



Yahya Haqqi: The Anatomy of an Egyptian Intellectual

Speaker

- Dr. miriam cooke, Professor, Department of Asian and African Languages and Literature, Duke University¹

Moderator

- Mohammed Hakki, Advisory Committee Member, USEF and nephew of Yahya Haqqi

Mohammed Hakki, USEF Advisory Committee Member, welcomed Dr. cooke and extended his warmest thanks to Ambassador Nabil Fahmy and the Egyptian Embassy for co-sponsoring the event.

Dr. miriam cooke, Professor, Duke University, began by giving the audience a brief background on Yahya Haqqi. Haqqi served the Egyptian community in a wide variety of ways as a lawyer, administrator, diplomat, “cultural advocate”, and literary critic. He was born in 1905, a time when, according to Professor cooke, Egyptians were beginning to rethink the role and form of literature in Arab society. This probably contributed to his distaste for strictly-defined genres and his preference to blur the lines between genres.

Yahya Haqqi grew up with an education combining the support of an intellectual, if impoverished, family with participation in the local institutions of one of Cairo’s most “popular” neighborhoods, Sayeda Zeinab. This gave him an appreciation for both the “high” and “low” cultures of Egypt. While his stories are written in an elevated Arabic, he was also called a friend of the poor and disinherited. He lived in a wide variety of places, including Istanbul, Rome, and Paris. He is known best as a pioneer of the “pen sketch”. Professor cooke emphasized that what mattered to Yahya Haqqi was that he was able to write about what he wanted without compromising his vision. She also noted that he was a strong advocate for young writers and that he often blended humor and insight in his literary criticism.

Dr. cooke sees three main themes that pervade Yahya Haqqi’s literature: modernization, valorization of the rural poor, and the conflict between spiritual and rational approaches to the world. These themes reflect issues that continue to be important to this day, marking Haqqi as a pioneer and a writer who continues to be very relevant. Many of Yahya Haqqi’s early stories provide some of the first critiques of modernization, or more specifically, westernization. Haqqi worked for a time as a civil servant in Manfalut, a small Upper Egyptian town, an experience that drove home to him both the beauty of the Egyptian country life and the clash between the traditional and the modern in Egyptian society. He often represented this conflict symbolically by the train. Yahya Haqqi viewed the rural poor as authentic guardians of tradition. Yahya Haqqi’s juxtaposition of the

¹ Dr. cooke prefers that her name be spelled with lowercase letters.

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rational and the spiritual is, according to Professor cooke, the main reason for his fame. The emblematic story is Qindil Umm Hashim, or The Saint's Lamp.

Professor cooke concluded by discussing Haqqi as a stylist. His love of language is clear from his reputation as a "goldsmith of language" who chose his words meticulously. Professor cooke read several passages from his stories and then ended by emphasizing the intensity of his descriptions and the vividness of his characters, noting that perhaps he should be considered "the Proust of the Arab world".

Q&A Highlights

Q: How did you discover Yahya Haqqi's writings?

cooke: I first discovered Yahya Haqqi while I was studying at Oxford. At the time I was very interested in mysticism. In Yahya Haqqi, I saw someone who was interested in exploring other religions to better understand his own religious faith. This inspired me to spend a spring in Cairo with him.

Q: In your discussion of Yahya Haqqi, you call him a wordsmith. Does this make his works difficult to translate?

cooke: Yes. Yahya Haqqi believed that there was often only a single word that could fit his thought, and that word might be an obscure colloquial word from a specific region.

Hakki: He was not only hard to translate. At the time that I was growing up, many average educated Egyptians found him difficult to read. His beautiful descriptions and his love of Egypt make his works worth the effort though.

Q: Where did you learn Arabic?

cooke: Scotland.[where she did undergraduate work]

Q: Was Yahya Haqqi satisfied with your translation?

cooke: He never specifically commented on my translation of his works, although he was quite displeased with the first chapter of *The Anatomy of an Egyptian Intellectual*, a book that I wrote about him. In that chapter, I discussed him as someone who was searching for religious meaning even while remaining a committed Muslim. This was during the early 1980s at a time in Egypt when some intellectuals were nervous about giving the impression that they were not religious.