian) and Israeli Jews that has characterized relations between Israel and its Arab inhabitants and neighbors ever since its founding in 1948 has been a major cause of the rise of violent fringe groups on all sides. Islamic extremists in Egypt have gained a still firmer foothold in a society composed chiefly of Muslims, most of whom are poor and whose basic needs are increasingly desperate and not effectively addressed by the present administration. Like any group seeking political power, these extremist factions promise the populace what the government does not deliver, at the same time profiting from their own identification with the more moderate Islamic groups that are in fact setting up free schools and health-care facilities in some of the regions where such resources are lacking.

Under the circumstances—and I have here touched on only a few of the problems that are straining the social fabric of Egypt—it is easy to understand how certain elements of the society have become polarized. The question of whether such polarization has occurred along religious, ethnic, or political lines, or some combination thereof, is perhaps less significant than the undeniable fact of the resulting social schism. For Egypt has become, in some sense, divided against itself: not only because Muslims and Copts are all Egyptians and some of them are fighting among themselves, but also because on both sides it is, as usual, a volatile minority that is causing most of the disruption, to the grief and consternation of the majority of the populace, regardless of religious affiliation.

This situation is easily enough distorted and misrepresented by the reports that circulate within Egypt itself, as well as in the surrounding Arab countries. Still, it is perhaps most profoundly misunderstood in the West, where the whole Arab-Islamic world is often viewed as a hotbed of religious extremism in which reason and discourse are scarce, while irrational violence, perpetrated mainly on the innocent, is the order of the day. Too little recognition is accorded the voices arguing for peace and for tolerance among different groups—and yet these voices represent the vast majority. And they include Bahaa' Taher. For just as it is no accident that his novel—about a remarkable alliance between a Muslim village in Upper Egypt and the inhabitants of a nearby Coptic monastery—emerges precisely when it does, it is no coincidence that the novel has not just one chief heroic figure, but two: the one a Muslim and the other a Copt.

The novel's protagonist, in the literal sense of "the leading actor," is the father of the narrator. He is a meditative and deeply principled man, a social and religious leader in his community. The mystical hero of the tale is a Coptic monk, who, while often a comic figure who confuses his facts, yet manages to combine humility and authority. He seems to be endowed with extraordinary powers of perception, almost a sixth sense, and in fact as events unfold he emerges as something of a prophet. The Safiyya of the novel's title is also a sympathetic character, but if the narrator's father and the Coptic monk may be said to represent reason and compassion, Safiyya stands for something more primal. For although she is a figure of power and intelligence, what chiefly motivates Safiyya is violent emotion, which takes

the form of a savage obsession with the fulfillment of a vengeance to which—according to tradition, not religious principle—she considers herself entitled.

The story takes place in postrevolutionary Egypt, in a small village near Luxor, over a period of years prior to and just after the Arab-Israeli War of 1967. The events are set in motion by an unpremeditated killing within the village's Muslim community, which leads to a blood feud condoned by some members of that community and opposed by others. It is not just the characters themselves that are at variance with one another, but cultural values as well, for those who oppose the blood feud set themselves up in opposition to an ancient and deeply embedded practice. The morality of this custom of exacting blood for blood is not explicitly debated in the novel: both sides of the question are represented by sympathetic characters, whose stories are told. What is particularly interesting, however, is that the opposition to the blood feud brings Muslim and Copt in this novel into a state of true, interdependent symbiosis. Thus on the one hand the feud divides the villagers—all Muslims and all related to one another, whether closely or distantly—while on the other hand the effort to prevent the feud from reaching its bloody conclusion forges a still more powerful bond between two religiously and socially distinct groups already coexisting peacefully in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance and good will.

To suggest that the message here is that all differences can be transcended by opposition to violence would be a vast oversimplification: the dynamics of conflict are more subtle than that. For the response of the Egyptian populace to the Israeli occupation of Palestine, and to Israel's takeover of Sinai in 1967, is quite realistically portrayed in the novel, and this response was

by no means one that called for a peaceful solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. On the contrary, it demanded immediate military mobilization against Israel, and in the strongest possible terms. Moreover, vehement objection to the Israeli seizure of Arab lands is clearly expressed by both Copt and Muslim in this story. Here too is an implicit argument for unification of Egypt's disparate elements through recognition of common interests, but it is an argument of a rather different sort. In this case, Egyptians are called upon to unite against a common enemy, rather than against a violent and divisive tradition.

It is clear then that the enemy of Egypt is not its own peoples, be they Muslim or Christian; rather the enemy is whatever divides Egypt against itself, whether this be an aggressive foreign power that appropriates its land, or, on a more microcosmic level, a destructive practice that sets brother against brother in a tiny Egyptian village. It is this crucial message that I believe the storyteller Bahaa' Taher wishes his novel *Aunt Safiyya and the Monastery* to convey to his readers.

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Barbara Romaine
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