“AL-KHUTŪBAH”: DEFiance in the FACE of INTERROGATION

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By

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The research and writing of this thesis is dedicated to my family, friends, and everyone who helped along the way.

Many thanks,
Aliza Keren Mamber
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Introduction

This thesis is a translation of one of the works of Bahā’ Tāhir, an Egyptian writer who has composed both novels and short stories. Throughout my coursework, I have read various examples of ancient and modern Arabic literature. In fact, when I first read one of Tāhir’s other, more well-known stories, I did not enjoy his style and literary techniques. However, this particular story caught my attention due to its very strangeness, and I became curious to dig under the surface and discover the multiple layers of meaning to be found within it: its cultural nuances and social and historical influences. I undertook the difficult task of translating it into English in order to allow other readers to share my interest in this unique story and to give them an opportunity to perform further research into the topic. There is a risk in translating of losing the author’s message, but I have endeavored to remain faithful to Tāhir’s original purpose. In light of my background and the information I have learned about Arab society over my years of study, I was able to grasp the cultural context that is necessary to convey Tāhir’s intended meaning.
Translation

The Proposal

Bahā’ Tāhir

I had been nervous about everything. An experienced friend took me to a famous barber who cut and combed my hair, massaged my chin, and charged too much. After that, we bought an expensive red tie and silver cufflinks. In the end, when I stood in front of a mirror, it was like I had become a stranger. I was no more handsome, but I was different: with lustrous, smooth hair, as though it was frozen in place; a shiny, flushed chin, too; and a stiff, taut collar. For the first time in my life, I put a tie pin on; it seemed to me the whole time that it would slip out, but it remained put until the end.

The doorman was amazed by my appearance and, laughing, asked me if I was on my way to propose. I told him that I had an important appointment at the bank and gave him five piastres for no reason—he looked at me in wonder. I told him to say a prayer for me, as I was hoping for a promotion. He thanked me and raised his hands to the sky, muttering under his breath. I felt awkward, so I quickly went out the door. The wind stung my face, and thus I realized that my temperature was elevated. While I was in the taxi, my heart began to throb strongly. I became convinced that the speech I had

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prepared had vanished from my memory and that I would not know how to say anything to her father after “Hello.” And then the sweat started.

I told myself as I rang the doorbell that everything would depend on the father, and that I might have to consent to answering his questions. An eleven-year-old girl opened the door for me, brown-skinned and serious-faced. She stood behind the partially opened door and faced me with lowered eyes. When I asked about the father, she shook her head, opened the door further, and led me without a word to the parlor. I remained by myself for a while, smelling the typical smell of a parlor: the scent of wood preserved by a dearth of ventilation and infrequency of use. The Venetian blinds were closed, screening the gray light of sunset, but by the brilliant light of the chandelier I saw the pictures: an oil painting of two sailors standing on the ends of a gondola, each holding a long oar sunk into the water. Broad caps covered their faces, and in the background of the brown gondola and the blue water there was a European countryside in flashy shades of green and red. To the right of the painting hung a photograph of a man with his hand on the shoulder of a woman in a wedding dress, and then pictures of children at various ages. A picture of a lone girl caught my eye, her short dress held in her hand on one side while she raised her other hand in the manner of the Ancient Egyptian dancers; I did not know if she was Laylá or not…

I stood up when the door suddenly opened, and he entered in shirt, pants, glasses, and house slippers. He held out his hand to me, smiling slightly; his hand was cold. When he sat down in front of me, he asked me if he should open the blinds or not. I looked at the blinds for a long time, but I could not make up my mind. He remarked that
spring in Egypt was fickle and that he was always cold. I agreed to that. Then he said that the real spring in Egypt was autumn, free of humidity. Moreover, there were the *khamsīn* winds in spring.\(^2\) I added on my part that the *khamsīn* shifted a lot of dirt around, and that irritated the eyes. He leaned his back against the chair and said:

“Welcome.”

Silence ensued. He crossed one leg over the other and swung his slipper on his foot; his heel emerged from his slipper, smooth, clean, and intensely white, like a large egg.\(^3\)

I could not escape from it any longer, so I began to speak without looking at his face. I said that I was a colleague of Miss Laylá at the bank, and that I would be asking for her hand in marriage, after gaining his permission. I told him about my degree, my salary, and my father. When I lifted my head at the end, I found him leaning his head on his chest; it appeared to me that he had not heard a thing I had said, but he eventually raised his head, saying:

“Which village in the region of the Saʿīd did you say you were from, Sir?”\(^4\)

I told him once again about my village.

He asked me:

“From the Arabs of the Saʿīd?”\(^5\)

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2 The *khamsīn* are winds full of dust and sand that sweep through Egypt as the seasons change from winter to spring. When they blow, the air and sky turn a peculiar shade of orange; the sand invades every crevice, making breathing difficult. The *khamsīn* last for about fifty days, deriving their name from the Arabic word for fifty, “*khamsīn.*”

3 In Arab culture, showing the bottom of one’s foot to another is considered very rude, particularly between men.

4 The Saʿīd is in the southern part of Egypt, also known as Upper Egypt.
“Yes.”

“And do you know ’Abd al-Sattār Bey?”

I did not know him, so he told me that he was the superintendent of the school district there, and that everybody knew him. I explained to him that I had studied in Cairo and that I had gotten a job there after graduation, so maybe that was the reason why I did not know ’Abd al-Sattār Bey. He shook his head, not appearing convinced by that. He looked toward the door, where the servant girl was moving forward warily, carrying a glass of lemonade on a tray. She put the glass in front of me, then left. He told me to go ahead, and I said, “No, you.” Averting his face, he responded that he never drank anything because of a gastro-intestinal problem. It seemed like he was angry with me, but while I was drinking the lemonade he told me that he was honored by my request for his daughter’s hand, and that he believed that I was an intelligent, well-deserving man. He added that intelligent men were scarce these days, then told a joke:

“A hippie went to the barber, and he sprayed him with DDT.” When he began to laugh at that, I laughed, too, a little, then thanked him and hoped that he would think well of me.

He went on in a calm voice: “Truthfully, son, fathers are giving their daughters freedom these days; that wasn’t the case in my day. The father would arrange everything, and his daughter wouldn’t have to do anything except get married. Nowadays, a father has his daughter educated and doesn’t take a cent from her after she gets a job. She rejects everyone he suggests she marry, eventually choosing whomever

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5 Those who belong to the group known as the Arabs of the Sa’id are associated with upper class land owners, as opposed to the Copts, who usually work in business.
she wants, and the father simply has to tolerate everything, against his will. But in general, we’re a conservative family.”

“Of course.”

“Naturally, Laylá is like other daughters. She would never disobey my orders. I raised her, and I know her. When she wanted to work, I said to her, ‘Is there something you don’t have?’ She said no. I said to her, ‘So, why should you work? I had you educated so that you would have a degree as a tool in your hand in case something ever happened, God forbid.’ She said, ‘But Dad, all of my friends are working…Please, Dad…Please, Dad!’ Finally, I consented, only because of how earnestly she insisted.”

“Of course, that…”

I did not finish.

“Yes?”

“…that was the reason.”

“Of course. ’Abd al-Sattār Bey was my classmate at the old Advanced Teacher’s College. Anyway, it doesn’t matter, you said that you don’t know him. But I’m telling you now, and please, listen well: I cannot agree to anything that is not in Laylá’s best interest.”

“Please, if you would clarify for me—”

“Yes, in truth, Laylá has spoken to me about you more than once. So I asked about you, and I’ve discovered a lot of information…a lot of information.”

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6 This school later became كليّة دار العلوم (Kullīyat Dār al-‘Ulūm), literally, the College of the Institute of Sciences, and the father’s use of the older name for the institution highlights both his age and the fact that he was able to afford higher education at a time when few Egyptians could.
He began searching anxiously through his pants pockets. It looked like he was going to take some papers out, but he finally took out a handkerchief and began to wipe his face and hands. He asked me again:

“Should I open the blinds?”

“If you want.”

He looked at the blinds and said slowly:

“When you were in college, you lived with your mother’s brother, correct?”

“Yes.”

“And now you live alone.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Why did you leave your uncle’s house and decide to live alone?”

“I graduated from college, and it wasn’t appropriate for me to remain a burden on him.”

“Really? It wasn’t because your uncle was angry with you?”

“Not at all.”

“I’m happy to hear it. Speaking of which, this question is kind of sensitive, and I hope you’ll forgive me, but think of me as your father. The land in the village, is it in your father’s name or your mother’s?”

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7 In Arab culture, most young people remain living in their families’ homes until marriage. Those who work far away from their hometowns would normally live with their closest married relatives in the area.
“I’ve explained to you, Sir, that we are not wealthy. It’s just a small piece of land that my father cultivates, and I think it’s in his name.”

“No, I believe it’s in your mother’s name.”

“Maybe, but I don’t understand the meaning of this—I don’t live in the village, and I’m not a farmer.”

“Me neither, but I understand many things. One plus one equals two. Why didn’t you go live with one of your father’s brothers in Cairo?”

I was silent and began to turn the empty glass around on the tray. But I came back to myself right away and left the glass in its spot. In a lowered voice, I said:

“Do you really believe, Sir, that this is an important issue?”

“More important than you suspect.”

“Well, then, the truth is that there’s a disagreement between my father and his brothers.”

“Maybe it’s more than a disagreement. Maybe it’s a complete break. Do you know the reason?”

“There was a disagreement over the inheritance, as far as I know.”

He laughed, saying:

“The inheritance? Forget it; I believe that you don’t know much about this issue. This…disagreement, as you call it…took place before you were born, and your father certainly wouldn’t have spoken of it to you. But now, I want you to be honest with me. Everything said between us will remain secret. As you’re asking to be my daughter’s husband, it’s my right to know everything.”
“I wasn’t lying.”

“Of course you weren’t lying! But tell me, now: Why did your mother’s brother divorce his wife?”

“Do you also believe—”

“Please. Tell the truth.”

“Believe me—I swear I don’t know the reason. My uncle was silent on this matter. I think the reason was that she never got pregnant.”

“But he stayed with her for ten years without her getting pregnant.”

“Yes.”

“And he didn’t get re-married after divorcing her, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Well?”

“Maybe that wasn’t the reason.”

Suddenly, he leaned toward me and seized my hand where it lay on the small table between us. I trembled as he began to whisper, his face almost touching mine:

“Do you mean that you don’t know that it…that it…is said that your uncle’s wife had a relationship with you?”

“That’s a lie!” I yelled.

“Please. Lower your voice. I did not say that it was true. I just said that it’s been said.”

“Who said it? It’s a lie…a hateful lie. Whoever said that is a hateful liar.”
“The ones who said it are your father’s brothers.”

“They said this to you?”

“Of course not, but I knew. No. Don’t ask me how I knew. But why would they say such a thing?”

“I didn’t know that they had said that.”

“Do you visit your mother’s brother?”

“Sometimes.”

“And does he visit you, or, no…there’s no point in asking that question. Did your uncle ever go to the village after his divorce?”

“I don’t remember.”

“It’s a simple question. He used to visit the village once a year, during vacation, and he stayed as a guest with your family. At your sister’s.”

“Yes.”

“When was the last time?”

“Three…three years ago…it was the year I graduated.”

“Yes, right before his divorce…And he hasn’t gone since then even once.”

“Why?” I asked.

He laughed loudly, revealing clean, bright teeth with no gaps. Still laughing, he continued:

“I’m…I’m…the one asking you that question.”

I did not answer, and I began to look at the picture of the gondola hanging over his head. It seemed a little darker, and when I felt my forehead my hand became
drenched with the sweat on my face and around my eyelids. I moved my hand to my shirt collar and tried to open it, but my fingers fumbled on the tight button, so I contented myself with undoing my tie a bit. His face completely serious, the father attempted to rise, saying:

“I’m going to open the blinds.”

I waved my hand at him quickly and said:

“There’s no point in that, please—what I need now is to know…what…what do you mean exactly?”

“It must be clear by now.”

“Sir, do you want to refuse my proposal to Laylá, and because of that you’re telling me about …about these rumors?”

His face set, he said: “What rumors?”

“This preposterous story about my uncle’s wife.”

He leaned toward me again, whispering:

“I don’t understand…this matter should be clear as day. You’re from the Sa’īd, from the Arabs of the Sa’īd. You understand the traditions much better than I do.”

“Which traditions? Please, be clear. There’s no call for talking in circles.”

“May God forgive you. The story as I know it is that your mother’s brother, who is also your father’s cousin, was the only one in the family to maintain good relations with your father, is that not so?”

“Yes.”

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8 People from the Sa’īd, especially the Arabs of the Sa’īd, often adhere more strictly than more urban groups to traditional behavioral mores regarding family life and sexual activity.
“Because of kinship ties, of course. The whole family broke off relations with your father because he squandered his inheritance on…let’s call it ‘pleasure’…all of them except your mother’s brother…and the man was prepared to bear the rest of his brothers’ anger, but he wasn’t prepared for death threats."

I laughed and leaned my head back. My eyes collided with the oars of the gondola, pointing like spears, as he raised his voice slightly and said:

“I don’t know if you were ignoring everything, or if you simply didn’t know, but they all went to him then, to your mother’s brother, and said that they had put up with what your father had done but that they could not tolerate this ‘shame’ as they called it…in other words, that his wife was having a relationship with you. They said that either he divorce her or they would kill him, and you, at the same time.”

“That’s a lie. Some contemptible person wanted to sully my reputation and created this fictional story.”

“Maybe, but how will you prove that it’s false?”

“There’s a lot of evidence; I’m telling you, it’s false. I’m not so low that I would think, that I would think, even think, of my uncle’s wife. She was…was like my mother…completely like my mother.”

“I’m not going to discuss that now. I’ll take your word for it. I believe that nothing happened, but what evidence is there that this outcome was not caused by this rumor?”

“That I haven’t heard about it.”
“That’s not evidence…you say that you haven’t heard about it, but where’s the evidence that you haven’t?”

“I swear.”

“That may be…but you yourself said that your uncle was secretive about this matter. Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“And it’s absurd for him to have told you himself about this matter…you, who’re on bad terms with your uncles and cousins. You don’t even know them. Isn’t that right?”

“Yes.”

“So it’s also unlikely that you’d hear from them.”

“They would have been alright with killing me, then?”

“I don’t know—that’s something I don’t understand. And, of course, you don’t believe that I made this whole story up simply to tell you that I don’t want you marrying my daughter…I simply could have said, ‘No, sorry.’”

“So?”

“So, the story is true…I’m not saying the story of the relationship; that doesn’t concern me, but the story of the threat and the divorce. Unless you have some evidence to disprove it.”

“Yes, I have; of course I have. If it were…if it were true, then it would have been made public everywhere, and I would have found out about it. If it were true, then my father’s brothers would have taken advantage of it to publicly expose me and my father.”
“And bring harm upon themselves with this shame? No…they would have wanted to contain the matter, not spread it.”

“So then how did you find out about it? From ‘Abd al-Sattār Bey?”

He laughed a little and said:

“A man of his position, interested in these matters?…No. No.”

“Then how did you find out?”

“That’s my business; but I assure you, it will remain a secret between us.”

“Why should it remain a secret? Spread the rumor! Spread it everywhere!”

“I’m not evil. And please, lower your voice.”

“Why should I lower my voice? Isn’t that what you want? Don’t you want Laylá to hear this disgusting story? Isn’t that your plan for separating her from me? Here I am, I’ll do it, instead of you…I’ll tell her myself…my uncle’s wife…Why not my mother’s sister herself…or…or my grandmother, for instance…” I exclaimed, gasping for air.

He abandoned his efforts to silence me, standing up and shaking me by the shoulders. In a slightly raised voice, he said:

“Be a man! If I had known you were going to do this, I would never have spoken with you in the first place. Are you a child? You’re a guest in my house!”

“Do you want me to leave?”

“No, just that you be a man, and listen to all that I have to say. Should I bring you a glass of water?”

“No, thank you.”
“I’m sorry if I’ve angered you. But believe me. I didn’t know that you were ignorant of all this.”

“I was blissful in my ignorance.”

He sat back down facing me, his fingers intertwined. He stared at me silently, until I said:

“I apologize for what I said.”

He said, waving his hands:

“I appreciate your sentiments.”

Rising, I said:

“Thank you. May I go now?”

He rose again and placed his hands on my shoulders until I sat back down.

“No—we’re not done talking yet.”

“I already get what you had to say—you believe that I have a bad reputation, and you don’t want me as a husband for your daughter. I can’t deny this bad reputation, as I don’t have any evidence to disprove it.”

“I didn’t say that you had a bad reputation. I just said that you were the victim of rumors.”

“There’s no difference.”

“Also, I never said that I would reject you as a husband for my daughter.”

“So then what’s the meaning of all this?”

“Please, understand me…I’m only looking out for Laylá’s best interests.”

“Why won’t you just talk straight?”
“It’s… You want the truth, then? It’s… You realize that in a bank, in a position such as yours, a man’s reputation is the most important thing.”

“Again? Again, you’re making insinuations?”

“No, but—”

“This is ridiculous. I will not put up with any more of these insinuations. Tell me what you know. Tell me everything you know. Nothing matters to me anymore.”

“Please—”

“What about my job? There’s nothing that could damage my reputation at work. If you’re referring to when I was accused of misuse of public funds, I was cleared of that. The Internal Affairs Bureau itself cleared me, and the case was dismissed… they were satisfied with a warning.”

“I swear to you that I’m not referring to that; rather that I don’t know.”

“No. That tactic won’t work with me any more. As long as you’re going to be making insinuations, then know: It was a planned conspiracy… They exploited my good intentions and pushed papers at me that I didn’t know anything about. The Bureau itself discovered that. If it had been misuse of public funds, I would have been put in jail. Do you hear me? It’s clear… but the Bureau gave me a warning because they said that my good intentions were a kind of negligence. Do you hear me?”

“Yes. Yes. I hear you.”

“I’m not a thief.”

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9 This institution mentioned here, النيابة الإدارية (Al-Niyābah al-Idārīyah), conducts legal investigations that pertain to the civil service. Egyptian banks are nationalized, placing this investigation under its jurisdiction.
“I didn’t accuse you of that. Are you crying?”

“No, why would I cry? This is sweat. Sweat…look.”

“So why don’t you want me to open the blinds?”

Saying so, he rose from his seat. I couldn’t see him clearly, and all I saw of the painting was red and yellow.

I replied:

“I didn’t say that I didn’t want you to open them. I said that I didn’t care…I don’t care whether you open them or not…I only want to know what you want!”

He put his hand in his pants pocket and hesitantly offered me his handkerchief, but I said to him:

“Thank you. I have a handkerchief with me.”

I began painstakingly wiping the sweat off my face, from my forehead and around my eyes, and when I had finished I didn’t see him in front of me. He wasn’t in the room at all, but the painting faced me, with its sailors whose faces were blurred. Then I found him standing in front of me, offering me a glass of water. I drank a gulp of water, and I noticed when he sat opposite me that there were tiny droplets of sweat standing out on his white, wrinkled brow. His face was pale, and we remained silent. After a while, I spoke, and I was surprised that my voice was so loud.

“It’s assumed that the gondola is in Venice.”

He said, “Yes? What did you say, Sir?”

I said, pointing to the painting:
“That picture …It’s assumed that the gondola is in Venice. I mean in a city. But this picture shows it in the countryside. I’m trying to say that it’s a mistake.”

Still sitting, he twisted his body around and began contemplating the painting hanging behind his back as though he were seeing it for the first time. Then he turned to me and said:

“Yes, you’re right. Are you knowledgeable about art?”

“No, but we studied that in History. In school.”

“I also studied that. But I never noticed.”

Then he said with sudden vehemence:

“Listen to me…Laylá loves you.”

“And I came here to ask for her hand.”

“Put yourself in my place. You are her father. Would you accept?”

“You could have told me this from the very beginning. I’m sorry, and I won’t trouble either you or Laylá again. I’ll say that you refused.”

He leaned towards me, quickly whispering:

“No. No. No. I don’t want you to say that at all!”

“Well, then, what do you want, exactly?”

“In that case, let’s speak frankly, as you yourself suggested. There are certain stories, or…accounts, about you, which it would be in your best interest for no one to know.”

“Yes.”
“If these stories were to become known at your workplace or even among your friends, they might damage your reputation.”

“Yes.”

“Even Laylá herself might be affected by them…she might believe them.”

“Then?”

“On my part, I won’t say a word…I promise you that…but I ask that you cooperate with me.”

“Cooperate? On what? What are you after?...If…”

“Please, don’t laugh. I truly need your help. If you told Laylá that I had rejected you, she would only become even more attached to you. I know that; she’d hate me, and I might find myself forced to tell her everything.”

“I understand. So, should I tell her instead that I’m the one who rejected her?”

“No. Not that either. Tell her that I accepted…that I set up another appointment with you so that we could come to a mutual understanding. In a week or two.”

“What?”

“There are ways. You understand these matters much better than I…There are girls within the bank, and girls outside the bank…” Then he placed his hand over his mouth as he laughed, “…and as I am aware, you know how to act with girls.”

“You want me to—”

He waved his hand, cutting me off:
“You understand perfectly well what I want. You can convince Laylá in a thousand ways that you’ve decided against marriage. But enough of that. Do you know Mister ’Abd al-Fattāh, head of the Accounts department at the bank?”

“Yes. What’s his connection to all this?”

“There is no connection. He’s an old friend. In fact, between you and me, he’s the one who hired Laylá at the bank. A good, helpful person. I heard from him that they want to open a branch of the bank in Heliopolis, and that they want a head for the branch…What’s your level there? I mean, how many years have you worked at the bank?”

“Just a moment, please. Are you trying to buy me off? Is that the case? That I leave Laylá in exchange for a promotion?”

His face hardening again, he said:

“Why would I want to buy you off? What do you possess that could harm me? I’m offering you a service in exchange for a service. It’s in my best interest for you to be far away from the place where Laylá works, and it’s in your best interest to work at the new branch.”

“Why?”

“You yourself said just a minute ago that your personnel file wasn’t spotless. This is an opportunity for you to regain your standing.”

“Listen, please…Don’t try to—”

“I’m not trying anything…You’re trying to violate your promise. You’re more dangerous than I imagined.”
“What promise? Listen, I won’t give in to threats. I love Laylá, and she loves me. I’m gonna tell her everything, and she’ll understand. Do you hear me? That’s what I’m gonna do.”

He closed his eyes and leaned forward in his chair. The tiny droplets of sweat had collected in the creases of his wrinkled brow, clustered like crystals, until it looked like the surface of an ice-cold glass. He laughed softly and shook his head with his eyes still shut, saying:

“Yes. Oh, yes. I recognize that courage. In my life, I’ve known many who ignored the voice of reason, and now they’re a dime a dozen. Believe me, this is not courage; courage is realizing what comes afterwards and accepting it.”

“I realize it, and I accept it.”

“No. You don’t realize anything.”

“Yes, I do. You can sully my reputation at work, and maybe you can even have me transferred to another district, and you can fill Laylá’s head with doubts about me—”

“I can do more than that, believe me. I can spread the rumor your uncles have been trying so hard to conceal. Then, no one will know what your father’s brothers, or your father, or your mother’s brother might do…”

“But that’s impossible.”

“What’s impossible?”

“You can’t do that.”

“And why not?”
“You can do whatever you want to me—transfer me, kill me—but my relatives don’t have anything to do with this!”

“But you want to destroy my daughter…my very own daughter. Why should I be concerned with people who are strangers to me? Think. Think hard about this. Do you believe that I will hesitate? Look at me. By the way, did you know that your mother’s brother once tried to commit suicide?”

“Would you please be quiet?!”

“It was right after the divorce, and no one in the family knew.”

“What exactly do you want from me?”

“They took him to the hospital in critical condition, but…”

“Please, be quiet! I’ll do anything you want, just please, be quiet.”

He leaned back in his chair, saying:

“From the beginning, I took you to be an intelligent man. No. Don’t get up right this second. Dry your sweat before you leave. You might feel cold outside.”

I dried my sweat before I left. But while I was going down the stairs, my feet stumbled, and I fell on my face. I got up quickly and began to brush the dirt from my clothes and body. I rested against the large outside doorknob for a bit, until I had calmed down. The doorknob was a big closed flower made out of copper.

Outside the house, there was night, and air, and cars going slowly one behind the other, with two red lights on the back of each. I stood there, waiting. It was not cold. When the cars finally stopped, I crossed the street, and there was a barber shop full of mirrors. I saw myself, and I saw dirt on my sleeve and a swelling scratch above my
eyebrow. I touched the scratch with my hand. The skin was torn, but there was no blood.

The barber stood leaning against the door as he put his hand in the pocket of his white coat. I observed him as he looked at me with interest. When our gazes met, he told me to come in and get a piece of cotton. Then he began laughing to himself and turned his face away from me. I did not respond. I quickly brought my hand down from my forehead and crossed the street once again. I brushed my sleeve off well in front of the door. I noticed my shadow on the shiny copper flower, then I began climbing the stairs again.
Bahā’ Tāhir was born in Cairo in 1935 to a Sa’īdi family originally from the Karnak area. Because his father, an Arabic teacher, was a government employee who eventually settled in Giza, he has said that he feels neither completely Saīdi nor Cairene. With nine children in the family, of whom Bahā’ was the youngest boy, the family lived in poor conditions. Throughout his childhood, his mother kept a strong connection with their Sa’īdi roots alive in their home, telling him true stories based on the news of their former village she had gleaned from visitors. In fact, Tāhir has attributed to her his love of stories and of the Sa’īd. He began his formal education at the age of three and later spent a year in religious school. His introduction to literature began with police novels, *Kalīlah wa-Dīnnah*, children’s versions of tales from *A Thousand and One Nights*, and the stories of Mustafá Lutfī al-Manfalūṭī. Tāhir’s interest expanded to include internationally acclaimed works, such as *Ana Karenina*, *Crime and Punishment*, and *10*.

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Madame Bovary. His high school, where he joined the History Society, encouraged its students to take part in political events and demonstrations; it accepted differences of opinion and welcomed debate. In college, Tāhir discovered the works of poet ’Abd al-Mun’im Awwād Yūsuf and other Arab authors. After the 1952 revolution, he felt torn between feelings of accomplishment at ousting the old government and those of repression from the new. Demonstrators often faced violent suppression from the police, even more so than in the previous era.

Tāhir graduated from Cairo University with a degree in literature. He immediately began working for the fledgling Radio 2, Egyptian Radio’s culture channel, helping to develop it as a medium through which to present literature and theater. His first short story was published in 1964, and since then, he has only published two works of non-fiction, six novels, and four collections of short stories, the first of these being Al-Khutūbah in 1972. His publishing was curtailed during the 1970s under Anwār al-Sadāt’s administration due to his left-wing activism. Vehemently opposed to al-Sadāt’s open-door policies, Tāhir was driven into exile. In 1975, the Minister of Information banned him from writing in Egypt, and he was eventually forced to leave the country, working as a translator in India, Sri Lanka, Senegal, Kenya, and other nations. While Tāhir was and still remains a Pan-Arab nationalist, he did not choose, as so many other Arab exiled authors of the time did, to settle in another Arab country. He had even less faith in the other Arab regimes with regard to freedom than he did in Egypt’s, saying, “I believe in Pan-Arabism, but not in Arab leaders.”

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11 Al-Jesri, “Bahaa Taher.”
In 1981, Tāhir settled in Geneva, working as a translator for the United Nations. Unable to write during his painful years of wandering, his novel *Sharq al-Nakhīl (East of the Palms)* was finally published in serialized form beginning in 1983. He eventually returned to Egypt during the 1990s, and since then he has been active in cultural and literary circles, and his works have been celebrated throughout the Arab world. His novels include *Qālat Duhā (Doha Said); Khālatī Safiyah wa-al-Dayr (Aunt Safeyya and the Monastery)*, which discusses the sensitive topic of the relationship between Copts and Muslims in Upper Egypt; *Al-Hubb fī al-Manfā (Love in Exile)*, about the massacre of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon; *Nuqtat Nūr (The Point of Light)*; and *Wāhat al-Ghurūb (Sunset Oasis)*, an existential crisis novel for which Tāhir won the first Arabic Booker prize in March of 2008. Besides *Al-Khutūbah*, his short-story collections are *Bi-al-Ams Halamtu Biki (Yesterday I Dreamed of You)*, *Anā al-Malik Ji’tu (I, the King, Have Come)*, and *Dhahabtu ilá Shallāl (I Went to a Waterfall)*, in which the author expresses his difficulties in accepting the political and social changes that took place in Egypt while he was gone. Tāhir has pointed out how his exile affected his composition of *Qālat Duhā* and *Al-Hubb fī al-Manfā* while he lived abroad, whereas *Dhahabtu ilá al-Shallāl* and *Nuqtat Nūr*, composed after his return to Egypt, were attempts to explore the changes that took place in the country during his absence. In addition to the new Arabic Booker prize, Tāhir also received the State Award of Merit in Literature, Egypt’s highest literary honor, in 1998, and the Italian Giuseppe Acerbi Prize for *Khālatī Safiyah wa-al-Dayr* in 2000.

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12 Bāshā, “Hikāyat Sa’īdī Ākhar.”
Analysis

In order to understand “Al-Khutūbah,” it is necessary to first comprehend the mindset of the man who wrote it. While certain literary experts have examined Tāhir’s language and delved into specific themes they find demonstrated in the story, among them rebellion, the desire for freedom, and the discovery of identity, none have carefully analyzed what I believe to be the foundation of “Al-Khutūbah.” For a long period before composing this work, the author had felt torn between feelings of support and opposition, of love and hate, toward the 1952 revolt and its lasting effects on the country. He used this story as a catharsis for those emotions.13 Tāhir wrote the story in 1968, not long after the Six Day War, which had its own detrimental consequences for Egypt and the entire Arab world. “Al-Khutūbah” reflects Tāhir’s innovative style as he uses the language in both the narrative and the discourse to convey his opposition to the government and his distaste for its unjust oppression of Egyptian citizens.

Tāhir is considered one of the foremost writers of the 1960s era in Egypt. Many of the cultural personalities of this generation later faced repression under the regime of President Anwār al-Sadāt; they were often fired from their jobs, exiled, imprisoned, or forced to hide in fear for their lives. Granted, this treatment of influential figures was not unheard of in Egyptian history—in past interviews, Tāhir has referred to Muhammad ʿAbduh, who was exiled for years, Taha Husayn, who lost his position in the government,

13 Husayn, Qarīban min Bahāʾ Tāhir, 114.
and several other important Egyptian thinkers who endured great hardship due to their endeavors to introduce new and possibly revolutionary ideas to their societies.\textsuperscript{14} In Tāhir’s oft-repeated opinion, it is the duty of intellectuals to help shape public thought.\textsuperscript{15} In the 1960s, it was possible for these thinkers to reach the people of Egypt through plays, magazines, literary newspapers, and other cultural media. However, the situation changed when al-Sadāt came into power. Those who attempted to spread their ideals were often accused of being existentialists, Communists, saboteurs, and reactionaries—whichever suited the needs of the current regime.\textsuperscript{16} These attacks succeeded in removing Bahā’ Tāhir from the broadcasting industry and prevented him from writing during the middle of the 1970s. As a result, he left the country a few years later. While he has since returned, he maintains that some of the effects of this cultural repression are still felt today.\textsuperscript{17} While there is comparatively more intellectual freedom, it is not complete.

This attitude toward his society has contributed to the formation of Tāhir’s unique writing style. During his years at Cairo University, Tāhir belonged to a group of young men interested in studying and creating music, art, and various forms of literature. Included in this assembly were noted literary critic Rajā’ al-Naqqāsh, his novelist brother Wahīd al-Naqqāsh, Mustafā Abū al-Nasr and Subhī Shafīq (writers), Muhammad Sulaymān (poet), and Hasan Sulaymān (artist), as well as sculptors, painters, and musicians.\textsuperscript{18} These men would gather and present their original works for each other, and

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\textsuperscript{14} Māmkīgh, \textit{Bahā’ Tāhir}, 40. \\
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 32. \\
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 51. \\
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 42-43. \\
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 45. 
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in doing so, Tāhir’s technique began to emerge. As a rule, he avoided any exaggeration and floweriness in his stories, yet he did not employ a didactic or propagandistic tone.19 After college, Tāhir found it difficult to get any of his works published, due to governmental corruption. The Ministry of Culture was not accepting material from new voices in the literary scene, even though these as-yet unknown authors expressed a new point of view that reflected the changes in society. Consequently, some intellectuals began private newspapers and magazines, and in 1964, Bahā’ Tāhir’s first short story was published in the magazine *Al-Kātib*.20 As time went on, Tāhir became acquainted with other renowned authors of the 1960s united in their need to give new expression to the new circumstances in their society.

Most of the literary critics who have dealt with Tāhir’s work concentrate on his novels and more well-known short story collections, such as *Bi-al-Ams Halamtu Biki*. Fortunately, a few have chosen to include “Al-Khutūbah” in their analyses. In his introduction to Bahā’ Tāhir’s *Al-Khutūbah wa-Qisas Ukhrā*, the short story collection in which “Al-Khutūbah” originally appeared, Idwār al-Kharrāt examines the author’s writing. He describes Tāhir’s language as neutral, cold, reportorial; the language of an “alert eye.” Tāhir chooses his words objectively, from an exterior dictionary, not an interior haze. His terms come from the everyday course of life, from clear external objects, not the outpour of underlying, overwhelming floods of sentiment, which al-

19 Ibid., 46.
20 Ibid., 48.
Kharrāt claims are misleading. This particular style is evident in “Al-Khutūbah,” where most sentences are short and to the point, without the numerous adjectives, relative clauses, and other modifying embellishments so often found in Arabic literature. Much of the story is the dialogue between the two characters, and only certain aspects of the story, such as the parlor, the painting, and the characters’ appearances are described in much detail.

However, as al-Kharrāt continues, that is not to say that Tāhir’s work lacks deep emotion. He suggests that the very control, or wariness, conveyed in the words is what arouses anger, sorrow, or fright in the reader. Although the text of “Al-Khutūbah” may be considered bare and unadorned, the characters’ emotions come across plainly through the intense dialogue. Their speech is supplemented by the depiction of their body language: how they move toward or away from each other, in addition to their perspiration. They very starkness of the language makes the antagonism between the father and the young man immediately evident; we are not distracted by superfluous narrative.

As al-Kharrāt mentions, the story is written from a first person point of view, that of the young man. Tāhir does not use this perspective as an opportunity to slip into introspection and internal dialogue; rather, the narrator talks as though he is speaking about someone else, careful to tell us about everything he sees, everything that occurs,

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22 Ibid., 4.
without focusing solely on himself.\textsuperscript{23} The father’s actions are described every bit as clearly and as often as the young man’s, and only rarely does the narrator tell the reader how he feels. These infrequent allusions to his emotions are brief and to the point, as in “I had been nervous about everything,” and “I felt awkward.” Nevertheless, the author does provide other clues to the narrator’s state of mind with his temperature, pulse, clumsiness on the stairs, and especially his sweating, which starts even before he arrives at Laylá’s house and continues until the end of the interview.

The conclusion that al-Kharrāt reaches about the singularity of Tāhir’s language is that he uses dialogue to express what is normally conveyed through sight. In fact, he returns to the metaphor of the “eye” mentioned earlier and makes up a new term to more precisely explain Tāhir’s style. As al-Kharrāt uses it, this term is most closely translated as “the form of sight-dialogue.” Ordinarily, dialogue would be associated with plays, not short stories, but al-Kharrāt maintains that Tāhir has managed to merge the two genres seamlessly. The conversation forms the basis of the text; through it are communicated the conflict, the confrontation, the development of events, and the characters’ emotions. All of these progress in a manner similar to that of a play, as the plot thickens and gradually becomes more complex. Al-Kharrāt even compares the description of the setting to the directions given at the beginning of a scene.\textsuperscript{24} One can immediately see the aptness of this analysis for “Al-Khutūbah.” The description of the parlor, where the main action takes place, is found near the beginning of the story. Throughout the conversation

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 6-8.
between the father and the young man, the narrative includes their movements, like stage directions. At the end, the text details how the young man “exits the scene,” and as the reader is not told what happens after he goes back up the stairs, it is as though the lights have faded out on the story.

Finally, al-Kharrât begins his analysis of “Al-Khutūbah” itself. He does not believe that the protagonist of the story is completely powerless and ground down in the face of a stronger force possessing what seems like absolute power. The critic sees him as a victim of his own actions as well as those of his family members. While it is highly unlikely that the young man did indeed have a relationship with his uncle’s wife, the matter is never settled. Furthermore, the father is not an utter tyrant; while his behavior is appalling, he is somewhat justified. As he frequently insists, he is only looking out for the interests of his only daughter, a fundamental part of his self. In fact, al-Kharrât considers both of the characters to be victims of the rigid society in which they live. They must conform to a harsh, unyielding value structure that ties their hands and hears no pleas for mercy. Social, political, and economic factors all combine to affect their attitudes and actions. For example, the father admits to being uncomfortable with the new generation’s method of picking their spouses. Also, although he denies taking a cent from Laylá, considering the doubt and suspicion pervading the entire story, it is possible that he would miss the income she has brought into their household.

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25 Ibid., 8-9.
Al-Kharrāt perceives a seed of protest and rebellion in all the victims present in the collection of short stories. It is well-concealed, buried within metaphors, hidden more deeply in some stories as opposed to in others. For Bahā’ Tāhir as well as his protagonists, justice and a meaningful life are essential in the face of all the oppression they have endured. Still, they have never succumbed to desperation or frustration; instead, the pursuit of justice and meaning remains their secret endeavor.26 In “Al-Khutūbah,” this seed emerges quite clearly in the last line of the story when the young man begins “climbing the stairs again.” He revolts against the tyrant who has beaten him down by returning to, one imagines, re-state his case and possibly win. Overall, al-Kharrāt views Tāhir’s writing as a call to the reader to defeat the oppression that we all face.

Another literary critic who deals with the works of Bahā’ Tāhir is Sophie Bennett, in her article “Transcendence and Immanence: Self and Other in Bahā’ Tāhir’s Short Stories.” She focuses mainly on those of Tāhir’s stories that include female characters, but some of her analysis may be applied to “Al-Khutūbah.” Bennett explains that “[m]en in Tāhir’s writing often express anger and frustration at their lack of power.”27 The young man’s anger and frustration are palpable as he responds to the father’s accusations. He yells, he threatens to tell Laylá the whole story, and he drops his head back against the chair in aggravation when the father ignores his repeated denials and explanations. However, Bennett asserts that both Tāhir and his protagonists learn to transcend the

26 Ibid., 11-13.
27 Sophie Bennett, “Transcendence and Immanence: Self and Other in Bahā’ Tāhir’s Short Stories,” *Arabic and Middle Eastern Literatures* 1 (1): 77.
threats they face, exalting their spirits and finding their identities in the process.\textsuperscript{28} Once again, this development is visible in “Al-Khutūbah,” as the young man finds the courage in the end to return to Laylá’s house and confront the father. Although the father has completely shaken the young man’s belief in his family and in his own character, he pulls himself together, discovering his underlying strength.

Bennett also points out Tāhir’s repeated use of antagonism between opposing pairs—tradition and modernity, truth and falsity.\textsuperscript{29} Obviously, in the case of “Al-Khutūbah,” the father represents the traditional and false and the young man the modern and truthful. Even her treatment of women, which at first glance would seem inapplicable to a story where there is no prominent female character, is useful in one respect. She mentions that in much of Tāhir’s writing, women do not exist. They are “marginal to the dominant order.”\textsuperscript{30} “Al-Khutūbah” is, in its simplest definition, about two men arguing over the future of a woman. Never is the woman asked for her opinion, and she does not appear in the story at all. Her father continually claims to be acting in her “best interests” as he attempts to separate her from the man she loves. Both characters assume they know what Laylá’s reaction to the information revealed in the course of the argument would be, and they make decisions about her life without ever consulting her. This decision-making process is not abnormal for the patriarchal society in which the characters live.

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 78-79.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 78-79.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 80.
The last of the critics, Lānā ’Alī Māmkigh, devotes a short section of her book, *Bahā’ Tāhir: Qasa‘īyan wa-Riwa‘īyan*, to this short story. She first concentrates on the timing of the writing; in the late 1960s, many Arab artists and creative personalities saw their dreams destroyed. Bahā’ Tāhir, along with others like him, used his art to avoid falling into the slippery slope of nihilism. His writing gave him an inner balance, and so he hurried to compose this story.\(^{31}\) She quotes an interview with Tāhir in *Al-’Arabī*, where he asserted that during his time as a translator, he became melancholy and felt alienated from his homeland, to the point where he contemplated suicide. Re-introducing writing into his life saved him from this depression and gave him a purpose.\(^{32}\)

Māmkigh notes that the antagonism between the two characters actually starts from the very first line of the story: “I had been nervous about everything.” The young man spends a good deal of money preparing himself for this interview and works himself into a state of extreme upset, until he appears as a stranger to himself.\(^{33}\) The critic also brings up the matter of the narrator’s sweat, temperature, and pulse, but she ignores the fact that the father reveals the bottom of his foot to the young man. Even before the two begin any discussion of a marriage proposal, the father demonstrates his disdain and contempt for the young man, and the author foreshadows the passionate conflict that is to follow.

Next, Māmkigh examines the lines of the text that, indirectly, give the reader an idea of the father’s characteristics. She remarks upon the distinction between form and

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\(^{31}\) Māmkigh, *Bahā’ Tāhir*, 301.

\(^{32}\) Ibid., 52.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., 301-302.
content in his personification. The perfection and brightness of his smile, the frequent use of the color white to describe his appearance, are in direct opposition to the inner ugliness they conceal. This malevolence even takes physical form: his gastro-intestinal problem.\textsuperscript{34}

One important symbol that Māmkigh mentions is the oil painting of the two gondoliers. The narrator brings it to our attention as a reflection of the changes in his emotions. When the young man first enters the parlor, he is still relatively calm. He notices the picture for the first time, and it looks normal; he sees all of its colors as they are: brown gondola, blue water, and green and red countryside. The next time the painting comes up is not long after the alleged rumor of the young man’s relationship with his uncle’s wife is introduced and the father has begun his questioning. Here, the painting appears darker to the narrator, as a manifestation of the negativity that has entered into their interaction. It is as though a shadow has been thrown over the discourse—and the painting. After the father continues the sordid tale, adding information about the young man’s father and paternal uncles, the picture comes up again, with the oars “pointing like spears.” These spears illustrate the narrator’s feeling of being under attack. Once the young man has become desperate, demanding to know everything the father has heard about him and revealing his past entanglement with the authorities, he looks at the painting, and all he sees is red and yellow. The scene has lost its soothing blue, green, and brown tones; only the violent hues of red and yellow remain.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 302-303.
At this point, the painting enters the conversation between the two characters. As Māmkigh observes, the father finds himself a bit at a loss after the young man’s confession, and we perceive that his tyranny is not absolute. The narrator has noted that the sailors’ faces are blurred in the painting, a reference to the father’s distortion and blurring of the truth, and that there are drops of sweat standing out on the father’s forehead. He calls attention to the fact that the painting is a mistake. This picture of two gondoliers who are not where they ought to be is a tangible symbol of the father’s falsification and perversion of truths.\(^3^5\) Unfortunately, even this unveiling of the father’s duplicity does not stop his abuse. He attempts to bribe the young man into leaving Laylá, and when the offer of reward does not work, he changes his tactic to intimidation. His threat to spread the rumors he has supposedly heard, along with the additional news of the uncle’s attempted suicide, are what finally force the narrator to give in, at least temporarily.

As the painting is a reflection of the young man’s emotions, so the references to the Venetian blinds mark the father’s changes in tactics during his interview with the young man. His very first line is an offer to open them, and their discussion starts in a fairly normal fashion. The second time he asks marks the beginning of the inquiry into the young man’s personal life. The father makes the suggestion again, slightly more forcefully, before adding to his original tale the information he has gathered about the young man’s father’s side of the family. When the blinds next come up, the father uses them as an opportunity to let the young man calm down, as he has been yelling,

\(^3^5\) Ibid., 303-304.
becoming desperate. Upon their return to the main topic, the father shifts his tone to one of bribery.

Near the end of her analysis, Māmkigh makes the most important observations of her study, albeit briefly. The father does not really intend to open the blinds, even though he repeats the offer four separate times. Opening the blinds would let in light, which to the critic represents the truth. Shedding light on the situation would not be in the father’s best interests, because he is the symbol of authority, of the secretive intelligence agencies that pervade Egyptian society.\(^\text{36}\) This point is crucial, and I will return to it later.

In contrast, Māmkigh views Laylá as a symbol of the nation, liberation, or any value associated with truth and justice. The aim of the father, the government representative, is to break any individual striving to attain that value, and he uses the various means illustrated above to destroy him.\(^\text{37}\) When the young man leaves the apartment, it seems as though the father has won; the young man is frustrated, confused, sweaty, and even physically wounded by his fall down the steps. Yet, as Māmkigh states, his ultimate return up the steps is an act of resistance against all oppressors. He is like a soldier who has been wounded in battle, but the wound does not extend to his innermost self: “The skin was torn, but there was no blood.”\(^\text{38}\) This minor injury cannot dissuade him from his intention to marry Laylá, or to attain liberty.

\(^{36}\) Ibid., 305. \\
^{37}\) Ibid., 305. \\
^{38}\) Ibid., 306.
One final interesting item that Māmkigh brings up is the doorknob, which is shaped like a large closed flower made of copper. She first suggests that it symbolizes the historical dimension of the nation, harkening back to the days of the pharaohs with their sign of a holy lotus flower. On the other hand, it might also represent all of the beautiful and noble values that defy despotism and the usurpation of freedoms. Māmkigh continues this theme as she explains that on the young man’s way out of the apartment, when he feels beaten down and defeated, the flower is specifically described as “closed.” Conversely, when he returns with the purpose of rebelling against oppression, this word has disappeared, and in its place the reader finds “shiny.” This use of light in the last line of the story makes it an optimistic ending, giving the reader hope that the young man will be able to marry his beloved and realize his dream of freedom.³⁹

The short, aforementioned observation about the father as governmental agent is as deep as Māmkigh delves into the matter that is the crux of the entire story. This entire dialogue between the two characters is not merely a conversation but in fact an interrogation. The nameless father acts like a representative of the oppressive state, badgering a hapless individual, also nameless, in an attempt to make him confess to a crime. Tāhir does not give his characters names in order to emphasize their symbolism: the father as the entire shadowy repressive regime and the young man as any person unjustly accused. The term that Māmkigh uses for the father, “rajul al-mukhābarāt” (similar to “intelligence agent”), communicates much of the meaning intended here. The word “mukhābarāt” denotes intelligence agencies, but its connotations in Arab society are

³⁹ Ibid., 306.
much stronger than simple governmental entities gathering information. It has a sense of
secrecy, clandestineness, and, above all, pervasiveness throughout the society. “Al-
mukhābarāt” are like the secret police; they are always watching through their insidious
network of informants. Their agents are ruthless and will employ any means necessary to
achieve the aims of the government, whether or not those aims are for the good of the
people. While this explanation may seem dramatic, the father exemplifies these
characteristics in his dialogue. Among his realistic interrogation methods are bribery,
imimidation, and abrupt switches between his various techniques. He plays both “good
cop” and “bad cop,” shifting roles often so as to prevent the young man from relaxing.

First of all, even the setting is suggestive of an interrogation. There is no natural
light, only the bright chandelier. The characters sit alone in a little-used room with few
furnishings that we know of, and only the interviewee has something to drink. The
location is reminiscent of a typical interrogation scene in a television police drama. The
father’s network of informants extends to the bank where the narrator works through
ʿAbd al-Fattāḥ, and even to his village in the Saʿīd through his connection to ʿAbd al-
Sattār Bey. At the beginning of the questioning, the father seems friendly enough; he
tells a joke, asks about the narrator’s family and his living situation, and even calls him
“son.” Even when the questions start to become more personal, he asks the young man to
think of him as a father. He talks around the subject of the proposal and the information
he has gathered, instead of addressing it straightforwardly. Soon, however, the inquiries
become direct and to the point; he interrupts the narrator and continually contradicts what
the latter has always believed to be true. When the young man begins to lose control,
yelling at his persecutor, the father abandons his passive efforts to quiet him, getting up and physically shaking him. Yet immediately afterwards, he places his hands on the narrator’s shoulders as a friend would, attempting to calm him down and offer comfort, calling him a “victim of rumors.” Gradually, he works his way to bribery, or a “mutual understanding.” When the young man’s integrity and courage prevent him from accepting the bribe, the interrogator turns to threats of exposure. With another quick shift, he reveals the last part of the alleged scandal, the uncle’s attempted suicide. At the end of the interview, he returns to his protective role, suggesting that the young man dry his sweat before leaving so that he will not be chilled by the air outside.

What must not be forgotten throughout the interrogation is that it does not matter whether the young man is innocent or not. Tāhir purposely leaves that question unanswered; the reader is never given decisive proof that he did not have a relationship with his uncle’s wife. The point is that there is no way to disprove it—we only have the narrator’s word, and as mentioned before, Tāhir’s narrator does not spend much time in self-introspection. The individual is helpless in the face of the tyrannical state, which can ruin his life with a single statement. Of course, the young man in “Al-Khutūbah” is a reflection of the author’s view of the regime that prevented him from writing and working in broadcasting, eventually causing him to leave the country. Fortunately, the narrator of the story has a more positive ending; while the outcome is unknown, we hopefully presume that the narrator returns to the house to defy the despotic father and reject his immoral demands, ultimately gaining Laylā’s hand in marriage, or at least a reputation free from slander.
At first glance, “Al-Khutūbah” appears to be a somewhat confusing tale of a young man’s attempt to become engaged to the woman he loves. In order to make sense of the text, it is necessary to understand the author’s background and how it has affected his view of the society in which he lives. The critics who have included the story in their studies make excellent points. Al-Kharrāt’s analysis explains that the bareness of Tāhir’s language is what allows the characters’ intense emotions to come across so clearly. He also identifies both characters as victims of their rigid social structure and reveals the young man’s rebellion. Bennett presents us with evidence of and commentary on the young man’s discovery of his true identity, the exaltation of his spirit, new aspects of the conflict between the characters, and Laylá’s absence from the work. Māmkigh makes several thought-provoking observations about the story, including her interpretation of Laylā as a symbol of freedom and justice and her analysis of the description of the doorknob. Her fleeting reference to the father as an intelligence agent provides a jumping-off point for my own reading of “Al-Khutūbah” as a malicious government agent’s interrogation of a vulnerable citizen. With this story, Tāhir expresses his disgust with the repression visited upon the Egyptians by their government during his lifetime and throughout the nation’s history.
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