

SABRY HAFEZ

THE NOVEL, POLITICS AND ISLAM

Haydar Haydar's *Banquet for Seaweed*

ON APRIL 28TH of this year an impassioned appeal appeared in Cairo, blazoned across the pages of the newspaper *al-Sha'b*. Entitled 'Who Pledges to Die with Me?', it was a ferocious attack on a novel published in Egypt some months earlier, *Walimah li-A'shab al-Bahr (Banquet for Seaweed)*, calling it a blasphemous work by an apostate who merited assassination. Uproar ensued. Mosques thundered at the discovery of this infamy. The novel was withdrawn. Judges and police interrogated intellectuals and officials in the Ministry of Culture. Students demonstrated, and armoured cars rolled into the streets. Debate raged in the National Assembly, and the activities of a political party were suspended. Two different government committees were set up to investigate the affair. A torrent of articles and declarations, for and against the book at issue, poured off the presses. In Yemen, in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait analogous campaigns were triggered. Though the Arab world has seen not a few cultural or political clashes over literary works, the scale and intensity of the hubbub in Egypt this year is unprecedented.

Yet what is the text that has provoked it? A novel that is now nearly twenty years old, and has run through at least six editions, by a Syrian writer whose fiction has never so much as touched on the country where he is now reviled. Perhaps the most astonishing, and ominous, feature of the whole episode is the disjuncture between the controversy and its object. Not that *Banquet for Seaweed* is an irrelevant or inconsiderable

novel—just the contrary: it is a very powerful and remarkable one. But no less revealing of the present condition of culture and politics in Egypt than the rage of its enemies is their blindness to its themes and significance. To understand this deadly discrepancy, a look at the historical context of the battlefield of ideas in the Middle East today is necessary.

Power and learning

The Arabic novel is a purely twentieth-century phenomenon, whose rise was intricately linked to a cultural transition—involving a major shift in what Pierre Bourdieu has called ‘symbolic domination’—in the passage to modernity.¹ In pre-modern times, cultural leadership in the Arab world was virtually inseparable from religious authority, itself highly dependent on the currently governing political power. In these conditions, education was firmly in the hands of the religious establishment. The basic function of the leading centres of learning—the Azhar in Cairo, the Najaf in Iraq, the Umayyad in Syria, the Zaytuna in Tunisia or the Qarawiyyin in Morocco²—was to teach the Quran and transmit the concepts and rules of Muslim tradition. Most cultural production was grounded in religious concerns, and works of literature were deeply rooted in intellectual and stylistic competences acquired from the study of sacred texts. Endowments by the faithful strengthened the material basis of traditional Islamic institutions, but did not—with the exception of the Shi’i centre in Najaf—enhance their independence from political rulers.

Islam granted those equipped with learning a prominent role in society, so cultural elites, nurtured by the religious establishment, often acted as spiritual arbiters between the rulers and the ruled. More accessible to the people, their good offices could mediate complaints from below to those above, or ameliorate unjust rulings by the powerful—while, vice-versa, rulers often used them to pacify or control the masses. Over time, the more stagnant and autocratic the political establishment became, the more subservient the traditional intellectual elite was forced to be. Such was the trend pronounced during the three centuries of Ottoman

¹ See *Language and Symbolic Power*, Cambridge 1991, particularly ‘The Economy of Linguistic Exchanges’, pp. 35–102.

² Until recently none of these institutions taught any foreign languages.

rule in the Middle East, when local religious offices were manipulated from Istanbul to stoke individual ambitions, set groups against each other and coopt potential discontent. For the smooth running of each region, an effective alliance had to be set in place between the appointed *wali*—administrative official—and the local religious leadership, capable of suppressing or discrediting any opposition to the status quo.

Modernity on the Nile

In Egypt, however, the symbolic capital of the traditional elites started to erode in the early nineteenth century, when Muhammad Ali (fl 1805–48)³—often called the founder of modern Egypt—introduced, on the heels of the short-lived Napoleonic expedition to the Nile, a new, European-based educational system. For centuries, the religious establishment had sustained a system of Qur’anic schools throughout the Middle East that gave it a monopoly of education. Thus Muhammad Ali’s reforms, which broke this monopoly, amounted to little less than a cultural revolution. The new educational system supplied the modernizing state with much needed technocrats and civil servants. Schools, hospitals, newspapers, magazines, printing presses, learned societies and charitable organizations were founded in large numbers. The spread of journalism, and translations of European literature, created new reading publics and fostered nationalist awakening. Even the position of women was not left unchanged.⁴ From all these institutions, the traditionally educated were alienated and effectively excluded. The new order preferred advisors trained in Europe, who often returned to occupy high positions in its administration. By the time Muhammad Ali’s grandson, Khedive Isma’il—educated in Paris, and determined to ‘make Egypt a part of Europe’—was deposed by British intervention in 1879, the modern educational system had established complete ascendancy over its religious rival, its products outnumbering their counterparts from the traditional schools by ten to one. The latter, however, were marginalized rather than uprooted—an error for which Egypt would later pay dearly.

³ One of his successful wars was waged against the fundamentalist Wahhabi movement in the Arabian Peninsula, crushing their revolt and undermining their power base. It took them decades to recover. When they did so, the result was the Saudi kingdom.

⁴ By the early twentieth century, girls made up 9 per cent of all school pupils in Egypt, the figure rising to 14 in 1910, 18 in 1920, and 22 in 1930.

Under the British protectorate radical nationalism was repressed, but the semi-colonial order could not halt rapid urbanization and, with it, further changes in customary modes of life and systems of values. An educated reading-public started to support new types of literature and art—forms hitherto unknown in Arabic culture: the short story, the novel, drama, painting and, eventually, the cinema. Meanwhile, religious education was coming to be seen—even in the countryside, its traditional hinterland—as barren and unhelpful to the young. The graduates of the Azhar had serious problems finding work in the institutions of the modern state. Politically, too, since the struggle for independence from Britain needed to speak the language of the occupiers, its leaders came without exception from the modern educational system. By the first decades of the twentieth century, the new cultural elite was ready to challenge the traditional intellectuals on their own ground. Pioneering works of narrative included acerbic attacks on pillars of local religion—typically depicted as villains using religious robes to hide treachery, opportunism and debauchery. After discrediting the traditional elite in the first two decades of the century, the new intellectuals started to rationalize the sacred in the 1930s,⁵ and to accommodate it into the secular by the 1940s, arriving at an almost complete secularization of religious topics in their treatment of the character of the Prophet and his early companions by the 1950s.⁶ In 1960 the first Marxist biography of Muhammad appeared.⁷ The development of this intellectual offensive coincided with the country's progress from colonial rule to limited independence, and finally complete liberation from imperialist control at the end of the 1950s.

However eroded their power base, traditionalist leaders never ceased to resist the advance of secularization; and the dual educational system continued to generate an underlying dichotomy in Egyptian culture that gave them resources for counterattack. Bigots used every opportunity to

⁵ In the works of Muhammad Husain Haykal, Taha Husain, Abbas Mahmud al-Aqqad and Tawfiq al-Hakim, who rewrote the life of Muhammad and a number of his major companions in modern terms.

⁶ In works like Yahya Haqqi's *Saint's Lamp* and Ali Ahmad Bakathir's *Red Revolutionary*; then in Fathi Radwan's *Great Revolutionary*, and Nazmi Luqa's *Muhammad: the Message and the Messenger*. Luqa was the first Copt to write a life of Muhammad.

⁷ Abd al-Rahman al-Sharqawi's *Muhammad the Messenger of Freedom*.

depict their adversaries as catspaws of a Western plot against Islam—not an easy task, at a time when they were leading the national movement against colonial rule and mobilizing the masses behind them. Yet traditionalists never tired of assailing their foes as enemies of the faith. The history of modern Egyptian culture is punctuated by the battles fought between the two forces. In 1925, the traditionalists won the contest over Ali Abd al-Raziq's book, *Islam and the System of Government*, which had called for the separation of religion and the state, and secured the dismissal of the author from his post at the Azhar. But in 1926 they lost the campaign to convict Taha Husain—the leading Egyptian intellectual of the time—of blasphemy, for advocating in his book, *On Pre-Islamic Poetry*, a Cartesian approach to the study of Arabic culture. In 1927 the Muslim Brothers association was formed, to press home the counter-attack on the modernists. But the 1930s and 1940s proved to be a period of frustration for the traditionalists; in a time of liberal experiment, they failed to make any gains over the next two decades. It was not until 1959 that they again won a significant victory, when the Azhar proscribed Naguib Mahfouz's novel, *The Children of Gebelawi*.⁸ A decade later, two plays by Abd al-Rahman al-Sharqawi, *Al-Husain: The Revolutionary*, and *Al-Husain: The Martyr*, were banned from the stage.

Under Nasser, however, these remained relatively isolated episodes. In the main, the 1950s and 1960s was a period of social polarization, increasing activity by the left, and a sharp crackdown on the Muslim Brothers and kindred groups. Many fundamentalist leaders went into exile, where a number joined forces with Nasser's two major enemies, the feudal dynasties of the Arabian Peninsula and their patron in

⁸ The novel *Awlad Haratina (The Children of Our Alley)*, which appeared in English under the title *The Children of Gebelawi*, was serialized in *Al-Ahram*, the Egyptian daily with the widest circulation, but the Azhar objected to it, so it was not published in book form. However in 1966 a Lebanese publisher, Dar al-Adab, produced an edition in Beirut, copies of which were sold in Cairo. Citation of this work in the Swedish Academy's declaration of award of the Nobel Prize to Mahfouz in 1988 greatly angered the Islamicists, and shortly after the eruption of the Rushdie affair, the leading fundamentalist, Omar Abd al-Rahman—currently imprisoned in the US for his role in the attack on the World Trade Centre—declared that had they killed Mahfouz in 1959 for writing *The Children of Our Alley*, Rushdie would never have dared write his novel. This was taken as a fresh *fatwa* to kill Mahfouz. In 1994 an attempt on his life failed, although the assassin plunged a dagger into his neck, leaving him paralysed in his right arm.

the United States. Association with the Saudi dynasty de-radicalized the Islamic movement, giving it a built-in phobia of the left. When Egypt was trounced by Israel in the Six Day War of 1967, these traditionalists seized on the defeat to blame the whole modernist project for this national disaster. This was the beginning of a determined counter-offensive to re-legitimize discredited forms of religious-political discourse, which modernist intellectuals made the mistake of not taking very seriously at first.

Saudi sustenance

But with Sadat's installation in power in 1970, the balance of forces changed dramatically. Nasser's version of Arab nationalism and state-led industrialization was unceremoniously ditched in favour of an open door to Western capital and a brazenly pro-American foreign policy, in exchange for lavish US and Saudi subsidies. Sadat's regime had no hesitation in using Islamic activists to stamp out student opposition to its policies in the universities, where fundamentalist groups violently silenced the left and steadily built up their own influence—offering 'Islam is the solution'⁹ as an appealing slogan to a now impoverished stratum of unemployed young graduates, ironically recipients of a modern education, but left without a future after the collapse of Nasser's welfare state. After the 1973 War, the oil boom in the Middle East offered a further golden opportunity to the Islamicists. Leaders of the fundamentalist movement had already amassed considerable wealth during their years of exile in Saudi service. Now they were in a position to act as brokers for desperately wanted jobs in the Gulf, amid the rampant unemployment and inflation unleashed by Sadat's open-door policies. Naturally, they favoured those with the right ideological leanings, and for the first time the adoption of a retrograde discourse became the key

⁹ To all social, economic, legal, political and spiritual problems. Islam, as a comprehensive faith that embraces every aspect of this world and the hereafter, is a basically static ideology in which all is clearly laid down in a finite mould, marking the boundaries of past, present and future in final form. There is no room for change here, only for exegesis, commentary and interpretation. Hermeneutic marginalia are possible, not real or radical mutation. The only acceptable permutation is from the present to the past, from the fallen condition of today's world to the splendid days of early glory, the haven of formative years. Movement runs backward not forward, and progress is towards immutability and permanence.

to vital work-opportunities and chances of wealth.¹⁰ Within another few years, a more dramatic form of adventure opened up for young militants. Massive American and Saudi funding of the Mujahideen movement in Afghanistan drew sizeable numbers of recruits to the Afghan War from the under-class of jobless but idealistic young graduates that had developed in Egypt, as in other poor and densely populated Arab countries. Combat training and experience in the Afghan war radicalized the neo-Islamicist movement, and gave it a new self-confidence. Execution of the widely detested Sadat by Muslim militants at the start of the 1980s only enhanced their aura of dedication.

The following decade saw the consolidation of Islamicist legitimacy in Egypt, as kleptocracy and corruption persisted, and protection of the poor and weak by public authority became a mockery. Betrayed by the state, the under-classes were driven towards an alternative welfare system offered by the neo-traditionalists. With the collapse of public health and education, the role of mosque-schools and mosque-clinics became more and more important, and the credibility of official media was undermined by a counter-discourse which could back its words with competent deeds experienced in daily life.¹¹ At the turn of the 1990s, victory in Kabul brought back a large number of battle-hardened 'Afghan Arabs', as they were called, buoyed up by the defeat and fall of the USSR. They readily presented themselves as the only viable alternative to an increasingly decadent and subaltern regime.

Rebranding Islam

These social and political changes were accompanied by a no less significant cultural shift. Sadat had authorized a token liberalization of the scenery of power to decorate his dictatorship, allowing the forma-

¹⁰ The more compliant the individual with the Wahhabi version of Islam, the greater their salary became. This offered the Wahhabis a rare opportunity to infiltrate Egypt and exact their revenge on the modernizing legacy of Muhammad Ali, who crushed their early movement and delayed their success for more than a century.

¹¹ These services were neither free, nor conventionally subsidized. Rather, the neo-Islamicists used the idealism of young professionals, and unemployed youth, to offer cheaper services to those who needed them most, not incidentally increasing the resources of their organizations in the process.

tion of a number of political parties, none with any hope of winning an election, but each entitled to its newspaper. Two of these parties, *Al-Wafd* and *Hizb al-'Amal* (Labour Party), collaborated with the outlawed Islamicist groups, and the Labour Party ended up completely in their hands, its newspaper *al-Sha'b* (*The People*) gradually becoming their official organ. The architect of this transformation, 'Adel Husain, was an ex-communist who developed a highly effective discourse, drawing on the deep yearning for a bygone cultural superiority, as a way out of a profound sense of humiliation and defeat. He recognized that the static, pre-Copernican nature of Islamic ideology, with its geocentric universe, was essential to its magical appeal for the young, yet, at the same time, a source of tension with a socio-historical reality in which human beings and their order were visibly losing any feeling of centrality, and becoming more and more subject to fragmentation. To solve this main contradiction of Islamic ideology, he went onto the attack with appeals to the sincerity of the young to wake up to the conspiracy of the West against Islam. Turning *The People* into a messianic vehicle of the new Islamicism, he cleverly inverted prevailing images of modernity, associating it with failure, defeat and corruption, and contrasting these to the puritan, idealistic standards of Islam. He also utilized Sadat's call for a state based on 'science and religion' to the full, putting technical knowledge and the fruits of his past as a militant Marxist in the service of religion. Charismatic preachers with access to state-controlled television popularized this message, widening the public of *The People* and making many of its columnists stars of the new era of the faithful.

Islamicist violence

Meanwhile, publishing houses financed by Saudi or Iranian money filled the market with subsidized editions of a Muslim discourse covering every aspect of spiritual life. To enforce their grip on the market, the new zealots drove out writings suspect of rationalist or secular viewpoints, activating the Azhar and Council for Islamic Studies as inquisitors and censors. In the last two decades, not a year has passed without a number of works being banned for theological reasons. Traditionalists had now turned the tables on their opponents. Instead of periodic reinterpretation or appropriation of the story of the Prophet by rationalists and modernists—now suppressed by a rigidly orthodox canon—treatises were appearing on topics once the bastion of modernity, calling for the devel-

opment of a specifically Islamic literature.¹² Although it is difficult to take many of these tracts seriously as intellectual arguments, culturally they represent a complete reversal of the rise of modernism to symbolic domination in the first half of the twentieth century.

All this was achieved in an atmosphere of fear and intimidation, in which free-thinking intellectuals increasingly met with not only symbolic but literal violence. Modernists found themselves trapped between Islamicist fanatics and an irretrievably degenerate and servile regime, as the 1990s opened with one attempt on the life of Mubarak in Addis Ababa and ended with another in Port Said, while attacks against tourists punctuated the life of the country in between. To worsen matters, the state, branding all its opponents as terrorists, strove to enlist modernist support in its campaigns of repression. Intellectuals who let themselves be lured into consorting with officialdom then drew the rage of the Islamicists against them. In 1992 a leading rationalist, Faraj Fawdah, was assassinated. In 1994 came the attempt on the life of Mahfouz that left him paralysed in one arm. In 1996 Nasr Hamid Abu-Zaid, author of an unorthodox exegesis of tenets in the Qur'an,¹³ was ordered by a court ruling to divorce his wife, on the grounds that a Muslim woman is forbidden wedlock with an infidel—forcing the couple into exile. It is this fevered escalation that reached a sudden crescendo with the furore over the publication of *Banquet for Seaweed* in Cairo in the spring of this year.

¹² The call for Islamic literature goes back to numerous articles by the two main Islamic ideologues of the 1950s and 1960s: Abu-l-Hasan al-Nadawi and Sayyid Qutb. But their ideas were developed into full length books during the 1980s: among them, Muhammad Qutb's *Manhaj al-Fann al-Islami (Principles of Islamic Art)*, Najib al-Kilani's *Al-Islamiyyah wa-l-Madhahib al-Adabiyyah (Islamism and Literary Schools)* and *Madkhal ila al-Adab al-Islami (Introduction to Islamic Literature)*, 'Imad al-Din Khalil's *Al-Naqd al-Islami al-Mu'asir (Contemporary Islamic Criticism)*, and Muhammad Ahmad al-'Azab's *Fi al-Fikr al-Islami min al-Wijhah al-Adabiyyah (On Islamic Thought: A Literary Perspective)*. It is significant that all these authors worked for a number of years in the cultural or educational institutions of Saudi Arabia and either published their works while still *en poste*, or immediately upon return to their home country.

¹³ The work he submitted for promotion to the chair of Islamic thought in Cairo University was branded as too rationalist and secular. A member of the promotion committee, the Islamic activist 'Abd al-Sabur Shahin, took the case outside the university, preaching against Abu-Zaid in his mosque, while other Islamic activists financed the legal suit against him.

In recent years the price of serious books and magazines in Egypt has soared, amidst a rampant inflation that has delapidated the purchasing power of the middle class. Today the average Egyptian reader cannot afford to buy literary works published outside the country, and has difficulty in acquiring even those printed within it. As a palliative measure, a few years ago the Ministry of Culture set up a series of cheap reprints of outstanding works by contemporary Arab writers from countries other than Egypt, edited by the Egyptian novelist Ibrahim Aslan, entitled *Afaq al-Kitabah (Horizons of Writing)*.¹⁴ The series only prints between 3,000 and 5,000 copies of any work, but since these are sold at the price of a newspaper they are often out of print within a few weeks. In October 1999, *Banquet for Seaweed* was released by the series, a novel of 700 pages with a print run of 3,000, and a cover price of 4 Egyptian pounds—a little over a dollar.

Voices of dissent

Its author Haydar Haydar is a leading Syrian representative of the 1960s generation of writers and intellectuals in the Arab world.¹⁵ Born, as a rule, shortly before or during the Second World War, their childhood nourished on dreams of independence and freedom, this was a cohort that reached its teens in a Middle East most—though not all—of which had been decolonized. During their schooldays, Nasser's brand of pan-Arab nationalism and the triumph of liberation movements elsewhere in the world filled the air with euphoria, and the radio with patriotic anthems to a future based on equality and social justice, free from foreign exploitation and domestic regression. By the time they went to university, higher education was free in Egypt, and almost free in most Arab universities, filling them with a healthy mixture of students from all strata of society. Campuses teemed with progressive ideas, and cul-

¹⁴ There is a sister series devoted to the work of Egyptian writers, *Aswat Adabiyah (Literary Voices)*, edited by the eminent Egyptian novelist and short-story writer, Muhammad al-Bisati.

¹⁵ He has published six collections of short stories: *Hakaya al-Nawras al-Muhajir (Stories of a Migrating Seagull, 1968)*, *Al-Wamd (The Shining, 1970)*, *Al-Wu'ul (Goats, 1978)*, *Al-Fayadan (The Deluge, 1979)*, *Al-Tamawwujat (Waves, 1979)* and *Ghasaq al-Aliyah (The Dusk of the Gods, 1987)*; and five novels: *Al-Fahd (The Leopard, 1969)*, *Al-Zaman al-Muhish (Dreary Time, 1973)*, *Walimah Li-A'shab al-Bahr (Banquet for Seaweed, 1983)*, *Maraya al-Nar (Mirrors of Fire, 1992)* and *Shumus al-Ghajar (The Suns of the Gypsies, 1997)*.

tural life appeared generally free of sediments from an obscurantist past. (In fact, though masked, these were still operational in several aspects of the official discourse, allowing its adherents to use this period of hibernation for stock-taking and reconstruction.)¹⁶ The leading cultural journal of the time, in which most of this generation's writers and critics made their debut, was the monthly *Al-Adab (Literatures)*, published in Beirut and widely read from Iraq to Morocco. A truly pan-Arab literary review, *Al-Adab* was modelled on *Les Temps Modernes*,¹⁷ taking its inspiration from Sartre's attractive blend of Marxism and Existentialism and its guidelines from his manifesto *What is Literature?*.

By the time the new generation had completed its cultural formation and begun its own literary career in the 1960s, the euphoria of independence had dissipated, as dreams of freedom and social justice foundered on the realities of autocratic rule and thwarted development. In consequence, its writing marked a clear break with the simplicities of a pre-independence literature, which had habitually posited a more or less monolithic national self against the colonial Other. By contrast, the new authors dwelt on the contradictions of national identity, giving voice to the voiceless. Writing with subtlety and indirection, to elude official censorship, they refused the codes of the ruling discourse, and foresaw the disaster of 1967 long before it took place.

Haydar Haydar is eminently a product of this experience. From an Alawite family, Haydar was born in 1936 in the small village of Husain al-Bahr, near Tartus, on the Mediterranean coast. After graduating from the University of Damascus he worked as a teacher, finding time to write. His first novel *The Leopard* (1969) is set in the mountain villages of his region, depicting the plight of peasants who had fought for Syrian independence, only to suffer yet worse oppression from local landlords under national than under colonial administration. The narrative traces the fate of an individual revolt against harsh and depressive conditions that are not yet mature enough for collective rebellion: a tragedy yield-

¹⁶ This was the period in which the bulk of the work of one of the leading theorists of the new Islamicist movements, Sayyid Qutb, was written.

¹⁷ This was not the first time an Arab cultural review had based itself on *Les Temps Modernes*; in 1945 Taha Husain's *Al-Katib al Misri (Egyptian Writer)* had used the same model, but remained a purely Egyptian literary journal and ceased publication by 1948.

ing only a legend in an unchanging landscape. Haydar's second novel *Dreary Time* (1973) is the *Bildungsroman* of a group of young people arriving from the impoverished countryside in search of a new life in Damascus, following their progressive loss of hope and direction amid the maze of its confused religious ideologies, thwarted social aspirations, competing brands of nationalism and simplistic versions of Marxism. It can be read as an elegy to the urban youth of his time, and their inability to comprehend the complexity of the forces frustrating them.

An epic of the modern Arab world

A decade passed between these early works and Haydar's next novel. In the mid-1970s he went to Algeria to teach, moving on in 1981 to Beirut, where he worked with the Palestinian resistance until the Israeli invasion of the Lebanon forced him, along with so many others, to flee to Cyprus. There *Banquet for Seaweed* appeared in 1983, in a limited edition published in Nicosia. It received immediate critical acclaim and was reprinted several times in Beirut and Damascus during the following years. Marking a major thematic and stylistic break in his work, the novel moves away from the local Syrian scene for a broad panorama of the failure of Arab revolution, complex in structure and epic in scope. *Banquet for Seaweed* interweaves two narratives—one recounting the Communist uprising in the Marshes of Southern Iraq in 1968, the other portraying the daily realities of Algeria in the early 1970s. Spatial and temporal axes are held in balance by an intricate dialectical form. The story starts on an Algerian morning, in a chapter entitled 'Autumn', proceeds through 'Winter' and 'Spring', then breaks to a thematic sequence set mainly in Iraq—"The Marshes", 'Love', 'Ode to Death', 'The Rise of Leviathan'—before returning to 'Summer', where it ends in the Algerian night following the daybreak of its beginning. Substantively, what this structure figures is a dialogue between the revolution that was crushed in Iraq, and the revolution that supposedly triumphed in Algeria, mediated through two contrasting love affairs.

The novel opens with a couple strolling on a beach, accosted by two young louts with the taunt: 'Decent Algerian women don't mix with foreigners.' The foreigner is an Iraqi exile, Mahdi Jawad. Member of a once vibrant Communist Party, the largest force in his country, he is now a survivor of its debacle. For the ICP, refusing to overthrow an ailing and unpopular regime in 1963, allowed the Ba'ath party to seize power

instead, and split apart. Mahdi, belonging to its radical wing, was jailed and tortured. Escaping from prison, he has made his way to Algeria to work as a teacher in its Arabization programme. There, however, the military regime of Boumédiène is now in power, the liberal and socialist leaders of the FLN in prison. Mahdi soon discovers that life in Algiers is not radically different from that in Baghdad. 'The city is beautiful, surrounded with forests and the sea, but like any Arab city, it is dreary: ruled by tyranny, hunger, bribery, corruption, religion, hatred, ignorance, cruelty and murder.'¹⁸ Dreams of justice and emancipation seem as distant as under the French. Ignored, unemployed, without visible future, the children of the revolution turn their frustration against themselves, against women, against fellow Arabs.

His companion on the strand, Asya Lakhdar, was ten years old when Algeria was liberated. Her father had fought for the FLN in the mountains, was arrested by the French shortly before the victory of the Revolution, and tortured to death; then, as a child, she witnessed the ruthless campaign of destruction by the OAS before the French withdrawal. She now lives with her younger sister Manar and her mother Fadilah, who has since been forced to marry a merchant, Yazid Wild al-Hajj. Her stepfather played no role in the revolution, but realized that marrying the widow of a martyr as a second wife and raising her daughters could give him political *cachet* and opportunities under the new regime. The mean and pragmatic Yazid exploits Fadilah and oppresses her daughters as a petty tyrant at home, while pursuing shady deals on the black market in the city: a representative figure of the corrupt new merchant class that has inherited the revolution and emptied its goals of meaning. Ironically, confident in the virtues of the market no matter what its colour, Yazid believes that business values alone can save Algeria from economic decline and offer it a democracy better than Boumédiène's militarism or Ben Bella's 'communism', as he describes it. The sisters cordially detest him.

At the time of the narrative, Asya is struggling to pass her *baccalauréat*, after failing it three times because of her weakness in one subject, Arabic. The dreams of the two girls have gone in opposite directions.

¹⁸ Haydar Haydar, *Walimah li-A'shab al-Bahr (Banquet for Seaweed—henceforward BS)*, sixth reprint, Dar Ward, Damascus 1998, p. 11. All references are to this Arabic edition.

Manar is determined to escape it all and get away to a good life in France. Asya wants to regain Arab identity by recovering her language, to study at university and work in her country. When Mahdi appears in the classroom, he reminds Asya of her father, who was Mahdi's age when he died, and he is soon smitten with her—'fresh and vital as the sea, beautiful as a goddess of old whom death has forgotten'.¹⁹ Extra-curricular lessons allow their relationship to flower, against the background of Yazid's opposition and the hostility of Algerian society. If this love affair, often lyrically described, offers Mahdi emotional release from the melancholy of his time in Algiers, he finds friendship and intellectual support from a chance encounter with a compatriot, Mihyar al-Bahili, teaching philosophy in another school in the city. As an idealistic youth in Iraq, Mihyar's faith in Nasserism was shattered by the Arab defeat of 1967. Determined not to give up, he joined the Marxists who organized the uprising in the Marshes of Southern Iraq in 1968, an insurrection which lasted several months before it was abandoned by the ICP, on instructions from Moscow. Captured by the Iraqi Army, Mihyar had managed to escape from prison and, like others of his generation, made for Algeria in the hope of serving a more effective revolution.

He soon discovers that he is chasing a mirage, becoming if anything even more disappointed than Mahdi in the fruits of national liberation. The fate of Fullah Bu-'Innab, landlady of the pension where he lodges, personifies that of the women in Algeria who struggled for the independence of their country and ended up worse off than when they started. Fighting side by side with men in the mountains, covering for them in time of danger, undertaking hazardous missions, even acting as a delegate abroad, Fullah had been a militant of the revolution in the most complete sense. But with its victory, she had lost twice over: first in refusing venal competition for material privileges in the new order, as nation became market and patriotism bigotry; and then in falling under pressure to submit to traditional Islamic status. Seeking to preserve her freedom, she found that to reject domestic slavery was only to expose herself to the cynical attentions of old comrades, now men of power and possessions. Aware that her charms will fade, she manages to get a large flat, which she runs as a pension to provide for herself. The only freedom left to her, highly resented by the surrounding soci-

¹⁹ BS, p. 280.

ety, is to take lovers among the Arab teachers who lodge in the pension. This defeated and desolate soul feels a strong affinity with Mihyar as someone else capable of seeing the social deterioration around them, and equally helpless before its dynamic.²⁰ She tries to seduce him, without success. Mihyar, who loves the wife he has left behind and is in no mood for an affair, discovers that the regime in Baghdad has sent agents to file slanderous reports on them to the Algerian authorities. But she perseveres, and when Mihyar falls ill and, in a feverish delirium, clings to her to ward off death, the relationship is consummated. Fullah nurses him back to life, and he starts to identify with her predicament.

Bitter fruits

Beside these four major characters, the novel includes a variety of secondary figures and sub-plots which amplify its bitter portrait of the human consequences of revolutionary failure in the Arab world.²¹ Haydar uses a poetic style to often savage satirical effect. But though suffused with anger, the narrative offers repeated reflection on the sources of the violence—physical and symbolic—it depicts: how much of it stems from the legacy of colonialism and how much is inherent in any class rule or political tyranny? Corruption is treated in the same spirit. Excoriating ‘the commercial madness and the thieves of the new era’, the text goes on: ‘The French had left ten years ago, but the inhabitants began to feel that, before leaving, the invaders had cultivated their seeds in the womb of the city.’²² In composition, the novel oscillates between mimesis—narrative purporting to be a true account of events and characters—and diegesis—narrative mediated through the characters, laden with their own questionable comments or generalizations. The four chapters with temporal titles are more diegetic, allowing the characters to vent their subjectivity at will, while the four with thematic titles are closer to a mimetic record of historical events, furnishing an unwritten history of Iraqi Communism and the uprising in the Marshes. The division is not rigid, the novel moving from one mode to the other without

²⁰ BS, p. 101.

²¹ The most significant of these is a group of expatriate teachers—Rashid the Palestinian, Abdullah the Syrian, Zulfun the Iraqi and Mursi the Egyptian—who offer an Arab national spectrum that widens the implications of what happens to the two heroes of the novel.

²² BS, p. 81.

undue formal precaution, in a way that has made misrepresentation of it easier. Historical and intertextual allusions generate different levels of meaning in each—echoes of Sophocles or Shakespeare, references to Eliot and Kazantzakis, recollections of the Zanj and the Qarmatians,²³ against the horizon of ruling cliques sustaining the ‘carcass of this sacred world and protecting the temple of the desert monster floating on oil wells and incantations of Islam’.²⁴

Banquet for Seaweed unfolds what is essentially a political obituary—at once mordant and poignant—of both communist and nationalist movements in the Arab world of the 1960s and 1970s. In that sense, it is a reckoning with what was then the immediate past. But the novel is also uncannily prophetic. It foresaw the rise of a murderous Islamic fundamentalism, and both civil war in Algeria and the gigantic disasters in store for Iraq, long before either occurred. Haydar’s grasp of the undercurrents of popular feeling in Algeria, of an almost palpable sense of failure and defeat, is remarkable. He captured the fermenting anger that was to explode five years later in the uprising of 1988, and warned of the bloody strife that has raged there ever since. Likewise his portrait of ‘The Rise of Leviathan’²⁵ in Iraq, after the rising in the Marshes was crushed, is phenomenal in its intimations of doom and destruction. Some of its pages read like a graphic description of scenes from the Gulf War, or extracts from reports on the condition of the Iraqi poor after a decade of economic sanctions.²⁶ The novel ends tragically, with the death of one Iraqi and the metaphorical loss of the other: the catastrophe in his homeland, the sullen hostility of a frustrated society in Algiers, the slanders of agents from Baghdad, and his inability to offer a decent future to Asya, eventually lead Mahdi to commit suicide, flinging himself into the sea to

²³ The Zanj were black slaves employed in the sugar-cane plantations of Southern Iraq in the ninth century, who revolted against Abbasid rule and constructed a capital south of Basra that took the Caliph till 883 to destroy. The Qarmatians were an egalitarian Isma’ili sect that rose against the Abbasids some twenty years later. After menacing Syria and Arabia, they set up a state in Bahrain and attacked Baghdad itself.

²⁴ BS, p. 90.

²⁵ The Arabic is *Luyathan*, from the Arabic root *Lawa*, to twist and deform, but the origin of the concept is Ugaritic. Being a Syrian, Haydar uses the archaic Ugaritic form *lwtn*, which is the source of the Biblical *Liwatan*, or Leviathan, as the signification of a kingdom of chaos and evil.

²⁶ See, for example, BS pp. 229, 234–5.

become a 'banquet for seaweed'. Yet the novel is not about thwarted love, but the ruin of political dreams and social hopes. It offers Haydar's verdict on his generation and on the societies in which he lived and worked, where ideological seaweed proliferates on all sides, strangling ideas and energies, spreading its slimy discourse everywhere.

Instruments of Satan

Sixteen years later, this formidable work—now a voice from another age—was released in Cairo, under the somewhat incongruous auspices of the Egyptian Ministry of Culture. There was no immediate reaction. But at the end of March 2000 a young writer, Hasan Nur, reviewed the novel in a weekly, *Al-Ushbu*, accusing its author of blasphemy. His article was read by Muhammad 'Abbas, a radiologist who spent several years amassing a small fortune from his practice in Saudi Arabia, and is now a key financial backer of the Labour Party. His attention caught, 'Abbas delved into the novel and, a month later, published a rabid attack on it under the title '*Man Yabayi'uni 'ala al-Mawt?*' ('Who Pledges to Die with Me?')²⁷ in *The People*. Rather than treating it as a work of fiction—a form to which he had turned a hand himself²⁸—'Abbas condemned it as the blasphemy of an apostate, meriting death, for a sentence that read: 'In the age of the atom, space exploration, and the triumph of reason, they rule us with the laws of the Bedouin gods and the teaching of the Qur'an. Shit!'.²⁹ What provoked his fury was the juxtaposition on the same page, and in the same line, of the last two words, despite the full stop between them, and the fact that, in Arabic, the second could not grammatically be a qualifier of the first. To present the passage as a calculated insult to the faithful, 'Abbas also had to ignore a reference to the whole utterance as 'big buzzing words emanating from the demented mind of Mr Bahili', in the following paragraph.

²⁷ The term *ybayi*—to pledge an oath of allegiance, or acknowledge the sovereignty of a leader—is a resonantly emotive formula, with the lure of martyrdom, for Muslims vowing to the Prophet to die for Islam.

²⁸ 'Abbas had published two novels, *Al-Hakim Lissa* (*The Ruler as a Thief*, 1990) and *Qasr al-Aini* (*The University Hospital*, 1994), and a collection of short stories, *Mabahith Amn al-Watan* (*National Security Department*, 1992), but these went unnoticed. He only came to prominence with incendiary articles in *The People* in the last couple of years.

²⁹ BS, p. 73.

Pronouncing the author of the novel (and even his father) ‘sinful, obscene, lewd, impertinent apostates’, and the Ministry of Culture ‘the instrument of Satan in the land of the Azhar and Saladin’, ‘Abbas demanded no less than the immediate resignation of the Minister and the ‘demolition of the Ministry with all its organizations’. The publication of such a work in the land of Islam was ‘a filth that stained every Muslim and that can only be removed by sacrificing ourselves as martyrs in removing it. It is the duty of every Muslim to die in order to remove this filth and deserve the mercy of God.’ Calling for a *fatwa* against it, ‘Abbas ended by exhorting ‘the sheikhs and the students of the Azhar to move, for it is God Himself and the Qur’an, the two most divine in Islam that were sullied, reviled and insulted . . . if you do not move and keep silent you had better stop praying and calling yourselves Muslims, for there will be chaos and great disaster.’³⁰ He then rounded off his condemnation with a list of the names of those responsible for the publication of the novel, their home addresses and telephone and fax numbers.

Uproar followed, as *The People*—with its eye on the approaching elections in November—intensified its campaign in its subsequent two issues. By Friday, May 5th, the affair became the talk of the whole country, and a number of Imams and Mosque preachers delivered condemnations of the novel in their sermons. That evening, the Labour Party held a public meeting about it under the slogan ‘Anger for God’, at which orators linked this episode to every battle from Taha Husain to Nasr Hamid Abu-Zaid. Meanwhile a literary critic, ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Muwafi, had set ‘Abbas’s method of reading to work on ‘Abbas’s own novel, *The University Hospital*, revealing that it too contained apostate utterances and anti-Islamic conduct and observations.³¹ His article, published that morning, was photocopied by someone and distributed among the audience during the perorations from the platform; when people started to read it, there were murmurs of discomfort and dissatisfaction—whereupon the organizers of the meeting called for the copies to be handed in, and chaos reigned. On the following day the Minister of Culture, Faruq

³⁰ Muhammad ‘Abbas, *Al-Sha‘b*, no. 1460, 28 April 2000.

³¹ ‘Abd al-Aziz Muwafi, ‘Muhammad ‘Abbas has no aim but fame: he claims to be a guardian of Islamic values . . . Do you know what he wrote!’, *Akhbar al-Adab*, no. 356, 7 May 2000. Although the official date of publication of this weekly literary journal is the Sunday of each week, it is usually with newsgagents from the preceding Friday.

Husni, asked the Secretary General of the Supreme Council of Culture, Jabir Asfur, to form a committee of leading critics to write a report about the novel in question; it was set up the same day.

Meanwhile, an Islamicist lawyer close to the Labour Party laid charges before the Public Prosecutor against the officials in the Ministry of Culture involved in the publication of the novel; they were called in for questioning on Saturday, May 6th. Three of these officials, Ali Abu-Shadi, Ibrahim Aslan and Muhammad Kushaik, riposted by bringing an action against 'Abbas for slander. Simultaneously, the State Security Department sent the novel to the Azhar to get its assessment of it. The following Sunday, a group of secular intellectuals and artists gathered in the Atelier of Painters and Writers in Cairo to release, in conjunction with the Press Syndicate, a statement in defence of freedom of expression and against the Islamicist campaign. A number of human rights organizations followed suit.

'Read!'

On Monday, May 8th, the students of the Azhar University were told by their Rector, Ahmad 'Umar Hashim, that *Banquet for Seaweed* was certainly blasphemous. In response, they poured into the streets of Cairo, demonstrating against the novel. Riot police and armoured cars met them with tear gas and rubber bullets. They fought back with a hail of stones, and set fire to parked cars. There were casualties on both sides. According to one report, 150 students were admitted to the Azhar University hospital for treatment of wounds, to prevent them from falling into the hands of the police. Another account spoke of many arrests, and a few police injuries. It was also reported that students who were asked 'Did you read the novel?' invariably replied 'No, but our teachers told us it was blasphemous'. Ironically, given that the first word of the Qur'an is the imperative *iqra'* (read!), students of the Azhar do not need to perform this deed before they demonstrate.

Next day, the National Assembly debated the matter. Rector Hashim, in his capacity as a deputy, severely attacked the novel and demanded that the Minister of Culture appear before the Assembly to answer questions about the case. The Egyptian Writers Union, the Supreme Council for Culture, the Journalists Union, and some independent publishers and journals entered the fray, with declarations against the Islamicist cam-

paign. On May 9th, the Committee of the Supreme Council for Culture published findings strongly in favour of the novel, rebutting charges of apostasy against it—indeed, going so far as to claim that it set out to champion religion.³² Undeterred, *The People* widened its campaign with several articles denouncing other novels and books, proving that *Banquet for Seaweed* was merely the culmination of a pernicious trend which must be uprooted from society. On the following day, under pressure from the National Assembly, Faruq Husni agreed to refer the novel to the Azhar, whence it was solemnly despatched by the Head of the National Assembly, Fathi Surur. By now writers of every political and religious denomination were publishing articles and counter-articles throughout the Arab world for and against the novel, and a large number of independent, and semi-official television stations were debating the issue. Haydar Haydar himself was responding valiantly to the questions of the numerous press and TV reporters who had invaded his little native village of Husain al-Bahr (where, now in his mid-sixties, he has retired to farm and write), calling upon the student demonstrators to read his novel for themselves and make up their own minds about it. The whole history of the struggle for symbolic power was once again paraded and reinterpreted.

Stray dogs and swarming flies

On May 17th the Azhar issued its ruling. Its verdict damned *Banquet for Seaweed* on five counts.³³ (i) The Ministry of Culture had not sought the views of the Azhar before publication. (ii) The novel was full of phrases scorning all religions and divinities, including Allah, the Prophet and the Qur'an. (iii) It did not conform to moral values, was often erotic and full of sexual asides. (iv) It insulted all Arab rulers, attributing terrible

³² On the grounds that FLN guerrillas are depicted carrying the Qur'an, and Mahdi's mother sends him off with a Shi'ite ritual of farewell.

³³ Ironically, this is the same Azhar that officially rejected the *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie, and called for a rational dialogue with the author of *The Satanic Verses*. Its statement at the time declared that 'Islam does not accept the accusation of blasphemy against Salman Rushdie, for it does not call for killing people without fair trial, especially when there is no crime of killing or treason involved. The principle of considering a man an apostate because of a book he wrote is utterly unacceptable.' The explanation for the difference is to be found in the friction between the Sunni and Shi'ite religious establishments—the Azhar was irritated by Khomeini's presumption, but had no qualms about anathemas in its own precincts.

crimes to them, and called on people to rise up against them. (v) It violated religion, divine law, moral values and political decency. Upon the publication of the ruling, which was signed by no less than the head of the Azhar, Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi,³⁴ the State Security Department summoned Ibrahim Aslan, the editor of the 'Horizons of Writing' series in which the novel had appeared, to an interrogation which lasted from 10pm to 6am—making it clear that Aslan, an independent writer of integrity with a respectable record of work, would be a convenient scapegoat for the establishment. The Azhar ruling outraged the majority of secular intellectuals throughout the Arab world and, on the same day, a number of statements from Lebanese, Syrian and Moroccan writers were published in the press in Egypt and elsewhere, together with protests from the Iraqi Cultural Association in Britain and Sweden. It is telling that Syrian writers who wanted to give succour to the Egyptian campaign against *Banquet for Seaweed* had to resort to London-based, Saudi-sponsored media.³⁵

Throughout these weeks *The People* raised its pitch to a new crescendo, characterizing all who resisted the campaign as swarming flies, stray dogs, queers and criminals. Fiery articles enumerated further lists of unrepentent writers, branded new books as blasphemous, and stepped up the pressure for Faruq Husni, the Minister of Culture, to resign. By now the campaign appeared to be attracting wide public support. Fearing another explosion of anger, the government seized on a small faction in the Labour Party discontented with its leadership, and referred its challenge to the party establishment to the state's Committee for Parties Affairs (CPA). On May 20th the CPA decreed that Labour Party activities be frozen and *The People* suspended until the issue of its rightful leadership was resolved—which provoked a new round of articles, this time debating the wisdom of the government's action and the right of *The People* to express its opposition to official policies. The leader of the Labour Party, Ibrahim Shukri, started legal proceedings against the CPA, and other political parties denounced its decision.

³⁴ This is the very same sheikh of Azhar who travelled to Britain to meet the Archbishop of Canterbury in Britain three years ago, when he condemned the *fatwa* against Rushdie.

³⁵ See Ghassan al-Imam's article in *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 23 May 2000, and Sa'id Ramadan al-Buti's in *Al-Hayah*, 29 May 2000.

The affair now divided into two different fronts: on the one hand, the right of the Islamicists to express their views; on the other, the character of their crusade against secular and rationalist culture. On May 20th, 350 Egyptian writers and intellectuals signed a petition to the Public Prosecutor assuming co-liability for publication of *Banquet for Seaweed* with the three impugned officials of the Ministry of Culture, marching to his office to demand that he either press charges collectively against all or drop them against the trio. Meanwhile the Islamicists, fearing that protracted legal procedures to reactivate their party and republish their newspaper would cost them their chances in the forthcoming election, started to dissociate themselves from some of the tone, although not the substance, of ‘Abbas’s campaign.

The debate continued throughout June and July, culminating in an article and a legal ruling. On July 1st a lengthy consideration of the affair by the prominent journalist and former advisor to Nasser, Muhammad Hasanain Haykal, was published in *Al-Kutub: Wijhat Nazar*.³⁶ Haykal devoted the first two-thirds of his article to a lengthy account of his role in the Salman Rushdie controversy, his personal contacts at the time, his refusal of Rushdie’s request that he append his name to the list of luminaries defending Rushdie, etc. Citing Marx’s dictum that when history repeats itself, it does so once as tragedy and a second time as farce, he then loftily dismissed the campaign against *Banquet for Seaweed*—without even deigning to mention the author’s name—as a farce. For, Haykal averred, everyone involved mistook an issue that concerned the use of public funds, to subsidize the reprint of a book that had never been censored in Egypt, for one of freedom of expression. *The People*, with its dubious pre-electoral agitation against the government, lacked the stature of Khomeini. Faruq Husni and the Ministry of Culture were at fault and, instead of admitting it, mismanaged the ramifications. Both factions had misused great values and grand symbols, from God and religion to reason and free expression, but secular intellectuals had lost the battle before they started, once their opponents had got away with

³⁶ “‘Ala Atraf al-Din wa-l-Siyasah wa-l-Adab’ (Approaching Religion, Politics and Literature), *Al-Kutub: Wijhat Nazar*, no. 12, July 2000, pp. 4–13. The journal is a recently founded monthly modelled on the *London Review of Books* or *New York Review of Books*, with a good reputation, though expensive for Egyptian readers—an issue of 82 tabloid pages costs ten Egyptian pounds, or two and a half times the price of the reprint of *Banquet for Seaweed*.

presenting themselves as guardians of faith and morality. Haykal concluded gloomily—and, if only on this point, accurately—that the upshot of the affair would inevitably be a narrowing of the margin of freedom in Egypt.

Political atrophy

In fact, the self-appointed censors of *The People* and the Azhar have indeed succeeded in widening the sphere of their influence, and leaving some of their ghosts inside every intimidated intellectual. Over and over again, writers talked about the inhibiting reflexes that result from battles like this. In this sense, it is painfully true that the fragile margin of free expression has diminished. Institutionally, the publication department of the Ministry of Culture is now paralysed and its reprint series suspended, despite repeated promises that its programme would not be affected. On the other hand, the court ruled on July 25th that the CPA's decision to freeze the Labour Party and suspend its newspaper was unconstitutional. The CPA appealed the decision, and the Labour Party remains in baulk, its newspaper closed. So once again, the running battle for the estate of an ailing political establishment, which has lost virtually all legitimacy, has not focused on its woeful record on the major questions of national or international politics, but has been deflected towards what a regressive opposition sees as the weakest link in its chain—modern culture, which continues to pay the price. One of the most dismal aspects of this contest is that both modernists and traditionalists now appeal to the same political establishment, enhancing its failing powers and restoring shreds of credibility to a regime that had all but lost it.

Melancholy, too, is the contrast between the furore and *Banquet for Seaweed* itself. Comparisons with the Rushdie affair only underline the difference between the two. *The Satanic Verses*, essentially set in Britain, is a novel about religion, immigration and identity. Sinister and odious though the fundamentalist campaign against it was, there was at least some relation between its themes and the hysteria about it. *Banquet for Seaweed*, on the other hand, is a political novel about communism and nationalism, the Iraqi and Algerian Revolutions—themes which, two decades after its publication, in a context so reactionary that even the memory of these great movements has largely disappeared, were all but completely displaced by a grotesque fixation with an exclamatory aside

of no structural significance for the work, as if religion is now the only issue left in Arab public life. Not all participants in the affair were quite so blind, of course. Haykal, a veteran operator of the period Haydar was writing about, was well aware of what is at stake in *Banquet for Seaweed*, whose unforgiving portrait of the politics for which he stood could only be anathema to him; the consummate bad faith of his intervention is readily explicable.

It is striking how little attention the controversy has paid to the subsequent work of Haydar Haydar himself, who has continued to produce writing of notable imaginative power and uncompromisingly radical intent. Thus his daring fourth novel *Mirrors of Fire* blends metaphor and poetry to approach the taboo subject of the massacre in Hama in 1984, when the Syrian army devastated one of its own towns, using heavy tanks, fighters and artillery to wipe out Islamicist opposition to the Assad regime; while his latest, *The Suns of the Gypsies*, explores the world of the Palestinian resistance, tracked by Mossad assassins and haunted by suicide missions, and the brutal indifference and manipulation of the Arab regimes towards it—a theme that could hardly be more timely today. Instead of these central issues, the tics and manias of obscurantism increasingly absorb Arab intellectual life, as the spread of the contagion from Cairo shows. Since the eruption of the campaign against *Banquet for Seaweed* in Egypt, zealots in the Yemen have assailed the writer ‘Abd al-Karim al-Razihi, forcing him to seek political asylum in Holland; and orchestrated a campaign against Samir al-Yusuf for reprinting one of the classics of modern Yemeni literature, *Sana: An Open City* by Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wali (1940–73), bringing legal charges against him for disseminating blasphemy. In Saudi Arabia, two books by ‘Abdullah al-Qasimi have been banned under similar accusations. In Algeria the novel *Sayyidat al-Maqam (The Hostess)* by Wasinin al-A‘raj was likewise proscribed for impiety. Fundamentalists in Kuwait have launched a legal case against two women writers, Layla al-Uthman and ‘Afaf Shu‘aib; and in Jordan against the poet Musa Hawamidah. In June, the Egyptian writer Salah-al-Din Muhsin was sentenced to six months suspended imprisonment for publishing four books—‘*Ab‘ati (Abdulati)*, *Irti‘ashat Tanwiriyyah (Flickers of Enlightenment)*, *Musamarah ma’ al-Sama’ (Dialogue with the Sky)* and *Mudhakkirat Muslim (Diary of a Muslim)*—deemed insulting to religion.

In these bleak conditions, Arab intellectuals gain nothing by treating for favours from the state or bending to pressures from the zealots. Yet all too often today, instead of working to eliminate the very idea of appointed custodians of religion and morality, they seek to show they are as pious as any fundamentalist, and twist their own works to prove their credentials. If Islam has yet to experience any Reformation, it still remains the duty of intellectuals to make clear that its texts are a collective symbolic legacy of the whole culture, on which no-one has a monopoly of interpretation, and that those who oppose free thinking about them are protecting their own mundane interests and not a sublime truth or divine values. In failing to do so, they merely play into the hands of the Arab establishments. For unless they root the values of rational argument and free imagination in society, not as ideas in opposition to the interests of the masses, but as essential conditions of the people's liberty and future, they are doomed to re-fight the same battles again and again, from an ever-shrinking margin of freedom of their own.