

EXCERPTED FROM

Return of the Spirit  
a novel

Tawfiq al-Hakim  
translated by  
William Maynard Hutchins

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# Introduction

William Maynard Hutchins

*Return of the Spirit* is a gloriously Romantic tribute to the solidarity of the Egyptian people of all classes and religions and to their good taste and excellent sense of humor. It begins with the flu pandemic of 1918 and ends with the Egyptian Revolution of 1919. Admiration for the novel by the military entrepreneurs who replaced the monarchy in Egypt's 1952 Revolution may have dampened enthusiasm for it, but the Egyptian Revolution of 2011 has brought new life to the work, making it seem like today's news, all fresh and glowing again.

Novels celebrating the 2011 Egyptian Revolution will appear in due time, but Alaa Al Aswany, author of the immensely successful novel *The Yacoubian Building*, is already in print with remarks that echo *Return of the Spirit*: "The revolution makes much better people. When you participate in it, you regain your ability to say 'no.' . . . Egypt regained its identity. . . . And I believe that the personality now of Egyptians is very different. I think we regained what we lost in the [past] thirty years."<sup>1</sup>

Egyptian critic and journalist Ghali Shukri, in his book-length study of Tawfiq al-Hakim, responded to criticism that the 1919 Revolution was merely used by the author as a *deus ex machina* to end the novel: "The truth is that al-Hakim intended it to be that way. . . . He wished to affirm that the Revolution was latent in the Egyptian Spirit so that it was hidden from the naked eye," in such fashion that at the right moment, given the right catalyst, "the Revolution would explode."<sup>2</sup>

*Return of the Spirit* is a comic novel with a serious, nationalist theme that is as relevant today as it was eighty years ago. The plot has the snowballing inevitability of a tragedy as the character flaws of Muhsin's relatives drive the romance between their love interest, Saniya, and their rival, Mustafa Bey, for whose sake Muhsin's aunt, Zanuba, invests scant family resources on love charms. Their failures in love strengthen the young men

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*Return of the Spirit* [‘Awdat al-Ruh], published in 1933

A NOVEL IN TWO VOLUMES OF EIGHTEEN AND TWENTY-FIVE CHAPTERS, RESPECTIVELY

PLOT SUMMARY

A sensitive Egyptian lad matures through the early years of the twentieth century as romantic heartbreak and patriotic revolt against British colonial rule help him find his calling as an author who celebrates his solidarity with his extended family and with all levels of Egyptian society.

MAIN CHARACTERS

*Muhsin*, an upper middle-class, provincial Egyptian boy who decides to become a writer

Muhsin’s three uncles:

*Salim*, a vain and earthy police captain

*Hanafi*, the sleepy head of the blended family, a math teacher

*Abduh*, an irascible engineering student

*Zanuba*, Muhsin’s homely and illiterate spinster aunt, who serves as housekeeper for her male relatives in Cairo but still hopes to marry

*Saniya*, the beautiful girl next door with whom all the young men fall in love

SUPPORTING CAST

*Hamid Bey*, Muhsin’s henpecked father

*Muhsin’s mother*, who is proud of her Ottoman/Turkish ancestry and dismissive of Egyptian farmers

*Mabruk*, the household servant and a family friend from their village

*Mr. Black*, a British irrigation inspector

*M. Fouquet*, a French archaeologist

*Mustafa*, the young man who steals Saniya’s heart from Muhsin and his roommates

*Abbas*, Muhsin’s school pal

*Maestra Labiba Shakhla’*, a female entertainer who teaches Muhsin to sing and allows him to perform at least once with her troupe

SETTING

Cairo in 1918–1919, especially the area of al-Sayyida Zaynab, which is named for a beloved granddaughter of the Prophet Muhammad, with some scenes in rural Egypt in and around Damanhur

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and motivate them to join together in the 1919 Revolution against the British, who throw them in prison. Through his suffering, Muhsin finds his calling as an artist who aspires to become the eloquent tongue of his nation.

*Return of the Spirit* is, then, at once a portrait of an Egyptian as a young artist and therefore an apprenticeship novel; the narrative of a failed romance that transforms everything; a political novel that celebrates the 1919 Revolution in Egypt and calls for national solidarity; a work of Arab Muslim literature; and a novel that presents its blended family as a model for Egyptian society and its characters as symbols for tendencies and ideas.

The novel is also simply enjoyable reading. Since it was a first novel and subject to little if any editing, not surprisingly it retains certain infelicities: the digressions, the political ambiguities, the possible symbolic overload, and the ending that perhaps arrives too abruptly. All the same, there are more than enough felicities to make up for these.

### **An Apprenticeship Novel**

*Return of the Spirit* is comparable in certain respects to James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Both novels were written in the early twentieth century, have positive, upbeat endings as the young protagonists find their callings as artists, are rich in dialogue and colloquialisms, celebrate significant details of daily life, and have a political agenda, namely, liberation from British rule and recovery of their nation's authentic culture and consciousness.

Both heroes appeal to a feminine religious intercessor: Stephen Dedalus to Mary and Muhsin al-Atifi to al-Sayyida Zaynab, a female descendant of the Prophet Muhammad and the de facto patron saint of the Cairo neighborhood where Muhsin's extended family lives. Both heroes, who are approximately the same age, struggle with lust or love; and both are haunted by language. Irish Stephen is of course fluent in English, but finds that this language, "so familiar and so foreign," causes him "unrest of spirit."<sup>3</sup> The one characteristic that most significantly ties Stephen to Muhsin is belief in his vocation as an artist. Stephen's desire "to forge . . . the uncreated conscience of my race"<sup>4</sup> is the Egyptian Muhsin's dedication to become the eloquent tongue of the Egyptian people.

### **A Narrative of Failed Romance**

Like Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther*, *Return of the Spirit* recounts a failed romance, and each work caught the imagination of its contemporaries

by capturing the spirit of its generation. Muhsin, who is only just past puberty, falls madly in love with his talented teenage neighbor Saniya when he is grudgingly allowed to exchange music lessons with her. After flirting with Muhsin, Saniya breaks his heart and also the hearts of his adult relatives Hanafi and Salim. When Charlotte and her fiancé, Albert, present Werther with the pink ribbon she wore the first time he saw her, he kisses it repeatedly like Muhsin with Saniya's handkerchief.<sup>5</sup> Werther consoles himself for his lost love and for the falsity of contemporary society by pairing simple, rural life with Homer.<sup>6</sup> Muhsin rebels against his parents' snobbery and seeks out the company of farm laborers, thinking not of Homer but of ancient Egypt. For Muhsin (and for al-Hakim at the time he wrote the novel), the Egyptian farm worker was a link to what is ancient and authentic in Egypt. Both Werther and Muhsin tend toward nature pantheism, with Muhsin's revealed by his vision in the cowshed. As his despair increases, Werther's earlier cheerful pantheism takes on a terrifying, malevolent form.<sup>7</sup>

Goethe's book was said to have been carried by Napoleon on his campaigns and to have caused countless suicides,<sup>8</sup> and al-Hakim's book is said to have influenced Gamal Abdel Nasser in a significant way and to have contributed to an acceptance of totalitarian rule by Egyptian intellectuals.<sup>9</sup>

### A Political Novel

Al-Hakim's response to European colonialism was less a call to arms than a call to spiritual rebirth through pride in Egypt's heritage. Although tension between modern, urban Cairo and ancient, rural Egypt is a vital element of the novel, for Muhsin the choice is not exclusive. Muhsin is as positive about streetcars as he is about waterwheels powered by oxen. What he opposes is the suppression of human dignity. The waterwheel, in fact, guarantees that Egypt will have streetcars (and astronauts). The tip of the pyramid points, metaphorically, to the Aswan High Dam and beyond.

From *Return of the Spirit* to later works like *The Thorns of Peace* and *Voyage to Tomorrow*, solidarity has been an important theme for al-Hakim. M. M. Badawi says of al-Hakim's 1956 folk play *al-Safqa* [The Deal]: "In their desire to possess the land they have been tilling with such toil and dedication, the peasants present a remarkable spectacle of solidarity and self-denial."<sup>10</sup> He adds: "The peasants are not devoid of foibles. . . . They are a noisy, but good-humoured crowd, who with a few bold strokes are brought to life as distinct individuals."<sup>11</sup>

Joseph Conrad placed comparable emphasis on solidarity, as for example in a famous preface in which he said that the artist speaks to the "con-

viction of solidarity . . . which binds men together.”<sup>12</sup> Al-Hakim, like Conrad, understood that art has political implications and that the artist has a duty to champion human solidarity. In *Return of the Spirit*, al-Hakim focused on an Egyptian nationalist solidarity that cut across class lines; in later works the human solidarity stressed was international, as in his play *Poet on the Moon*.

In a newspaper column dated November 13, 1948, Tawfiq al-Hakim compared the events of the Egyptian uprising of 1919, celebrated in his *Return of the Spirit*, with later strikes and demonstrations in Egypt and concluded that the difference between these diverse moments of civil unrest was the unanimity of heart in 1919—a solidarity as much spiritual or religious as political.<sup>13</sup> Critic Ali Jad has observed: “The author is determined to see manifestations of the special unity of the Egyptian people in almost any ordinary social phenomenon, be it the gregariousness of passengers on Egyptian trains or the crowdedness of some Egyptian houses.”<sup>14</sup>

In *Return of the Spirit*, instead of angry denunciations of British imperialism, there are happy expressions of the solidarity of adverse circumstances. Even as a child, Muhsin insists on eating with the members of the musical troupe instead of with the guests. In the digression about the Sudan, the story about the monkeys down the well celebrates their primate solidarity, which holds up even under attack. If an artist is to become the eloquent tongue of his people, the solidarity of a nation’s citizens (as in *Return of the Spirit*) or of all earthlings (as in al-Hakim’s *Voyage to Tomorrow*) must be assumed.

In Egyptian literature, *Return of the Spirit* was a pioneer political novel that tied an individual’s awakening to the political awakening of the nation. It clearly served as a precedent for *The Cairo Trilogy* of Naguib Mahfouz and for Latifa al-Zayyat’s *The Open Door*. Hilary Kilpatrick, in *The Modern Egyptian Novel*, characterized *Return of the Spirit* as “a wonderfully romantic expression of that nationalist philosophy of rebirth which inspired the revolution of 1919” and observed that the book has won “the admiration of successive generations of Egyptian readers.”<sup>15</sup> Bayly Winder, who called *Return of the Spirit* “al-Hakim’s most important and famous novel,” explained: “This story of middle-class Cairo life plays on the Egyptian myth of Isis and Osiris to set al-Hakim’s theme that the revolution of 1919 . . . constituted the return of national spirit to Egypt.”<sup>16</sup> The Egyptian critic Ghali Shukri wrote that *The Cairo Trilogy* is a natural outgrowth of *Return of the Spirit*, pointing out that both works end with the revolutionaries in prison—as part of a social revolution in the Mahfouz trilogy and of a nationalist one in *Return of the Spirit*.<sup>17</sup>

Toward the end of his life, Naguib Mahfouz, in an interview he granted Mohamed Salmawy for *al-Ahram Weekly*, said that al-Hakim’s “works were

truly landmarks in the evolution of Arab novel-writing. In the truest sense they represented and helped shape a new age. . . . My direct mentor was El-Hakim. *Return of the Spirit*, I believe, marked the true birth of the Arab novel. It was written using what were then cutting-edge narrative devices.” In fact, it was so unlike previous Arab attempts at writing novels that it “was a bombshell.”<sup>18</sup> Mahfouz also told me in a private conversation (circa 1991) that, until he wrote the trilogy, al-Hakim’s *Return of the Spirit* was the best Arabic novel.

Mahfouz’s hero Kamal in *Palace of Desire*, the middle volume of *The Cairo Trilogy*, is comparable to al-Hakim’s hero Muhsin. The important scene in which Kamal’s father confronts him about his future and the choice of a branch of education (law school versus teachers college), although dissimilar in details, is directly parallel to the scene in Volume 1, Chapter 7, of *Return of the Spirit*, where Muhsin insists that he and his friend Abbas must enter a secondary school for the arts. In each scene, the young hero takes his stand and voices his aspiration to become an artist—a responsible, authentic, Egyptian artist.

### An Arab and Islamic Novel

If *Return of the Spirit* resembles several Western types of novel—whether portraits of a young artist, stories of an unsatisfied and transforming love, or political novels—it is also an Arab and Islamic work. Denis Hoppe, while criticizing al-Hakim for being an author who “more than any other Arab writer, sees the Arab world through the rose-colored glasses of the West,” also mentioned that one of his “most striking characteristics” was “his sensitivity to the Arab past.”<sup>19</sup> Perhaps Hoppe did not contradict himself. A Muslim author who looks at Goethe’s *Sorrows of Young Werther* can find there the story of Majnun, the hero of numerous works of Islamic literature like Nizami’s *Layla and Majnun*,<sup>20</sup> a story of self-sacrificing, ‘Udhri love. Majnun goes insane when his love for the beautiful Layla is thwarted by her family. Layla’s life too is transformed by her love for Majnun. At a deeper level, the story relates Majnun’s quest for God, whose earthly reflection—Layla—he pursues. *Return of the Spirit* differs from Nizami’s tale of unconsummated but all-consuming love, because it is a realistic story of modern, urban life and because it substitutes the artist’s calling for the mind-ravished spiritual quest of the desert wanderer. Majnun, however was also an artist, a poet. At the end of *Return of the Spirit*, Muhsin delights in his physical contact with the other prisoners in his prison cell. Recognition of this physical, human solidarity signals a spiritual rebirth. From a Sufi perspective, Majnun is not a failure or a tragic hero, because he progresses by leaps and



bounds in his quest for the divine. Of the three—Muhsin, Majnun, and Werther—only Goethe’s Werther seems suicidal and despairing.

It is more difficult to find premodern Islamic apprenticeship novels. A study called *Interpreting the Self* includes translations of autobiographical selections by thirteen authors, ranging from the ninth-century Hunayn ibn Ishaq to the nineteenth-century Ali Mubarak.<sup>21</sup> *The Book of Contemplation* by Usama ibn Munqidh (d. 1188 A.D.), although a book of edifying reflections on God’s creation, contains elements of an apprenticeship novel like the author’s account of his youthful adventures combating serpents, lions, and Franks.<sup>22</sup> *Deliverance from Error* by al-Ghazali (d. 1111 A.D.) is another example of religious discourse decorated with autobiographical details as the author recounts the stages of the intellectual and spiritual apprenticeship that led him to embrace Sufism.<sup>23</sup> *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* by Ibn Tufayl (d. 1185 A.D.), although a work of philosophy, is also an apprenticeship novel that relates the story of a wild child who grows to manhood nurtured by a kindly doe and who gains, by his use of reason alone, complete knowledge of the Aristotelian universe surrounding him on his deserted island—although he does need to travel to a nearby inhabited island to discover how many times to pray each day.<sup>24</sup>

In *Return of the Spirit*, the main religious, symbolic framework is admittedly not Shari’ah-based, act-right Islam. Throughout much of the novel Saniya is portrayed as Isis. A hint of earth goddess symbolism comes when a green field reminds Abduh of Saniya in her green dress. In his later novel *The Sacred Bond*, al-Hakim also has his hero recognize that he had transfigured a young woman into “more than a living being; she was lofty and abstract and no longer real. She was a poem and a legend.”<sup>25</sup> No matter how beautiful and talented she is, Saniya is not the twentieth-century Isis. She is at best a representative of Isis. The Prophet Muhammad’s granddaughter al-Sayyida Zaynab has a better claim to being the novel’s Isis. Although not a character, she is invoked throughout, and the novel takes place on her turf.

Muhsin has trouble realizing that the Saniya to whom he is speaking is not the Saniya of his dreams, not the new Isis. Ali Jad has claimed that disappointment with an overly idealized woman is a recurrent theme in al-Hakim’s fiction, whether here, in *The Sacred Bond*, in *Bird of the East*, in *Shahrazad*, or, arguably, in *Maze of Justice*.<sup>26</sup> The tension between dream and reality is an important theme in al-Hakim’s works; even Muhsin’s adolescent wet dream, after he discovers the true nature of Saniya’s feelings toward him, is treated by al-Hakim as an example of this tension.

When a traditional Muslim implies in *Return of the Spirit* that there is only one choice—Islam or nothing—a fellow traveler gently corrects him and says that the question is rather having a heart or not having one. Egypt

in 1918 was still, the modern gentleman held, traditional enough to have a heart, whereas Europe was so modern that, like the Tin Woodman, it lacked one. In other words, Egyptian Christians and Egyptian Muslims are brothers; they all have hearts, even the same heart. This is the true meaning of Islam. For al-Hakim this was not secular humanism. It was important to be religious, but not in a one-dimensional way. He did not see Islam as having had a single pure and perfect era that needed to be revived. The issue was to reawaken the Egyptian spirit. This nation-building task was spiritual and therefore religious. In the discussion between the French archaeologist and the English irrigation inspector, the Frenchman argues that, whereas the uneducated Egyptian farm laborer is heir to the wisdom of ancient Egypt, the typical European has no inherited culture. These ideas turn up again in al-Hakim's *Bird of the East*,<sup>27</sup> in which the title refers to the hero, who is an Egyptian student in France and therefore an heir of the spiritual East, defined to include Egypt. On the other hand, al-Hakim in the preface to *King Oedipus* credits the French with a literary inheritance that goes back to the ancient Greeks and contrasts the rich French inheritance with a gaping theatrical void faced by a twentieth century Egyptian author like himself.

One key religious section in *Return of the Spirit* is Muhsin's vision in the cowshed, which seems almost a parody of Martin Luther's revelation in the "tower." In this cowshed, which is also the residence of a farm family, Muhsin comes to know the unity of existence and the unified duality of the emotions and logic. When his rival Mustafa succumbs to love and tries to decide whether to put his feelings into a letter to his beloved, he becomes a prime example of this notion of al-Hakim (and of others) that the heart and the mind actually reason in different ways. Both are trustworthy guides, no matter how much they appear to contradict each other on the surface. In his vision, Muhsin, by having a feeling of the unity of existence, has had a "feeling of God." This could be another example of latent Sufism in al-Hakim's writings, of a secular spiritualism, or of a secular Islamic pantheism, except that al-Hakim cites Dostoevsky here, taking the passage from a book by Mérejkovsky.

### **The Family as a Microcosm of Egypt**

The novel's characters, well developed in themselves, also stand for things that form part of the book's meaning.

Zanuba is criticized for shaving the food budget to spend money instead on magic and charlatans. The Islamic modernist message conveyed through this example is that uneducated women are not the fruit of Islam

but a danger to it. Society, and particularly Islamic society, must protect itself by educating women thoroughly in every field.

The scenes contrasting Saniya with her mother show generational change in the outlook of women in Egypt during that period. Saniya is even more strongly contrasted with Zanuba when Zanuba makes a determined effort to attract the attention of Mustafa, the man who will fall in love with Saniya. (Of course, everyone who encounters Saniya falls in love with her.) Saniya is not only beautiful; she is also the representative new woman. She is the second Prisca, the modern Prisca, in al-Hakim's landmark play, *The People of the Cave*—which was published the same year as *Return of the Spirit*—because she is an educated woman. Both Saniya and her mother successfully manipulate the men in their lives, but Saniya has a turn of mind that is the fruit of her education and that allows her to debate with her mother and to guide her intended mate in an appropriate direction. The marriages of the mother and daughter are instructively different. Saniya's father waited to marry until he had virtually completed his career—until he had made enough money to retire. Saniya marries, for love, a young man she has encountered by chance. Fortunately, money is not in short supply here either.

Of all the characters, Saniya is the most heavily burdened by symbolism, although she is slow to understand her plight. She would be justified in protesting, as al-Hakim's King Oedipus did in al-Hakim's play of the same name, that what happened was the fault of other people casting their fantasies upon her. Saniya is Isis, or a representative of Isis. She is therefore a symbol for woman and for the Egyptian woman as goddess, or vice versa. She is also a symbol for the reawakened spirit of Egypt. Critics have complained that Saniya is not a strong enough character to bear the weight of all this symbolism.<sup>28</sup> Without meeting Saniya, without losing our hearts to her, can we believe in her? The symbol gap is, however, an important theme of al-Hakim's works. In his play that is named for her, for example, Shahrazad pulls out all the stops in an attempt to save not herself but her husband from his obsession with her weighty symbolic baggage. Even Muhsin, in time, realizes that Saniya is less important as a person than as a symbol. Saniya at least has the courage to follow her own course. In this respect she resembles the heroine of E. M. Forster's *Howards End*, who expressed her satisfaction with her spiritual compromises.<sup>29</sup>

Mustafa Bey's blond mustache and chestnut hair are not accidental details in *Return of the Spirit*. They suggest that he is partly of Turkish heritage—like Muhsin's mother (and of course Muhsin too, thanks to his mother). Furthermore, Mustafa's status is specified by his servant: "He's one of the gentry." Blond or not, Mustafa turns out to be a hero parallel to Muhsin. In fact, *Return of the Spirit* is full of heroes: the entire Egyptian population.

Mustafa's dilemma—whether to sell out to a foreign concern—looks forward to the industrialist-technocrat hero of al-Hakim's play *Tender Hands*. In other words, Mustafa is the son of a true Egyptian businessman and has a duty to develop his father's company and engage in nation building. He needs only Saniya's encouragement to make this decision. Like Muhsin and his uncles, Mustafa is a sleeping beau awakened by the charming princess Saniya.

Muhsin is a callow artist who aspires to become the voice of the people and thus a reformer. He shares in the popular revolution and suffers the consequences. In al-Hakim's later works, like the play *Princess Sunshine*, the artist's role is limited to reforming the nation's leaders, even, at times, from an ivory tower. Muhsin's attitudes contrast strongly with those of his parents, who even comment on this. Muhsin shows us the right way. As our role model, he teaches us to shun narrow ethnic prejudice and snobbery and to throw our lot in with the masses. Muhsin is aware of the difference of status separating him from the farm laborers who work his parents' estate, but the opulence of his parents' house revolts him. Muhsin of course represents Tawfiq al-Hakim in this novel. Al-Hakim's autobiography, *The Prison of Life*, portrays the child's mother in a more flattering way.<sup>30</sup> The novel's account is, possibly, the franker version.

The drowsiness of Hanafi, the honorary head of the household, reaches a climax at the end of the first volume when Muhsin misses his train because Hanafi was napping on a bench at the station. This personality trait, which helps define Hanafi's character, is also symbolic, for this novel is all about awakening Egypt.

Two of the weaker characters—the French archaeologist and the British irrigation inspector—are also two of the more transparent symbols. Their identification by nationality and specialization is hardly accidental. That an Anglo-French team should be entertained at the beginning of the twentieth century in a Turkish/Ottoman fashion on an Egyptian farm is historically accurate. The division of labor speaks to a paradox of the early twentieth century in Egypt when Great Britain exercised a commanding political and military presence, while France was important culturally. Al-Hakim himself went to France to further his legal studies. Although a digression, the scene between the Englishman and the Frenchman serves to bring out ideas that tie up loose ends of the plot. The French archaeologist's views, a major element in this character's portrayal, were inspired by the Russian author Mérejkovsky's book *Les Mystères de l'Orient*. This book obviously influenced al-Hakim—there are repeated quotations from it and allusions to it in *Return of the Spirit*—but the ideas he borrowed from it were not given to Muhsin and may be taken with a grain of salt.<sup>31</sup>

Dr. Hilmi, Saniya's army doctor father, plays a part in the plot, but serves mainly to introduce a digression about the Sudan. The question of the

political status and future of that land riled Egyptian-British relations for decades. With the anecdotes of life in the Sudan toward the end of the first volume, al-Hakim made a series of nationalist, Egyptian points about the possibilities of future Egyptian exploitation of that country's resources. These adventure stories told by the retired doctor outside the pharmacy also provide an example of Egyptian society's separation at the time into two gender worlds: one of men literally in the street and a second of women praying or playing the piano inside the house.

The family's unsuccessful attempt to hand over the household finances to Mabruk conveys a political message. Mabruk, although male, is uneducated and illiterate. When he squanders "public" resources on personal prestige he violates the book's teachings, which strongly favor solidarity. He also provides a warning against handing power over to uneducated masses who may squander the nation's resources on prestige projects. There is thus an ambiguity to the political message, a fact that did not escape some Soviet critics.<sup>32</sup> The novel's waves flow back and forth between liberalism and authoritarianism.

The respect that *Return of the Spirit* shows for the Egyptian nationalist leader Sa'd Zaghlul, whose banishment led to the 1919 revolution, makes Zaghlul seem the Prince Charming whose kiss will awaken the Sleeping Beauty—Egypt. The novel implies that this Prince Charming could be another pharaoh and even an earthly manifestation of the divine. Al-Hakim later realized that this beautiful, romantic vision had less beautiful implications for human rights and freedoms. Even though the book's prediction that this new leader will bring forth from the Egyptian people another miracle like the pyramids appeared to set the stage for President Nasser's successful struggle to build the Aswan High Dam, it is not Sa'd Zaghlul who figures in the climax of the novel. Muhsin, the young man who aspires to be an artist expressing the feelings of his people, is the novel's hero. Moreover, Muhsin does not wish to become the nation's beloved, simply its tongue or mouthpiece. In al-Hakim's world, the artist inspires the politician. *Return of the Spirit* is a call not to arms, but to pens.

## Assessments

The strongest claim that *Return of the Spirit* makes for the attention of a non-Egyptian reader is its realistic depiction of life in Egypt at the beginning of the twentieth century. Roger Allen, in *The Arabic Novel*, termed it "the first novel which succeeded in giving a totally convincing portrait of a family."<sup>33</sup> Ali Jad wrote, "This is a novel about Egypt par excellence: here we find Egypt not only in the . . . daily life . . . of Muhsin and his uncles and

aunt . . . but also in the crowded streets, coffee houses, tramcars and trains, in wedding parties and classrooms, at demonstrations and in prison.”<sup>34</sup>

Ali Jad underscored the novel’s comedy, reminding the reader of al-Hakim’s early training in the Egyptian popular theater, in which vaudeville, slapstick, and farce were combined with music. Jad mentioned the book’s “comedy engendered by the opposition of his characters’ personalities and . . . conflicting interests” as well as “a series of outrageous . . . actions . . . followed by [a] hilarious comment.” If “the characters in [*Return of the Spirit*] do not exactly go about throwing custard pies at each other. . . . Zannubah helped by a reluctant Mabruk bombards the two lovers (Saniyyah and Mustafa) with . . . garbage.” Jad suggested that “the novel could readily be made into a musical farce.”<sup>35</sup>

The Egyptian critic Hamdi Sakkut called *Return of the Spirit* “the first Egyptian novel which can sustain comparison with Western works.”<sup>36</sup> He also commented that its popularity “helped to raise the prestige of the Egyptian novel.”<sup>37</sup> Sasson Somekh said that the dialogue, “given in vigorous vernacular—is probably among the best in Egyptian fiction.”<sup>38</sup>

Richard Long said that *Return of the Spirit* “is by general consent the first real novel in Arabic.” If that were not enough, he points out, “The first real play and the first real novel in Arabic, astonishingly, had issued from one pen, seven months apart in the same year.”<sup>39</sup> He was, of course, talking about their publication dates, not the actual period of composition.

Ali Jad mentioned al-Hakim’s “consistent characterization” as one of the novel’s strengths: “Almost everything the characters do reflects and confirms the author’s initial statements about them.”<sup>40</sup> As is typical in al-Hakim’s works, the language of the novel is clear and unpretentious. The noted Egyptian author Yahya Haqqi commented: “*Return of the Spirit* is written in the only style that can be considered suitable to the theme: an easy, uncomplicated, authentic style that conveys conversation through its spirit and describes and speaks in such a way that the readers, about and for whom it was written, can understand it.” Haqqi continued: al-Hakim’s “only aim is to be entirely natural, unforced, and unpretentious.”<sup>41</sup> In this book al-Hakim used more dialect words than he would later, even some words said to be used only between women.

A nice touch of irony is provided by the fact that Muhsin and Zanuba inadvertently awaken and foster the romance between Saniya and Mustafa, even though this romance runs counter to the hopes and wishes of their entire family. An apparent structural problem—that the novel starts as a romance starring Muhsin and Saniya but ends up with a different male lead—may exist only in the reader’s mind. One can argue that a single romantic event is seen in radically different ways by the various characters, whose differing perspectives merely give the story the appearance of being a series of unrelated romances.

Ghali Shukri found a creative tension in *Return of the Spirit* involving (a) its classical dramatic structure, in which the characters' development is determined by their symbolic roles and by a progression from beginning to crisis to resolution, (b) a middle-class romantic ideology, and finally (c) realism, which is received here more hospitably than previously in Egyptian literature. What is really at stake in the novel is not a classical theme like honor or revenge, or a romantic one like death, but the condition of the middle classes in Egypt at the start of the twentieth century.<sup>42</sup> Each of the novel's characters has a role to play by personifying this cause and milieu. Countless details that taken separately may seem of trivial importance are woven together to create a realistic fabric for the novel. According to Shukri, al-Hakim's blend of classical dramatic structure, bourgeois romanticism, and realism influenced Naguib Mahfouz (especially in *Palace Walk*) as well as other Egyptian writers.<sup>43</sup>

Rasheed el-Enany, in his valuable study *Naguib Mahfouz: The Pursuit of Meaning*, said that Mahfouz observed that al-Hakim's landmark novel was "more akin to drama than to fiction."<sup>44</sup> Shukri also detected in *Return of the Spirit* a classical dramatic structure that was emphasized by the use of dialogue and by the way the characters "act" to portray the author's preexisting idea instead of undergoing their own development. Or, put another way, Shukri says, the development of the characters is determined by their symbolic roles and by a progression from their symbolic roles and by the plot's progression to the resolution of the crisis.<sup>45</sup>

Many critics prefer *Maze of Justice*, which Roger Allen has called "a beautifully constructed picture of the Egyptian countryside."<sup>46</sup> Dina Amin, for example, in an extensive article about al-Hakim, praised *Maze of Justice* as "one of his finest prose works" and said of *Return of the Spirit* only that it was "reality-based" and "a fictional portrayal of the life of his paternal uncles and aunt in Cairo, with whom he lodged while completing his undergraduate education."<sup>47</sup>

For reasons that I have advanced in this introduction and elsewhere, *Return of the Spirit* is Tawfiq al-Hakim's single most influential and important novel—the opinion of major critics notwithstanding—if only for the juicy slice of Egyptian life it offers. Roger Allen admitted that it "provides a lively colloquial dialogue as a means of introducing his readers to the tensions of a large Egyptian family . . . in Egypt in 1919."<sup>48</sup> Paul Starkey acknowledged that since it "captured the mood of the Egyptian people at a crucial point in their history," it "may well strike a more responsive note in the mind of the average Egyptian reader" than *Maze of Justice*, which combined "realism and immediacy" with an "avoidance of the structural faults [that] mar all his other extended prose works."<sup>49</sup>

M. M. Badawi wrote an excellent assessment of the novel: "*Return of the Spirit* represents a giant step forward in the writing of the Arabic novel:

the art of narration, the skill in characterization, and chiefly the management of dialogue, in which al-Hakim boldly opted for the language of speech rather than that of writing. Furthermore, the work is characterized by al-Hakim's intelligence and urbanity of spirit, as well as the ability to see and create comic situations in which humour is often combined with pathos."<sup>50</sup>

## Conclusion

*Return of the Spirit* is first and foremost a memorable and influential portrait of an Egyptian Muslim family living nearly a century ago. The message of *Return of the Spirit* is upbeat; it teaches that the solidarity of Egyptians of all walks of life will revive the age-old Egyptian spirit and chase away colonial oppressors, whose chief damage has been psychological and can be addressed, first and foremost, by waking the Egyptian people. The only true villains in the novel are inertia and ignorance. *Return of the Spirit* did not only celebrate the change that Tawfiq al-Hakim felt began in Egypt in 1919, but it was itself a significant part of that change.

## Notes

1. Alaa Al Aswany, "Narrating the Revolution," interview in the *Cairo Review of Global Affairs* 1 (Spring 2011), pp. 91–92.

2. Ghali Shukri, *Thawrat al-Mu'tazil* (Beirut: Dar al-Afaq al-Jadida, n.d.), p. 142.

3. James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: Viking Press, 1978), p. 189.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 252–253.

5. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, trans. Victor Lange (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1949), "May 22," pp. 8–9.

6. *Ibid.*, "June 21," p. 24; "March 15, 1772," pp. 68–69; "September 4, 1772," p. 79.

7. *Ibid.*, "August 18," pp. 48–49; "May 10, 1771," p. 3.

8. *Ibid.*, "Introduction," by Victor Lange, pp. ix, x.

9. Jean Lacouture, *Nasser: A Biography*, trans. Daniel Hofstadter (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), pp. 28, 281; P. J. Vatikiotis, *Nasser and His Generation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), pp. 28, 29, 43; Amos Elon, *Flight into Egypt* (New York: Pinnacle Books, 1981), pp. 103, 159; Anouar Abdel-Malek, *Egypt: Military Society*, trans. Charles Markmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), pp. 207–208; and Richard Long, *Tawfiq al-Hakim: Playwright of Egypt* (London: Ithaca Press, 1979), p. 28.

10. M. M. Badawi, *Modern Arabic Drama in Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 66.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

12. Joseph Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page, and Co., 1925), p. xii.



13. Tawfiq al-Hakim, "I Challenge," in *Shajara al-Hukm al-Siyasi fi Misr 1919–1979* (The Rulership Tree) (Cairo: Maktabat al-Adab, 1985), p. 272.
14. Ali B. Jad, *Form and Technique in the Egyptian Novel: 1912–1971* (London: Ithaca Press, published for the Middle East Centre, St. Anthony's College, Cambridge, 1983), p. 51.
15. Hilary Kilpatrick, *The Modern Egyptian Novel* (London: Ithaca Press, 1974), p. 41.
16. Tawfiq al-Hakim, *The Return of Consciousness*, trans. Bayly Winder (New York: New York University Press, 1985), p. 79, note 47.
17. Shukri, *Thawrat al-Mu'tazil*, p. 138.
18. Naguib Mahfouz, "Return of the Spirit," *al-Ahram Weekly*, June 29–July 5, 2000, p. 10.
19. Denis Hoppe, "The Novels of Tawfiq al-Hakim," senior thesis, Princeton University, 1969, chapter 2, available at <http://www.tln.lib.mi.us/~dhoppe/THESIS66.HTM>.
20. Nizami, *The Story of Layla and Majnun*, English trans. R. Gelpke with E. Mattin and G. Hill (Boulder, CO: Shambala, 1978).
21. Dwight F. Reynolds, ed., *Interpreting the Self: Autobiography in the Arabic Literary Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
22. Usama ibn Munqidh, *The Book of Contemplation*, trans. Paul M. Cobb (London: Penguin Books, 2008).
23. English translation in W. Montgomery Watt, *The Faith and Practice of al-Ghazali* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1967).
24. Ibn Tufayl, *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*, trans. Lenn Evan Goodman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).
25. Tawfiq al-Hakim, *The Sacred Bond*, trans. Mohamed S. Ghattas in "Balance Through Resistance: The Novels of Tawfiq al-Hakim," PhD diss., Oklahoma State University, May 2000, p. 109.
26. Jad, *Form and Technique in the Egyptian Novel*, p. 74.
27. Tawfiq al-Hakim, *Bird of the East*, trans. R. Bayly Winder (Beirut: Khayats, 1966).
28. Shukri, *Thawrat al-Mu'tazil*, for example, complained: "We are unable to see the characters of *Return of the Spirit* as personalities of flesh and blood" (p. 131).
29. E. M. Forster, *Howards End* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951 [1921]), pp. 295–300.
30. Tawfiq al-Hakim, *The Prison of Life*, trans. Pierre Cachia (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1964).
31. See, for example, Dimitri Mérejkovsky, *Les Mystères de l'Orient: Egypte-Babylone*, trans. Dumesnil de Gramont (Paris: L'Artisan du Livre, 1927), pp. 109–111, 112–113, 117, 165–166, 169.
32. See K. O. Yunusov, "Introduction," in A. A. Dolinina and N. M. Zand, *Tawfik al-Hakim Biobibliograficheski Ukazatel'* (Moscow: Kniga Press, 1963).
33. Roger Allen, *The Arabic Novel* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1982), p. 38.
34. Jad, *Form and Technique in the Egyptian Novel*, p. 38.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
36. Hamdi Sakkut, *The Egyptian Novel* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1971), p. 89.
37. *Ibid.*
38. Sasson Somekh, *The Changing Rhythm* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973), p. 19.
39. Long, *Tawfik al-Hakim: Playwright of Egypt*, pp. 27–28.

40. Jad, *Form and Technique in the Egyptian Novel*, p. 40.
41. Yahya Haqqi, in Roger Allen, ed., *Modern Arabic Literature* (New York: Ungar Publishing Company, 1987), pp. 111–112.
42. Shukri, *Thawrat al-Mu'tazil*, p. 133.
43. *Ibid.*, pp. 135, 139.
44. Rasheed el-Enany, *Naguib Mahfouz: The Pursuit of Meaning* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 20.
45. Shukri, *Thawrat al-Mu'tazil*, pp. 130–131.
46. Roger Allen, *The Arabic Literary Heritage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 306.
47. Dina Amin, "Tawfiq al-Hakim (1898–1986)," in Roger Allen, ed., *Essays in Arabic Literary Biography, 1850–1950* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010), p. 104.
48. Roger Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 185.
49. Paul Starkey, *From the Ivory Tower* (London: Ithaca Press, 1987), p. 228.
50. M. M. Badawi, *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 120.