

Joyce and Mahfouz: Fragmentation and the Feminine

John McDonald
University of Portland

Abstract: *James Joyce once wrote to a friend, “In the particular is contained the universal.” My paper is a cross-cultural thematic analysis of the short stories “Eveline,” by Joyce, and “The Answer is No” by Naguib Mahfouz. The stories, set in Dublin and Cairo, feature female protagonists who are faced with individual decisions which conflict with their sense of gender-duty, tradition, and family.*

I

In a review of *The Experimental Arabic Novel: Postcolonial Literary Modernism in the Levant*, by Stefan G. Meyer, reviewer Deborah A. Starr (2004:303) suggests that Arab writers and intellectuals “have wrestled with the implications of engaging with Western philosophy and literature”—she continues, “As their societies simultaneously attempt to emulate new social role models while preserving traditional culture.” I would counter that such an intellectual, cultural conflict in some ways is avoidable. Besides, emulation whether between or within cultural settings is necessary for progress, literary, social, even personal. Sabry Hafez (1992:270-271), in the essay, “The Modern Arabic Short Story” views the relationship between modern Arabic narrative and western narrative forms as “not one of genealogy alone but of dynamic intertextuality.” His claim is that the “emergence of a new literary genre...is a process that changes people’s understanding of their society and their perception of themselves before changing the discourses that process their experience.

The underpin of cultural change and catalyst for preservation and continuation, is women. The root of any culture, local or global, is that culture’s female population and in fiction, albeit western or Arabic, we will repeatedly encounter similarities of theme with regards to women and their relations to, and roles within, societies. Cultures do not necessarily isolate personal experience. Women, generally, are more concerned about the well being of others—within their families, within their friend’s families—with the plight of women who are complete strangers, they are more prone to feel empathy for others, even if the other is an image on television, in a documentary movie, or a news story. That said let us traverse such aggressive diction like “engagement” and “opposition.”

Attempts at co-opting or borrowing ideologies do not have to result in the loss of traditional cultural values, and I believe that if we examine the literature of different cultures, East and West, side by side, we will discover, more so than the differences we believe separate us, common concerns about gender, duty, morality—goodness.

In the short stories “Eveline” from James Joyce’s *Dubliners* (1914), and “The Answer is No,” written by Naguib Mahfouz and published in *The Time and the Place and Other Stories* (1991), readers are introduced to two young women, adolescents, who have experienced unsettling and traumatizing crises. Eveline Hill, and the no-named, any woman protagonist from Mahfouz’s story, share a strong sense of family duty and honor. They sacrifice their happiness, in spite of their youth, desired futures, and lack of “worldly experience,” firmly believing they have made morally correct decisions.

The stories’ plots begin in the present, flashback to the events that underlie the protagonists’ present trauma, and end again in the present. Eveline is the oldest daughter in an Irish Catholic family where she has undertaken the role of her mother, who on her deathbed deliriously cautions Eveline that “the end of pleasure is pain” (Joyce 1914:31) and urges Eveline to “keep the home together for as long as she could” (*ibid.*:30). Eveline’s father was “usually fairly bad of a Saturday night” (*ibid.*:29), a reference to being belligerently drunk, “and she sometimes felt herself in danger of her father’s violence” (*ibid.*:28). She has younger siblings to care for with no help from her older brothers, as “Ernest was dead and Harry, who was in the church decorating business, was nearly always down somewhere in the country” (*ibid.*). Eveline’s conflict between her desires – love and having a family of her own – and her duty to respect her mother’s dying request and care for her father and two young siblings is provoked by Frank, a sailor who has “landed on his feet in the old country” (*ibid.*) and shows a romantic interest in Eveline. Her father, learning of her relationship with Frank forbids her to see him. Although the narrator describes Frank as “very kind, manly, openhearted” (*ibid.*:29) her father’s view of him is that of a scoundrel, thus forcing Eveline to “meet her lover secretly” (*ibid.*:30).

At present, the female protagonist of “The Answer is No” is a schoolteacher, but during the flashback readers learn that she experienced her personal crisis at the age of fourteen, when she was victimized by her mathematics tutor, Badran Badawi, a man twenty years her senior. She was then an innocent, promising student from Pyramids Road, a “rich, beautiful girl, a byword in Abbasiyya for her nobility of character” (Mahfouz 1991:26). Since her victimization her father has died, and she has lived with her mother, and with her secret, until the narrative returns to the present and Badran Badawi is appointed new headmaster of her school.

II

Roger Allen (1995:78) in his article, "The Arabic Short Story and the Status of Women" remarks on how writers have been critical of marriage, as a general theme, in Arabic short stories, identifying "confrontational processes of change" as a more specific theme. These processes, according to Allen, involve rituals and consequences. He describes the sequence of the development in many Arabic short stories as follows: "Young girl, to adolescent woman, to wife, to mother." Not taking the stages of development into adolescence, let alone adulthood, Sudhir Kakar (1985:444) in "Psychoanalysis in Non-Western Cultures" claims a "shared universal experience of infancy and childhood within the structure of the family." Adding further, and perhaps most important to my comparison is the Lacanian theory of fragmentation. Lacan (qtd. in Bressler 2003:130) believes that "total unity and wholeness is in itself an illusion. Our sex is biologically determined, says Lacan, but our gender is culturally created. If this is indeed accurate then gender is demonstrative of cultural differences, but it can just as easily illustrate cultural and social similarities.

Besides some incidental cultural similarities between the settings of both stories (Egypt and Ireland were given "independence" in 1922 after being under the British Protectorate, and both have Majority and minority religious groups coexisting within their countries, Catholics and Protestants in Ireland, and Muslims and Coptic Christians in Egypt) there exist cultural similarities between the protagonists with regards to feminine development. Neither character is able to continue their development to wife and mother, to thus begin their own homes and families. Lacan (1978, cited in Bressler 2003:130) defines "Symbolic Order" as when we learn to differentiate between male and female, with the male gender representing cultural laws that are enforced by fear. Both Joyce's and Mahfouz's protagonists have their feminine development halted firstly by symbols of patriarchal expectations, the tutor Badran Badawi, and Eveline Hill's father in "Eveline," and secondly, by adhering to their roles within their homes and societies.

III

In *James Joyce: A Study of the Short Fiction* Mitzi Brunsdale (1993:13) asserts that in *Dubliners*, Joyce is "exposing the great conflict between suffering human beings and the Irish Catholic society he felt had fatally paralyzed their lives." She also identifies story motifs in *Dubliners* by section, in which "Eveline" is listed under "Stories of Adolescence." Eveline, a nineteen-year-old girl has already, in a way, lived the dutiful

part of a female family caretaker, a role once filled by her mother, and naturally assumed by Eveline. Joyce illustrates Eveline's dilemma between her home and duty, which are "life-paralyzing" in the sense that it is unlikely that she will find personal satisfaction as long as she remains a daughter and sister, as opposed to marrying Frank and becoming wife and possibly mother: "She had consented to go away, to leave her home. Was that wise? She tried to weigh each side of the question. In her home anyway she had shelter and food; she had those whom she had known all her life about her" (Joyce 1914:28). In another passage Joyce (*ibid.*:29) writes of her, "She had hard work to keep the house together and to see that the two young children who had been left to her charge went to school regularly and got their meals regularly. It was hard work—a hard life—but now that she was about to leave it she did not find it a wholly undesirable life." This passage exemplifies Eveline's hardships, but that she considers her existence as not "wholly undesirable" points out something important in Eveline's character. She is just "over 19" (*ibid.*:28) and yet she knows the value of "regularity"—that which is expected of her. In fact, Joyce employs the words "duty," "difficulty," and "regularity," noticeably throughout the four-page story.

Bonnie Kime Scott (1984:16), in her study *Joyce and Feminism* notes that "throughout *Dubliners* women are placed in self-sacrificing, nursing, serving roles. In 'Eveline' she observes, "Two generations of women dedicate themselves to family service" (*ibid.*). Eveline's only female role-model is her mother, who insists that Eveline remain as the caretaker of the family. She has no other immediate model of what a young woman is expected to do between the periods of adolescence, marriage, and motherhood. She has taken over for her mother, and this one-sided existence that confines her emotional growth perhaps pushes her to consider marriage with Frank with different expectations than her own mother's marriage and life, which during the flashback is described as a "life of commonplace sacrifices" (*ibid.*:310). Thus Eveline surmises that she can survive her conflict through unity with Frank, who to her is a symbol of newness and opportunity, yet as we know Frank is not the answer to her self-unification, as that is not possible.

At the start of "Eveline," she is in the present, thinking about leaving with Frank to Buenos Aires, but her mind strays to the past, and how her life as a child "used to" be (Joyce 1914:28). It is her obsession with the past combined with her fear of commitment beyond the present, that is a predetermining factor, a foreshadowing of her inaction at the end of the story. "Dust" (*ibid.*:26-27) is mentioned three times in the first three paragraphs, perhaps foreshadowing Eveline's inability to transgress her social and familial role, or her unwillingness to emerge from the position put upon her due to her gender: "She looked around

the room reviewing all its familiar objects she had dusted once a week for so many years, wondering where on earth all the dust came from. Perhaps she would never see again those familiar objects from which she had never dreamed of being divided" (*ibid.*:27). Yet, Frank also "had a home waiting for her" (*ibid.*:29).

Eveline's conflict, to leave Dublin with only the promise of marriage, and start a home and family is based upon unconfirmed statements made by Frank, whom she has known for a little more than a month. Margot Norris (2003:56) believes that the reader is "obliged to make dubious inferences, to be suspicious, to speculate with fragmented and incomplete information" and that we are in a position "very similar to Eveline's own." Given this, perhaps we can empathize with Eveline's father, whose caution about the affair stems from more than his own selfishness. Critic Hugh Kenner goes so far as to describe the plot as having a hidden story about Eveline's "close shave with disgrace" (qtd. in Norris 2003:56).

When the narrative returns from the flashback scene of her mother's death, Eveline is described as having "a sudden impulse of terror" (Joyce 1914:31). Irrationally she wants to escape, and irrationally she believes, "Frank would save her" (*ibid.*). She meets Frank at the ship yet her decision to leave has not been made, as "she prayed to God to direct her, to show her what was her duty" (*ibid.*). Frank's frantic insistence they leave is met by the instinct in Eveline to preserve her family and do her duty. It is as if, at that moment, there is an answer for Eveline, as she denies Frank: "She set her face to him, passive, like a helpless animal. Her eyes gave no sign of love or farewell or recognition" (*ibid.*:32). Although this passage suggests a sense of resignation it may also imply Eveline's acceptance of her role and duty, and her relief to have not abandoned or scandalized her family.

IV

Similar to Joyce, Mahfouz (1991:25) creates a story seemingly tragic; a young girl of fourteen with the potential for a satisfying life ahead, is abused by her tutor, Badran Badawi, who is "twenty-five years older, the same age as her father" and whom she "regarded as a second father." Mahfouz describes the actions of Badawi as "a well-sprung trap" (*ibid.*:26) as Badawi is confident that she will not dare to risk the personal and familial shame that would accompany her marrying. Badawi tells her, "Keep it to yourself and I'll come and propose to you the day you come of age" (*ibid.*:25). Some time passes before Mahfouz's heroine is confronted with the proposal, two years after her father's death. Indicating social class and family background, her

mother says to her, “I know your attachment to your personal independence, so I leave the decision to you” (*ibid.*:26).

The young woman does not want to marry Badawi for several reasons; of course the social mores regarding her situation dictate that if she does not marry Badawi, she will most likely remain unmarried, linking her to Eveline, in that both young women are not able to move beyond late adolescence, into courtship, marriage, and motherhood. Mahfouz writes, “She had been conscious of the critical position she was in. She had either to accept or close the door forever” (*ibid.*). However with Mahfouz’s character we see more independence and preparation for her future. Before Mahfouz builds to the scene of the proposal, internally the young woman is determining reasons why she would not marry Badawi, including the preservation of her dignity:

To have abused her innocence was one thing, but for him to have the upper hand now that she was fully in possession of her faculties was something else. It had meant little to her to sacrifice marriage. She had welcomed being on her own, for solitude accompanied by self-respect was not loneliness. She had also guessed he was after her money (*ibid.*).

Whether or not we trust the woman’s honesty about sacrificing marriage, we see that she prioritizes her family, her cultural mores and her personal dignity at the expense of her personal happiness. Her mother, we may interpret, has no knowledge of her daughter’s secret. The reader learns of the protagonist’s chance to marry “time after time” and that she “turned her back on them all” (*ibid.*:27):

“Does no one please you?” her mother asked her.

“I know what I’m doing,” she said gently.

“But time is going by.”

“Let it go as it pleases, I am content” (*ibid.*)

In the final paragraphs of the narrative we are left to ponder the difference between “contentedness” and “happiness.” Like Eveline, her chance at love and happiness, her stages of female development have been thwarted; understandably both are unlikely to move beyond these emotionally devastating encounters.

V

Roger Allen (1995:78) reiterates that “the traditional perspective of [a] predominantly male society has been that the aspirations of its female members is marriage.” This may be true with Eveline Hill, but Mahfouz’s protagonist, in the story which translator Denis Johnson Davies calls “outspokenly feminist” (qtd. in Mahfouz 1991:x), is attempting to move beyond one aspect in the development of her life of

which she has been denied. Sabry Hafez (1992:325) identifies the theme of withdrawal in Mahfouz's fiction, his trend to create characters who have withdrawn from the world, the "anti-hero." This withdrawal, Hafez (*ibid.*) explains:

Is a recoil both into and against the self. It is a withdrawal into the self in as much as it explores the human psyche or, more accurately, the impact of grotesque reality.... The idea of victimization is combined with a feeling of alienation and an implicit rebellion that involves a sense of revulsion as an attitude towards history.

Comparatively, Dayla Mor-Cohen (2001:82-3) describes the isolation following victimization as "escape as temporary relief from existential stresses." The withdrawal of Mahfouz's protagonist from her chronological development as a woman is her response to her physical victimization. It is explicit rebellion, though incomprehensible to everyone but herself and her victimizer. To her mother, who asks, "Does no one please you?" (Mahfouz 1991:27) in regards to her refusal of marriage, there may be some suspicion of rebellion, but the source remains veiled. In contrast, Eveline Hill's refusal of marriage is a withdrawal from progressing into womanhood; it is, in a sense, a withdrawal that, like Mahfouz's protagonist, holds her dignity intact, but her victimization at the hands of her father will continue. For Mahfouz's protagonist, the refusal of Badran Badawi and withdrawal from the possibility of love is somewhat akin to Eveline's temporary paralysis at Frank's departure. If the reader is still questioning her statement of contentedness, and whether or not this can be equated to happiness, the narrator steps in to clarify and provide closure: "Day by day she becomes older. She avoids love, fears it. With all her strength she hopes that life will pass calmly, peacefully, rather than happily. She goes on persuading herself that happiness is not confined to love and motherhood" (*ibid.*).

The importance we see in these stories published seventy-five years apart on different continents, in different languages, and in countries with differing socio-political values, is the commonality of theme. As companion stories they demonstrate shared concerns, conflicts, duties and desires. Most importantly they represent parallel experiences that transcend geography and place.

References

- Allen, Roger.** (1995). "The Arabic Short Story and the Status of Women." *Love and Sexuality in Modern Arabic Literature*. In Roger Allen, Hilary Kilpatrick, & Ed de Moor (eds.), 77-90. London: Saqi Books.

- Cohen-Mor, Dayla.** (2001). *A Matter of Fate: The Concept of Fate in the Arab World as Reflected in Modern Arabic Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bressler, Charles, E.** (2003). *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*. 3rd ed. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Brunsdale, Mitzi, M.** (1993). *James Joyce: A Study of the Short Fiction*. New York: Twayne Publishers.
- Hafez, Sabry.** (1992). "The Modern Arabic Short Story." In M.M. Badawi (ed.), *Modern Arabic Literature: The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*, 270-328. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Joyce, James.** (1914). *Dubliners*. Ed. Margot Norris. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2006.
- Kakar, Sudhir.** (1985). "Psychoanalysis and Non-Western Cultures." *International Review of Psychoanalysis*, 441-447.
- Kenner, Hugh.** (1978). *Joyce's Voices*. Berkeley: UC Press.
- Kime Scott, Bonnie.** (1984). *Joyce and Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Lacan, Jaques.** (1978). *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*. Alan Sheridan (trans.). Jaques-Alain Miller (ed.). New York: Norton.
- Mahfouz, Naguib.** (1991). *The Time and the Place and Other Stories*. Denis Johnson-Davies (trans.). New York: Doubleday.
- Norris, Margaret.** (2003). *Suspicious Readings of Joyce's Dubliners*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Starr, Deborah, A.** (2004). Rev. of *The Experimental Arabic Novel: Postcolonial Modernism in the Levant*, by Stefan G. Meyer. *Comparative Literature Studies*, 41/2:303-306.