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WHEN THE PERSONAL BECOMES COLLECTIVE: A STUDY OF AN ACTIVIST'S MEMOIR

Abstract: *This paper examines the posthumous memoir of a notable Egyptian woman, Inji Aflatoun (1924-1989), a nationally and internationally recognised painter, a feminist and a political activist, who lived during a time of turbulence and change in the history of modern Egypt. The paper takes advantage of the liberty and skepticism offered by the school of New Historicism to present an alternative reading of rich and debatable periods in Egypt's modern history by critically examining Aflatoun's documentation of her role in the political and artistic life of Egypt and the Egyptian feminist movement. Thus it presents a reading of her memoir as a sub-text that highlights and at times deconstructs the official discourse regarding certain known, unknown or ignored events and characters. In examining Aflatoun's memoir, the focus is on three interrelated and parallel parts: her political activism through her role in the national resistance and the Marxist underworld, her social activism through her involvement in the feminist movement, and finally her art as a form of both social and political resistance.*

Keywords: *memoir, New Historicism, Inji Aflatoun, Egyptian modern history, Egyptian feminist movement, political activism.*

Introduction

A memoir is a personal record of certain experiences, touchstone events or turning points, whether public or private, in its writer's life and the way he/she remembers and reflects on them. Hence, unlike biographies or autobiographies which tell the whole life story of a person, memoirs tend to be more selective. Judith Barrington remarks, "Rather than simply telling a story from her life, the memoirist both tells the story and muses upon it, trying to unravel what it means in the light of her current knowledge" (20). When the reflected upon story includes unknown events or figures that contribute to our understating of our past and present, and offers other versions of history; here the personal becomes collective and deserves a critical analysis. In a postmodern world, we are encouraged to examine such

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stories even when they are written by the Other, the marginalised, or those who have been in conflict with, and as such disapproved of, by the powerful. This seems in line with Terry Eagleton's summing up of postmodernism as "a style of thought which is suspicious of classical notions of truth, reason, identity and objectivity, of single frameworks, grand narratives or ultimate grounds of explanation" (vii.).

This suspiciousness of classical and unified notions of truth and grand narratives, especially when related to historical narratives, can be no better practised than through the school of New Historicism, which in light of Eagleton's statement, can be seen as a form of postmodernist thought. For in interpreting history, it refuses a totalising explanation and denies the objectivity and factualness of writing and analysing it, thus differing from old or "earlier historicism [which] tends to be monological; that is, it is concerned with discovering a single political vision, usually identical to that said to be held by the entire literate class or indeed the entire population...." (Greenblatt 2253) Consequently, through the lens of New Historicism, we have a plurality of historical voices, giving us other versions and interpretations of history. So instead of reading solely the official records of the victorious and the powerful or what may be termed a master-narrative, we have alternative histories or hidden and disturbing sub-texts that often fill the gap of the unrecorded and the untold.

From this perspective, this paper examines the memoir of a notable Egyptian woman, Inji Aflatoun (1924-1989), a nationally and internationally recognised painter, a feminist and a political activist. She lived during a time of turbulence and change in the history of modern Egypt, stood on the side of the opposition, was never favored by the existing regimes and paid a high price when imprisoned for four years, from June 1959 until July 1963. Aflatoun's posthumous memoir, *Min al Tefoula Ila al Sijn* or *From Childhood to Prison*, came out first in 1993 and then in a revised edition in 2014¹.

In analysing Aflatoun's work, this paper will discuss briefly her rebellious character and the elements shaping it. It will not present a New Historicist study of her text, but rather take advantage of the liberty and skepticism offered by New Historicism to read this valuable document as a sub-text that highlights and at times deconstructs the official discourse

regarding certain known, unknown or ignored events and characters; thus presenting an alternative reading of very rich and debatable periods in Egypt's modern history. To do so, the paper will highlight some of these events and critically examine Aflatoun's documentation of her role in the political and artistic life of Egypt and the feminist movement in the forties and fifties as a way of reading them from a different perspective. She was intensely involved in all these fields and fully committed to them. Said Khaial, Aflatoun's friend and the editor of her memoir, notes: "Her memoir does not simply tell a life story. When the I or rather the ego melts in the society and the person sides totally with the masses, then the life story becomes patriotic, social, popular and humanistic; and that was Inji Aflatoun" (27)².

From Childhood to Prison

We can see in this memoir three interrelated and parallel parts: Aflatoun's political activism through her role in the national resistance and the Marxist underworld, her social activism through her involvement in the feminist movement, and finally her art as a form of both social and political resistance³. She lived through two different eras and regimes. From 1944 (the beginning of her activism) to 1952, Egypt was a kingdom under British occupation and from 1952 until 1963, where her memoir stops, the country had turned into a republic and achieved independence. The text shows her life as one of endless struggle, a life,

"...marked with phases of colour, agony and rebellion that contributed to her groundbreaking artwork. Passing from a privileged upbringing to socialist activism, to fighting for women's rights, and to surrealist artwork that relayed her dreams and fears, to compelling expressionist masterpieces painted in prison, to colourful depictions of workers, Efflatoun's life and art were all about change - all about revolution" (Elkamel).

This rebellious character was created and shaped by different elements. One is Aflatoun's strong mother who was only 19 years old when she insisted on getting a divorce from her husband, and then had a life and a home of her own when she achieved financial independence by becoming the first Egyptian fashion designer. The Sacré-Cœur School, famous for its rigidity, contributed to Aflatoun's rebelliousness. It not only shaped her

feminist character, but also made her indignant of injustice and segregation and aware of her national identity. Hence, she resisted the list of forbidden things, including reading a novel banned by the school administration, as it celebrates freedom, and criticised the girls' bragging of speaking in French while disdaining their own language. Contemplating on her experience at this school, she writes: "I realised ... at the age of twelve that rebellion is a must to stand up against the injustice inflicted on me, and I decided to start. Here I can ... say that rebellion will be the feature that will characterise the rest of my life" (40). Aflatoun was victorious in her first battle and moved to the Lycée Français, where, she studied and was deeply influenced by the writings of the great pre French Revolution thinkers, Rousseau, Voltaire and others.

One more influence was art; she reflects on a turning point in her life, meeting with the untraditional painter and filmmaker Kamel el-Tilmisani (1917-1972). He introduced her to "Art and Freedom," a group of surrealist and experimental artists founded in 1939 by the writer George Henein (1914-1973). They held different exhibitions and discussed many causes in literature, art and politics. She describes El-Tilmisani as "one of the most notable artists of the generation of the forties and the most daring;" his "bewitching" tutorials opened: "a magic window on life and the true Egypt. For painting is but a true expression of the society and the self. He asked me to forget all the rigid academic rules. His lessons were open lectures about the history of art and humanity across the ages, highlighting the struggle of man for progress" (44). Meanwhile, Aflatoun got hold of Marxist books and pamphlets which raised such issues as poverty, class division, woman abuse under Capitalism, colonisation and liberation. They made her "consciously choose to move from the rich's camp to the poor's" (47). Later, she refused to join any of the famous studios or art colleges abroad and would rather work hard on rooting herself into the Egyptian soil and society, which she refers to as "a long and hard process of Egyptianising myself" (47-8), or, to quote Anneka Lenssen "a lifelong struggle to forsake the haute bourgeoisie of her upbringing in solidarity with Egypt's dispossessed classes" (85).

Having decided to adopt Marxism, she wholeheartedly got involved in public work and the secret political underworld, joining different Marxist parties, Askra in 1944, then Hedetu and

finally the Egyptian Communist Party. Aflatoun recounts personal stories regarding her moving from one party to the other and her ascension to leading positions in the Central Communist Committee. She also reveals hers and her husband's suspicion of Hedetu's blind support of what she calls the Officers' Movement in July 1952, which deposed the king and assumed leadership of Egypt, even after the execution of Khamis and Al-Baqary, two workers who led the strike of Kafr Al-Dawar factories. One wonders is she hinting at possible ulterior motives? She also speaks of some unknown Marxist parties, refers to their secret publications (such as "Al-Raya," the Flag, which condemned Nasser's bloody regime), and mentions some unheard of incidents like the one related to the true identity of the Secretary of the Communist Party, whose fake name was Comrade Khaled. For years the secret police could not know his real name, which Aflatoun reveals as Fouad Morsi. They knew about him only in 1958 when, she remarks, unfortunately the communist parties united (134).

Aflatoun's memoir reveals her busy life during the two different regimes she witnessed. It abounds with a great number of political and social incidents and events (often intertwined), of national and international conferences she took part in, demonstrations she organised, and committees she formed and participated in. Holding or attending such functions was never an easy job, as they were always resisted by the authority. Besides, she always had some kind of an inside story with almost each of these events, some of which are unknown or hardly highlighted in official records and other documents; whereas some deconstruct and contradict the "master-narratives". However, one needs to read her story or sub text with caution and a critical eye; for Aflatoun's Marxist beliefs and biases are evident in the language she uses and the judgment she makes of the people she met or worked with. She praises and highlights the role played by her comrades, often speaks of their progressive ideas implying a hidden contrast with the regressive ones of other groups. Most of the characters praised are socialists, communists or radicals. Once she refers to the communists as "the most active and honest elements of the patriotic elements," a biased overstatement (136).

Conferences, committees and demonstrations

The memoir introduces us to numerous conferences, like the first International Student Conference in 1946 and the International Youth Festival in Prague in 1947, their recommendations and the Egyptian authority's "stupid" action of sending the conference committee a letter warning them against the Egyptians attending it and giving their description as if they were outlawed. Two other conferences were held in Vienna and Rome in November 1951 for the cause of world peace, which she and the Egyptian delegation associated with the Egyptian cause of independence. Attending these conferences was due to her forming, along with the notable feminist, Siza Nabrawy (1897-1985), and other activists and feminists, the Egyptian Peace Committee in 1951. She speaks of the magazine they issued, *The Writer* and the statement they signed with a number of intellectuals calling for world peace. They were arrested, interrogated and a newspaper campaign started against them both at home and abroad, accusing them of a hidden Marxist agenda. She attended the same conferences in 1956, during the Nasser Regime to explain to the world his decision to confiscate the Suez Canal. On her return to Egypt, she sent Nasser a copy of the proceeding of a press conference in Rome and he answered back with a thank you letter! Ironically, when she wanted to go to the 1958 Vienna conference, the regime would not allow her since her help was not needed anymore.

The text also gives its documentation of different committees, like the National Committee of the Workers and Students, founded in 1946 and often regarded as "the most prominent of the student committees" in Egypt (Abdalla 66 & Aflatoun 74-6). It was an excellent example of the cooperation of nationalists with different ideologies and, for the first time, women managed to earn leading positions through election. Latifa Al-Zayyat (1923-1996), a leading member in this committee, speaks about it in her autobiography *The Search* (1992). Like Aflatoun, she mentions the tragic Abbas Bridge incident of 1946, but where Al-Zayyat speaks of a number of people killed in it, Aflatoun speaks only of the wounded. In fact, this is one of the debated historical incidents in modern Egypt since other activists and historians deny any killed number of people and mention that eighty-four were injured (see Abdalla 64)⁴.

During the two different historical eras she lived through, Aflatoun supported, and thus her text partly documents, the popular militant resistance first against the British troops in 1951, and then during the Tripartite Aggression of England, France and Israel in 1956. Formal records do not mention the Popular Committees of Women Resistance she formed with Nabrawy in Cairo and different parts of Egypt. Aflatoun particularly highlights the successful role played by her Al-Jamaleya committee and other ones such as Giza's and Shebeen Al-Kom's presided by another famous activist, Wedad Mitry⁵. Another important committee, though temporary, was the one created during the 1956 election to make the women aware of their rights to vote (148).

She also speaks of different demonstrations, some of which are known such as the above mentioned Abbas Bridge, and others are hardly mentioned in history books and records. A notable demonstration was organised on 14 November 1951, known as the Martyrs' Day. It was made up of thousands of women of different generations, classes, education and ideologies. An artistic group, "The Voice of Art" contributed with paintings and posters. The outcome of this demonstration and its strong emotional impact on Aflatoun, the artist, was a painting she titled, "No, we will not forget" (118-9). She also has the courage to speak of, and not be discouraged by, the failure of a demonstration she organised with some leftist women on 21 February 1948. She thought they would attract the public and the police would not attack them for being women. But she was wrong in her two assumptions, and the police hit brutally some women demonstrators. Aflatoun's memoir also deconstructs the official narrative regarding another demonstration, which was a protest against the execution verdict issued against the icon of Algerian resistance, Djamila Bouhired. The demo started from Al-Tahrir Square in Cairo and was supposed to reach the UN office, located in a nearby district. Yet, the police violently dispersed them. Ironically, the official discourse represented by the government's newspaper, Al-Ahram, was a headline hailing this demonstration and claiming that it marched to the UN office, making no reference to police brutality (162-3).

She also gives her own analysis of certain debatable historical incidents, such as the Cairo Fire on 26 January 1952, which still remains a mystery. She believes that the strong

popular awakening – evident in the successful Martyrs’ Day demonstration and the militant resistance in the Canal area - was so threatening to the colonial forces and the ruling regime that they led to the Fire. For Aflatoun’s memoir suggests that the secret (political) police and the Palace might be behind it because the King did not listen to the appeal of his Minister of Interior Affairs to ask the army to go down to the street until it was too late. This was followed by a huge police campaign (never mentioned in official records or known to many); it arrested hundreds of Feda’yeen (militant resisters) and “progressive leftists,” thus the Fire of Cairo led to breaking the resistance in the Canal area and clipping the wings of the national and popular movement (121). Aflatoun also sums up in one paragraph the Nasser regime. She described it as inflicted with “a chronic and dangerous disease, lacking trust in the people and fearing any form of independence by the popular associations and professional syndicates” (168). She believed that this disease caused the regime’s gradual disintegration, leading later to further serious blows, possibly hinting at the 1967 defeat of the Egyptian army by Israel, known as Nakba.

The Feminist Movement

Documenting the political scene in Egypt and her role in it during the forties and fifties, Aflatoun reveals in her memoir the intertwining of the political and social acts as well as the initiatives and leadership assumed by her and other women. Thus alongside her political struggle, Aflatoun’s text documents part of the Egyptian feminist movement. She expresses her indignation at the humiliating position of the Egyptian woman, being abused both at home and work, and gives her own survey and testimony of the existing feminist parties at that time. She shows how the activities of the first Egyptian feminist association, the EFU (Egyptian Feminist Union) declined, especially after the death of its founder, Huda Sha’rawy in 1947 and speaks particularly about the Feminist Party, established by Fatma Nemat Rashed in 1942, and Bent Al-Nil, Daughter of the Nile, founded by Doreya Shafiq. She finds the program of the former the most progressive, as it called for the full political and social rights of women. Yet, colored by her leftist ideologies, Aflatoun was not satisfied with the existing feminist parties. Hence, she joined a woman’s committee that comprised of female

Marxists such as Soraya Adham and Latifa Al-Zayyat whose autobiography never mentions any of the details discussed by Aflatoun, which makes the latter's book important in shedding the light on unknown aspects of other Egyptian activists' lives.

These same women later founded the Association of the Girls of the Egyptian University and Institutes in 1945, and Aflatoun documents their first important activity, participating in the first international feminist conference held in Paris after World War II. It resulted in the formation of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), "the largest and probably most influential international women's organisation of the post-1945 era" though "still relatively unknown [even] among Western feminist historians" (de Haan). That Federation, we learn from the memoir, would play an important role in supporting Egypt during and after the Tripartite Aggression and create world awareness of the destruction resulting from it (142-3)⁶. Aflatoun presents an inside story of an international event, hardly mentioned when documenting the Egyptian feminist movement. We only read of the post-World War I conferences attended by Sah'rawy and other feminists. Aflatoun and her colleagues were the only Egyptian representatives since the EFU refused to participate due to the conference's political agenda; for one of its goals was "resisting fascism and any form of oppression" (65). Hence, Aflatoun's talk joined the liberation of women with political independence from Britain. Therefore she was arrested upon arrival at the port of Alexandria, and since December 1945, her name was on the government's black list.

After the authority's dissolving their Egyptian University Association, she was not deterred and formed the Patriotic Woman Association, which was short lived. Aflatoun documents an incident that had hardly been mentioned before, when 8-10 female members of this new association joined the huge public reception organised by the government in September 1949 to welcome Prime Minister Al-Noqrahsi, on his return from New York. He was supposed to discuss the Egyptian cause at the UN Security Council, but the meeting failed due to the influence of western countries. But these few women turned the reception into a demonstration against the government and its stance towards colonisation (83-85). Aflatoun's story of this incident once more deconstructs the public record represented by an Egyptian magazine, which published a picture of Esmat Galal, a

member of the association and a Marxist demonstrator, claiming that she was cheering for the government!

The antithesis, filling the gap

Aflatoun's recording of the above political and social events and others reveals many facts, some of which are shocking. For example, we see in the two eras she lived through a police state that was intolerant of the Marxists, though the repressive atmosphere interestingly got worse in a socialist regime, Nasser's, which should have supported her and her comrades. The two regimes launched campaigns against them. She spoke for example of the 10 July, 1946 Ismail Sidqy campaign, closing down many newspapers and organisations, and arresting 300 intellectual figures from all classes and professions. Another anti-Marxist campaign started with the outbreak of the Palestine War in 1948, resulting in the arrest of hundreds of Marxist and Wafdian opponents.

Indeed, Aflatoun's memoir presents an antithesis of the thesis, or rather the image that some Egyptians have of their country during the forties. Some, especially in comparison with the military dictatorship ruling Egypt from 1954 onward, look nostalgically back at those days, seeing them as vibrant with political and intellectual freedom as well as radical ideologies. Even if this atmosphere did exist, the police always tried to destroy the resistance; hence under any pretext they suspended the constitution, resorted to emergency laws, opened the prison gates for the opponents, forbade their meetings and closed the syndicates (49). We learn that in 1947 the Egyptian secret police formed a new section, the Newspaper Prosecution, to trace the progressive writers (93).

As is the case with any opposition group, regardless of their ideology, the regime did its best to scare the public of them. She speaks of the "Ogre of Marxism" propagated by the colonial forces and those allying with them (59). This forced the Marxists to work secretly because "despite a constitution supporting freedom, forming a Marxist party was a crime punishable by one to ten years labor sentence" (49). Besides, she mentions the problem of having women working side by side with men in clandestine activity. Thus, ironically, we have regressive beliefs and mentalities among the progressive Marxists; for even the "comrades" were uncomfortable about the co-working of the two

sexes as well as the society which was willing to disrepute these women. This eventually forced them to create a woman's committee within the party to separate the sexes (51).

After July 1952 when the Free Officers rose to power, the same repressive campaigns continued and even became severer. In November 1954, her husband was arrested and remained behind bars for two years. She speaks for the first time of heavy torture in the prisons and cites a personal example, that of her brother-in-law, who disappeared for a few days and finally it turned out that he was in the Military Prison, known for its horrible means of torture, which was adapted from Hitler's Nazi prisons (134).

She also speaks in detail about the 1959 campaign against the leftists, known as the Massacre of the Communists. It became more brutal following Nasser's harsh speech which attacked what he labelled as the communist agents. Almost all male Marxists were arrested and sent to Prison. Besides, for the first time in the history of modern Egypt 25 woman activists including Aflatoun herself were arrested, but the authority did its best to keep their arrest unknown to the outer world. Interestingly, her text also reveals part of the American CIA's war against communists. Aflatoun was on their post-World War II black list; hence banned from entering many countries like France from 1951 until 1966.

Other forms of repression included banning her from traveling abroad unless her trips helped the regime. If prior to 1952 she could sue the government (as when they took out of the market her first booklet), she would not dare do so during Nasser's time. Forming popular committees was possible only to support his regime during the Tripartite Aggression, but later on she and other activists would be forbidden from spreading any social or political awareness among the people: "we found ourselves in the street with no organisation" (145). Bloody reactions to scare the people were taken such as the execution of Khamis and Al-Baqary, two workers who dared to rebel.

Elections were also forged and thugs were employed to help the government's supporters, techniques that would continue to be used by the successive dictatorial regimes. She documents a striking incident when Siza Nabrawy decided to run for the 1956 Parliament election in Old Cairo. Despite her popularity, her rival, Ahmad Said, the famous Radio commentator and the

government's man, won, obviously because of the government's dishonest interference not even allowing the lawyers to investigate the forgery that took place. Another example was what happened to the leftist candidate Dr. Abdel Azzim Anis, whose popularity and strong chances for winning the election were threatening to the regime. Hence, the police interfered by beating his supporters and arresting them with Anis himself!

Similarly, her documentation of the Egyptian feminist movement does not present the expected image of women solidarity, reminiscent of this glorious time in the history of the Egyptian woman's liberation. Contrary to the expectation of many, including the writer of this paper, we see those great feminists, fighting and distrusting one another. Cooperation despite differences took place on a few occasions. A rare example is the relationship between Aflatoun and Nabraway, the leader of the EFU. Interestingly, they only met by chance at a reception in 1950, meaning that there was no planned common work between them earlier. Apart from that, Aflatoun, colored by her ideologies, attacks almost all the existing feminist parties making clear "they were afraid of the new active elements, especially the leftists" (59). She speaks ironically of their leaders, calling them "the respectable ladies," comparing them to the regressive forces and accusing them of excluding her and the Marxists from their organisations so as to please the regime and ensure their positions (59).

We also see her harsh attack on Doreya Shafiq, a prominent feminist, and her shocking description of the latter's hunger strike in 1957 against Nasser's dictatorial regime, as a "performance". Aflatoun took the initiative with Nabrawy and Jacqueline Khory to write a statement denouncing Shafiq's act and had a great number of feminist association leaders and other independent figures sign it and then distributed it on a wide scale inside and outside Egypt. I learnt from Hoda Elsadda, a renowned Egyptian feminist scholar, that Wedad Mitry was the only leading figure who refused to sign it⁷. Aflatoun attributed Shafiq's strike to her belief that Nasser's regime was about to fall and she wanted to make a heroine of herself (147). Ironically, Aflatoun and her colleagues would pay a high price two years later. One wonders if Shafiq's strike had taken place in 1959, would they have reacted in the same way?

Another example of distrust took place when Aflatoun worked under the leadership of Nabrawy in the Popular Committee of National Resistance supporting the militants' struggle in the Canal cities. The committee, which included women of different ideologies, would not coordinate with Doreya Shafiq's. Later, Fatma Rashed, who was among them, withdrew and joined Shafiq's committee claiming that Nabrawy's included women of leftist tendencies. Aflatoun ironically speaks of the Front of Egypt's Women founded by Shafiq and Rashed claiming that the only thing they did was taking part in the huge demonstration of 14 November 1951. This unfair summing up of their work contradicts other documents showing Shafiq and her colleagues actively supporting the militant resistance in the Canal area. Moreover, we see how Mounira Thabet (1906- 1967), another notable Egyptian feminist, attacked Aflatoun by writing an article against her booklet, "80 Million Women with Us", claiming that Aflatoun under "the innocent" claim of liberating women was encouraging them to rebel against the principles of Islam and propagating her destructive Communist beliefs (Thabet & Aflatoun 104). However, a scholar from Al-Azhar defended Aflatoun, but he too was attacked by another fellow scholar, Ahmed Al- Sharbasy, who echoed Thabet's words accusing Aflatoun of being anti-Islam since she asked for gender equality⁸.

Despite one's skeptical reading and reservation regarding some of Aflatoun's views, one cannot but respect this relentless fighter, this multitalented woman who used her various gifts to defend and propagate the causes she believed in despite the high price she paid. Her house was more than once searched and once sealed with wax. She was arrested, interrogated and released many times during the two regimes. Her books and passport were taken. Besides, if one association was dissolved, she would form another under a different name and never gave up. She came out even stronger after every failed experience (Nabrawy's forged election is one example). Her husband's arrest was a tough experience; yet, she never regretted the life they chose and continued to support him during imprisonment. The most difficult part remains to be her decision to hide from the authority in 1959. She speaks in detail about the feeling of stress and fear, about her moving from one house and one city to another until she was arrested while disguised as a peasant. Life

in prison was not an easy one from all different aspects: meeting a different world of criminals and lesbians, living in almost solitary imprisonment and low everyday life conditions, and undergoing what she calls a slow death and a “psychological torture” by being totally secluded from the outer world (190).

Art and Creativity as Resistance

In all these conditions, which could have killed her physically and psychologically, she resorted to all means to fight injustice; the pen (particularly during the Royal regime) and the brush were among them, proving how they could be threatening to a police state. For example, she wrote three booklets and contributed to many newspapers, becoming once a regular columnist and editor of a page in the Egyptian newspaper, *Al Masry*. Yet one day she was fired because her page angered the then Minister of Interior Affairs Fouad Serag al -Deen (109). Regarding painting, she remarks, on different occasions, that she used it as a means to express her rebelliousness, alleviate her pain, especially after the sudden death of her husband, and document her “revolutionary ideologies” and political and social activism.

In her first stage, she adopted Surrealism and that phase was one of rebellion and self-expression. Hence her paintings were always about a girl in an attempt to escape flames of fire with snakes trying to devour her, or running in a scary way on the rocks while being surrounded by tossing waves and chased by a wild bird (45). Lenssen describes the paintings of that phase as “expressing the interior subjects of gendered, classed anxieties: dream imagery of vengeful trees, creeping vegetation and serpents that grasp at other beings including – frightened young women” (86). Later, as her activism grew, she had to do away with the surrealist stage, and choose:

...a new pathway in art that would be apt to this drastic change in my thoughts, feelings and life. My main desire was to express the Egyptian character, the reality and dreams of the simple downtrodden man who works hard all day in horrible circumstances without enjoying lawful rights or having a law to protect him. I wanted to reveal to people the abuse of man by man and the deteriorating situation of women in the Egyptian society, especially the working women and the female peasants. (99)

Hence, in 1952, following the Cairo Fire, her main form of resistance was through holding an exhibition in March, which was so successful that she describes it as “a political and artistic demonstration” (122). The subject of her paintings focused on the simple Egyptian people, particularly the women. Aflatoun held other art exhibitions in the coming years; her subjects would extend to the peasants, men and women, and the fishermen, which gave her the chance to tour all of Egypt to know better her subjects. Yet, her main school remained to be her small village, Kafr Shokr.

She refers to the power of the brush when she mentions that her painting “We will not forget,” depicting the funeral of twelve martyrs from the Canal, was given as a gift to the City University of Cairo. Interestingly, the students photographed it and distributed the photos as a political manifesto; so the police removed it. It was brought back to its place, only to be removed again and disappear for good. This happened with other paintings which were classified as dangerous. A prominent example is “The beggar of Alexandria,” which was not included in an exhibition because the selecting committee found “the eyes of the beggar dangerous and the painting inciting to revolt” (127). Even internationally, the American CIA black list banned her paintings from entering many countries including Brazil.

Still, nowhere were her paintings a means of resistance and survival as during her incarceration. She did her best to get the needed materials and interestingly, that period was one of her richest and long lasting. She painted more than once the only tree she could see through her window cell; it became a famous symbol of freedom afterwards. Latifa Al-Zayyat records that, when imprisoned at al-Qanater in 1981, she would look from her window cell at Inji’s famous tree, giving her hope. In that sense her paintings bring to mind the famous graffiti and art work that resulted from the Egyptian 25th January 2011 Revolution.

The value of Aflatoun’s text also lies in the way it highlights, in certain parts, the amazing role of the simple and poor Egyptians, who are always discarded from the official records of their history. The text gives many examples; a strong one is Aflatoun’s close work with the people in many poor areas during the Tripartite War: “We were thrilled to discover the hidden treasure in the Egyptian woman who was under the yoke of

extremely difficult social and economic conditions and backward traditions. We knew how to awaken her and win her to the national Egyptian feminist movement....” (145) This inherent strength would keep coming up in different phases of the Egyptian history, the most notable of which was during the two Revolutions of 25 January, 2011 and 30 June, 2013.

Conclusion

Reading *From Childhood to Prison* proves that the personal can become collective when involved and closely tied with the masses and one’s society. It shows the power and threat that courageous and common people represent to any oppressive regime, which always resorts to the same means of violence, forgery, and ready-made accusations of treason. Similarly, it reveals how liberal feminists, since the beginning of their struggle more than a century ago, have been easily labeled as westernised and anti-religion. Hence, Aflatoun’s life and courage should act as a source of inspiration regardless of her ideological stances and beliefs. This text and similar ones bring to mind Plato’s allegory of the cave, which I see as foreshadowing New Historicism’s argument regarding reading history. The allegory explains his theory of forms, representation and reality. It describes some people who are imprisoned in a cave and bound in a way that allows them to look in only a single direction to a wall. Behind them a fire is burning and their captors project shadow figures on that wall. Thus, the only reality they are exposed to is the shadows on the wall. If some prisoners manage to break free from the cave, they go out to the world and the sunlight only to realise how limited their vision in the cave was. If they were to go back to the cave, they would have a hard time adjusting to its darkness and explaining to their fellow prisoners the reality outside the cave.

Most of us are like those imprisoned in the cave, we only see the shadow of the truth or a single version of history when we solely read the official records or what those in power allow us to see. People like Aflatoun (interestingly her family name in English is Plato) have managed to escape from the cave and seen things in a different light. Though we can remain skeptical about their versions, they at least fill the gap and shed light on many unknown or ignored names and incidents. Such texts need to be circulated on a wider scale so that people would learn of the

unrecorded part of their history⁹. Feminist, history and politics scholars are in need of these works to somehow see a fuller picture and think of how such lives can help us understand our present, a time that is as turbulent as Aflatoun's. Can we learn from the mistakes of previous regimes? Can we dream of a true acceptance of other ideologies and a cooperation regardless of differences? Questions that unfortunately need yet to be answered.

Notes

¹ Any quotation from Aflatoun's memoir is from the 2nd edition and the translation is mine.

² This remark brings to mind another remarkable Egyptian activist and writer, Latifa Al-Zayyat (1923-1996) who shared a great deal of Aflatoun's political activism. Al-Zayyat too, did not see herself, except when melted with the masses. Many reviewers of Aflatoun's memoir such as Ahmed Alsherif, agree that her personal history is indeed Egypt's history, its consciousness and rebellion from the twenties until the sixties of the previous century. He supports his belief with the fact that her memoir ends with the end of her public work after her release from the prison.

³ For a critical reading of the interrelation of Aflatoun's different activities see Betty La Duke, "The Merging of Art, Feminism and Politics" in *National Women Studies Association*. Vol.1, No. 3 (Spring 1989): 474-485.

⁴ For a detailed and well researched documentation of this period which may fill the gaps left by Aflatoun and others, see Ahmed Abdalla who refers to the thorough investigation of the famous historian Abd al- Rahman al-Rafi, and dedicates a whole chapter to the year 1946 in Egypt's history, calling it "The Climax" in *The Student Movement and National Politics*, 62-79.

⁵ Khaial, the editor of Aflatoun's memoir, enriches the text by adding a footnote that elaborates on the activities of Metry in one of the Egyptian governorates (141).

⁶ Aflatoun speaks in detail about the Paris conference, and mentions many of the famous women attending it, such as the Spanish Dolores Ibarruri known as the Passionarta, the Romanina Anna Piker, the French Marie-Claude Vaillant-Couturier, the Indian Andira Ghandy, the Russian Nina Popova, and others (63-72). For further reference to this conference and other primary resources on women's international activism see the extremely valuable site "Women and Social Movements – International (WASMI) which provides access to more than 150,000 pages of primary sources related to this topic since 1840.

⁷ "Wedad Mitry has been a lifelong journalist. A student activist, she was the only woman elected to the Student Union at Cairo University in 1951. That same year she joined the Women's Popular Resistance Committee (founded by the feminist Saiza Nabarawi)" (Badran).

⁸ I owe the access to these pieces by Thabet and Sharbasy and many unavailable and extremely valuable materials by Aflatoun and on her and her art to Mr. Hasan Galal Al-Deen, Aflatoun's nephew, who generously provided

me with copies of these references. But due to limitation of space, this paper could not make full use of them.

⁹ I first gave this paper as a presentation at the Women and Memory Forum in Cairo in September 2015. Another activist's text was examined, that of Arwa Saleh. The audience included many young women who said that they had never heard of Aflatoun, Saleh or any of the other female activists included in the presentation. These women remain to be labelled as dangerous, which somehow explains the refusal of the Egyptian TV to dramatise the life of Aflatoun or to include her and other women like Latifa Al- Zayyat in our school curricula whether in history or reading books.

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