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**OPPORTUNISM AS ELUSIVELY GOVERNING REALITY IN FATHY
GHANEM'S THE MAN WHO LOST HIS SHADOW**

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Abstract

The Man Who Lost His Shadow, a novel written by Fathy Ghanem and translated by Desmond Stewart², is exceedingly perceptive. The author introduces us to a four-part novel, each part being narrated by a certain character. The first part is narrated by Mabruka, who comes to Cairo to serve Rateb Bey's family and when her mistress dies, she has to serve Abdul Hamid, a school teacher, only to force him, later, to marry her. Then we have Samia, who tries to be an actress and befriends both Anwar Sami and Yusif. However, she ends by marrying Muhammad Nagi, a journalist who narrates the third part of the novel. An illustrious journalist, Nagi, at the time, is the editor-in-chief of Al-Ayyam, a newspaper. He takes care of Yusif, the fourth character who, at the beginning find it difficult to have a job, but eventually, his opportunism enables him to replace Muhammad Nagi, as the editor-in-chief of the paper.

Keywords and phrases: a four-part novel; serve, journalist; actress; illustrious; narrate; opportunism; editor-in-chief.

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² After classical studies at Trinity College, Oxford, Desmond Stewart who taught me, came to Baghdad in 1948 to teach Shakespeare and Victorian novelists at the College of Arts and what was then known as Higher Teachers' Training College (now College of Education). His contact was terminated in 1956 after the publication of *New Babylon: A Portrait of Iraq*, a book he wrote with his colleague John Haylock. He spent much of his time writing fiction as well as translating Arabic prose and poetry. He also wrote extensively on the Arab World and Turkey and published a work on early Islam. He died in 1982.

Thematic Concerns

It is Barthes, who says [that] “to read a narrative is not to pass from one word to another, it is also to pass from one level to another” (1). However, in Ghanem’s case, only one level obtains. It is that of formal language.

To start talking of the narrative details, it is quite obvious that in *The Man Who Lost His Shadow*, the author isolates four overlapping characters for our inspection, with each character telling his own story. However, each one’s life is shown to be organically dovetailed with those of the others.

Thus, we have Mabruka, a peasant girl who comes to Cairo to serve Rateb Bey’s family, Samia, who announces that she has “something more important than talent-beauty” (p.47), Muhammad Nagi, who introduces himself as “the most illustrious journalist and writer in the Arab world” (p.179), and finally, the elusive Yusif, who is always there at the background of other characters.

Ghanem’s narrative opens with Mabruka, who starts lashing at Yusif, her “husband’s son by his first wife” right in the second paragraph of her personal account:

My only emotion now is hatred – hatred for one whose death I dream of – a slow lingering death with plenty of pain. I would like to knifeopen his belly, pull out his liver and grind it with my teeth. I would gorge out his eyes, or drink his blood. The man is Yusif Abdul Hameed, my husband’s son by his first wife. (Ghanem, p.9).

While working at Rateb Bey’s house, she observes Suad-Yousif close relationship. Suad is the daughter of Rateb Bey and Midhat’s sister. On one occasion, she has seen Yousif planting “quick kiss on her forehead while Suad sat motionless” (Ghanem, p.15).

As the narrative events unfold, we are made to feel the tense relation between Mabruka and Yusif. Thus, on more than one occasion, Yusif tries to evade her though she has become a widow after the death of Abdul Hamid Effendi, Yusif’s father. Yusif frankly confesses on one occasion, that nothing connects him to her:

She was Mabruka... I was Yusif. She was a maid working in someone’s house. I was the son of a school master. She was a peasant from the country. I was from Cairo. We had nothing in common. Nothing but the link of coincidence. (Ghanem, p.263)

This disengaging verbal comparison attests to Booth’s suggestion that “the author is present in every speech given by the character.” (2)

Mabruka whose life deteriorates ends by being sheltered with her child, Yusif’s half-brother, by Showki, a communist and a photographer [‘illustrator’] at Al-Ayyam, a newspaper. Both are shown to indulge in sex. This is how a sexy Mabruka reveals her fiery passion with Showki:

His lips silenced me. A feeling of physical desire swept over me; I desired him with everything in me. I took everything from him. I gave him everything. I devoured him; he devoured me. (Ghanem, p.70)

If Mabruka ends in sin, Samia, Ghanem's second character, initially sounds quite promising. She is now no longer Bahia Abdul Rahman but Samia Sami named afterwards by an artist whose name is Anwar Sami.

Quite earlier, Bahia Abdul Rahman starts a kind of love relationship with Midhat, Rateb Bey's son but soon she quarrels with him and tells him that she does not think of marrying him.

Later, she falls in love with Yusif to the extent that she shackles up with him. However, she starts speaking of Yusif's awkwardness and hesitation which make her feel sorry for him: "I scolded myself for wanting such a useless person to introduce me to Muhammad Nagi." (Ghanem, p.91). But Yusif, on his part, expresses his unequivocal love for Samia:

I love you when I'm asleep dreaming. Or when I'm asleep and not dreaming. When I breathe, I love you. When I drink, I love you. When I'm thirsty, I love you. Samia, I am worn out. I love you. (Ghanem, p.132)

She, on her part, is not worried by Yusif's poverty. "When I was with him, I did not think of money." (Ghanem, p.148). As it is, she defends him when Showki accuses him of having "taken a bribe" in the form of a "promotion" at Al-Ayyam, a newspaper, a thing which Samia instantly rejects: "His promotion... was not a bribe" (Ghanem, p.155).

Later, however, Yusif's elusiveness and evasiveness are more than obvious. He announces that he "would indeed marry Samia," only to be strangely seen suddenly going on a journalistic mission to Damascus on the very night before their proposed wedding.

According to Derrida, the first stage in a deconstructive reading is to recognize the existence and operation of literary oppositions in our thinking. (3)

In a relevant sense, Samia remembers what Nagi has said of Yusif on a certain occasion: "Yusif was a truthful liar, an honest hypocrite" (Ghanem, p.171).

Accordingly, Muhammad Nagi's take on Yusif must have disturbingly astonished Samia, who, at the moment, laments Yusif's treachery:

Yusif is not a king or emperor. He doesn't have a throne. If Yusif had one, I'm certain he'd abdicate for love as if it was the simplest thing. Yusif's tragedy is that he had no throne. Because of that he will abdicate from his love and search for his throne. (Ghanem, p.163)

Earlier, her relation with the man who has given her the name of a would-be actress becomes strained, a thing which eventually makes Anwar Sami threaten her

that she will “have no future in the cinema” and he, all of a sudden, threateningly explodes:

Did you imagine I was a gentleman? I am the son of a dog. I have rolled in filth. I have eaten pebbles. I have walked barefoot. I have worn torn shoes. I used to beg for sixpences. I robbed the bus conductor. (Ghanem, p.124)

Gibbons rightly suggests that “in third-person narration, the author remains outside the narrative.” (4). Ghanem, however, does the opposite thing. He allows his characters to speak for themselves and to detail their yearnings, a thing which makes them intimate to readers.

Nagi is the third and important character whose position sounds to be impressive as he starts talking about himself: “I Nagi, Muhammad Nagi, the most illustrious journalist and writer in the Arab world. Or so I was” (Ghanem, p.179).

Narratively speaking, Nagi’s relation with Yusif is being harped on. At the beginning, we see Nagi taking care of Yusif, who comes to work at Al-Ayyam, a newspaper. His attitude towards Yusif is quite patronising.

Later, as Yusif’s relation with Shohdi Pasha, who, in a sense, finances the paper, develops, Nagi is shown to lament the fact that he has been defeated by one who has told him that he is his ‘pupil’ and that he “would rather die than do anything to hurt” him. (Ghanem, p.222). But, eventually, the bitter reality is that Nagi now acknowledges his defeat:

Now all has changed. My place has been usurped by that specialist in hypocrisy, that pauper genius, Yusif Abdul Hameed Al-Suefi. How absurd that a boy like him should be taken more seriously than Nagi. The world is upside down. (Ghanem, p.179)

Here, we have an instance of ‘dramatic irony’, the absence of which, Booth enlightens us, will undermine the effectiveness of the narrative act: “there can be no dramatic irony, by definition, unless the author and the audience can somehow share knowledge which the characters do not hold.” (5)

In a relevant sense, it is quite ironic that Nagi’s bitterness swells as Yusif outwits him. From now on, he confesses his helplessness. Thus, he cannot understand “how this weak boy outwitted him” (Ghanem, p.193) and he “never imagined one day he [=Yusif] would rob [him] of all.” (Ghanem, p.198).

Later, ironically, on an intimate occasion, we see Nagi keen enough to protect Yusif and to enhance his reputation:

Listen to me boy. I’m giving you advice like a father because I love you as a son. You can’t possibly become an important editor on this paper while the people you’re with know that Showki, the illustrator, is keeping your father’s wife. (Ghanem, p.200)

As the Suez crisis develops, Nagi has to leave for France for fear of being jailed. Now he sounds pleased to let Yusif take his place:

Yusif can work wonders. Lucky I left him the editorship during this crisis. He knows how to get round them. If he hadn't been there, they'd have gaoled me. (Ghanem, p.181)

In Paris, a helpless Nagi is shown living with Samia, now his wife. There, his health is shown to be deteriorating. In fact, on one occasion, we see him leaving his wife for a night out and, later, he is shown to be indulging in a sexual affair with Gaby, a sympathetic prostitute. Eventually, we glimpse him confessing his utter helplessness: "The poor bed ... had witnessed my disgrace" (Ghanem, p.213).

It is argued that "in third-person narration, the author does not assume the guise of a fictional character but he remains outside the narration." (5). This insightful realization can hardly be applicable to Ghanem's characters since he allows them to speak for themselves, hence succeeding in delving deep down to unearth their hidden whims, a thing which vivifies each character's account.

It is also argued that "the novelist must state, must narrate – what else can he do" (6). Lubbock, who unleashes this instructive advice, would appreciate Ghanem's narrative act in the sense that the latter isolates each character for our inspection, a thing which allows us to delve deep to unearth their inner motives that are apt to propel them.

Accordingly, Yusif, Ghanem's fourth character who would ultimately be recognized as "the man who lost his shadow", is narratively shown to loom large as his motives are adroitly unearthed.

Yusif starts his account by announcing that his name "belongs to a stranger, someone I neither love nor hate..." (Ghanem, p.237). He sounds to resent his painful reality as he surveys the beginnings of his life:

But whenever I thought of the beginnings of my life... I felt I had been given an unkind welcome... Was there no life without tears and violence. (Ghanem, p.239)

He emphasises his utter responsibility for being in this world:

I didn't choose my father. I didn't choose my mother. They dragged me into this world; they gave me a name; they set my life in motion. I'm not responsible. (Ghanem, p.265)

Unequivocally, he announces his wicked reality which pervades the scene as he grows older:

When I got older, I became the man who twists and turns, whose heart says what no one hears, whose tongue says something else which people hear. (Ghanem, p.239)

Earlier, we are told that he has become a friend of Midhat, Rateb Bey's son and that because he loves Suad, Midhat's sister, he identifies himself with anything that relates to her family:

When Midhat spoke of their estate, the estate becomes mine. When their big black car had an accident I grieved... I included everything about them in my love for Suad. (Ghanem, p.266)

Later, we are told that Yusif is overwhelmed by his love for Suad as he is seen with her:

... I could not concentrate. My body felt on fire. I knew I loved her. Should I tell her? ... she must have become aware of the pressure of my body, of the fervor of my feelings, for she stopped speaking... (Ghanem, p.267)

Later still, Suad marries another man and Yusif befriends Samia and proclaims that he has changed:

The idea of marrying Samia was no stranger than that of renting the flat. I had no more fears. Samia had changed too. I would indeed marry her and proclaim... if need be: this was Samia, the woman I loved, my wife! (Ghanem, p.327)

As expected, he fails her and unexpectedly departs, the night before the wedding, ... to Damascus on a journalistic errand. Later, when he returns, he has to explain his sudden departure to Syria to pacify Samia but he is afraid that she may not understand. Strangely enough, Yusif's confession has freed Samia from loving him:

His confession had left me trembling; it had freed me from love. I did not trust the innocence in his eyes. I did not trust his frankness. I did not believe in the motives he confessed. I was sure he would betray me... I remember what Nagi said about Yusif's ambition. Yusif... was a truthful liar, an innocent hypocrite. (Ghanem, p.171)

"The reader of a novel... is himself a novelist" (7). Henkle's statement is perceptive in the sense that, we readers, can punctuate, as the novelist can, the inner yearnings of the characters.

Yousif's hazy relation with Mabruka, his father's widowed wife, is narratively emphasised. On one occasion, we see him promising to help her on the condition that she tries to distance herself from him:

Don't worry Mabruka, I'll help you! I'll get you out of your troubles. But I make one condition only- don't come where people can see us. (Ghanem, p.307)

Later, however, he is bold enough to acknowledge his relation to her when Nagi tells him that "she now lives in sin with Showki Mahmoud" (Ghanem, p.200). Yusif is now bold enough to acknowledge his relationship:

I'm not ashamed. If you would like me to tell everyone on the paper, I'm quite willing. After all, many Pashas have married their servants. (Ghanem, p.200)

As it is, Yusif's professional opportunism is shown to pervade the scene. He modestly begins his journalistic tendency by hoping that one day he would see his story "First Love" being published at al-Ayyam (Ghanem, p.281). Then he tries to find a journalistic job through Showki, his "last resort" for working at Al-Ayyam: "a job, any job, sweeping and cleaning...[there]" (Ghanem, p.287). He ends by being embraced by Nagi, who starts training him for a promising journalistic job at Al-Ayyam and whose advice to the young man has usefully been unequivocal:

My advice to you, Yusif, is to disregard rumours. I need someone I can depend on. You remind me of myself as I used to be. But I was bolder. (Ghanem, p.297)

Later, urged by Shohdi Pasha with whose wife Nagi has had an affair, Yusif is asked to insult and abuse the man who has embraced him as a son. At the beginning, his hesitation is more than obvious:

I had to humiliate the man who has raised me up, abuse him in front of his own creatures, pretending that I had suddenly grown confident and strong, while in fact my confidence and strength were one man, Shohdi Pasha. (Ghanem, p.329)

But soon he has to surrender to his opportunist reality:

... if I did as I was told I would be rich. This would please Samia. My pockets would be stuffed with money. We could honeymoon in Europe. Having conquered Nagi, I would be a hero in her eyes. (Ghanem, p.329)

To Nagi's utter astonishment, Yusif forges a quarrel with him, calling him "despicable coward" and ending by attaining the highest position at the paper. Soon the opportunist becomes aware of how men instantly change their loyalty:

I became supreme in a newspaper where the smiles of the editors showed what hypocrites they were. The most hypocritical is Nagi, who never stopped praising me, consulting me, asking me to correct his articles. (Ghanem, p.330)

This is how Yusif, who glorifies himself, now as being "the most illustrious journalist in the Arab world" (Ghanem, p.341) enunciates his luxurious life:

'I' have left poverty behind. 'I' only smoke cigars, wear the most expensive clothes and douche myself in the richest perfumes. Each day I feel younger, each day my face looks more ingenuous and boyish; I am the man they trust. (Ghanem, p.341)

Yusif Bey now discloses his devilish nature: "Life is delicious for the strong. There is no greater pleasure than to tread on the necks of your opponents" (Ghanem, p.345).

When an officer in the secret police comes to protect Yusif from the disgraceful Mabruka, Yusif's deceptive reality soars:

Riri is my father's wife. Mabruka is no longer important. What is important is that no Mabruka should be forced to go the way she has gone. We are all fighting for a better society. (Ghanem, p.342)

Strangely enough, as Shohdi Pasha's state dwindles, Yusif's state exalts now being "on close terms with the men of the Revolution." (Ghanem, p.341). Later, as he receives Nagi, who now returns home from France, he entertains the idea that "one of us must go. If you don't die, then I must." (Ghanem, p.351). Nagi dies and Yusif announces that "death is dead" (Ghanem, p.352). He tells himself that he is "thinking like a madman" (Ghanem, p.352). He, eventually, confesses that the "mischievous child" is still motivating him:

To my woe, to my joy... Now I know! It was the child who taught me...
He didn't go, he didn't desert me... Yusif Abdul Hamid: You were hidden, you mischievous child, inside me. (Ghanem, p.352)

Conclusion

To recapture things, the novel has dealt with four characters, showing their merits and shortcomings but it project Yusif as being at the background of each character.

Opportunism is the issue that is singled out in Yusif though the shortcomings of the other characters are skilfully dealt with. Yusif is a student who is shown to betray his teacher, Muhammad Nagi.

Ghanem delves deep down into men's souls to unearth their motives, some of which are disengagingly appalling and destructive. It is this ability on his part that makes him a recognised Arab writer.

Notes

1. Barthes, p. 5
2. Booth, p. 18
3. Bressler, p. 122
4. Gibbons, p. 131
5. Booth, p. 175
6. Lubbock, p. 63
7. Henkle, p. 17
8. Selden, p. 75

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