



Gamal El-Ghitani: A scent of history

Profile by **Gamal Nkrumah**

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Novelists do not necessarily plummet from grace when they turn down prizes. It is barely 16 months since Sonallah Ibrahim refused the Second Arab Novel Conference prize in a gesture that outraged the country's cultural establishment.

Last week the Cairo Third Arab Novel Conference sought to salvage something of the reputation of its much coveted prize by awarding it to one of the most distinguished Arab writers, the celebrated Sudanese novelist Al-Tayeb Saleh. Saudi novelist Abdul-Rahman Mounif was the first to receive that prize in 1998. Ibrahim declined to accept what he characterised as "a dubious honour" during the second round in 2003. And so, it seems, has Gamal El-Ghitani, who belongs to Ibrahim's defiant generation.

"Without mentioning names, someone from the Supreme Council of Culture phoned me up and asked if I would object to being short-listed for this year's Arab Novel prize," El-Ghitani says in a brisk, no nonsense tone. "Needless to say, I promptly declined. And, I believe several other Egyptian novelists did." El-Ghitani, novelist, short story writer and journalist is one of Egypt's and the Arab world's most accomplished literary figures.

So what does El-Ghitani think of this year's round and choice? "With all due respect Al- Tayeb Saleh is an outstanding novelist, his winning of the prize does not whitewash the event," explains El-Ghitani. "And besides," he elaborates, "I have deeper objections to the rationale that appears to inform official Egyptian decrees. I object to the element of whimsy that characterises ministerial decisions." In contemporary Egypt, the politics of culture has spun into a political storm. "Official cultural policy sorely lacks credibility," El-Ghitani explains.

A prolific writer, El-Ghitani is editor-in-chief of the weekly *Akhbar Al-Adab*, Egypt's leading literary publication. He has lived through the defining periods of Egypt's recent history, including the 1967 and 1973 wars. Hardly surprising, then, that his works should wrestle with history and personal conscience, that his fiction should occupy the interface between the social, the political and the psychological.

Zayni Barakat is perhaps El-Ghitani's most celebrated novel. Set in Mameluke Egypt, it was first published in serial form by the independent weekly *Rose El-Youssef* between 1970-71. In 1990 it became the first Arabic novel to be published in English translation by Penguin.

Zayni Barakat, a story replete with political intrigue and chivalry, is a tour de force. An intricately woven saga of passion and power, it delves into the darker recesses of the mediaeval mind while also tackling contemporary themes.

"The finest, leanest, most steely Arabic prose that I have either read or heard is produced by novelists (not critics) like Elias Khoury and Gamal El-Ghitani," Edward Said once remarked. "Each of whose prose is a razor-sharp Aristotelian instrument the elegance of which resembles Empson's or Newman's."

Not that El-Ghitani is a man content to rest on his laurels. His highly acclaimed *Tagaliyat* (Illuminations), published by Editions du Seuil as *Livre des Illuminations*, was launched last month at the Institut du monde arabe in Paris on 18 February.

Tagaliyat is in many ways the product of El-Ghitani's long-standing fascination with Sufism and mystical Islam. An illustration of Imam Hussein, Prophet Mohamed's martyred grandson, hangs in his office in *Akhbar Al-Adab*. A portrait of Ali Ibn Abi Taleb, the prophet's beloved son-in-law, overlooks his study. Both men are depicted as fervently pious. They are moist-eyed with handsome Persian features.

El-Ghitani is fascinated by the intersection of the sacred and profane, the spiritual and carnal, the artistic and intellectual. "I bought the portraits of Sayedna Ali and Al-Hussein in Iraq in 1974," he says. And, he finds *Nahj Al-Balagha* by Ali Ibn Abi Taleb a veritable fount of inspiration. "I am not a Shia, but I find the story of Ali and his sons profoundly moving."

The dingy offices of *Akhbar Al-Adab* where El-Ghitani receives me are cluttered with books, papers and pictures. He speaks quietly about his work, his years as a war correspondent, his novels and short stories – he has published 13 novels and six collections of short stories – and his love of art and architecture. "I don't work in a vacuum," he says. "I work with models drawn from Arabic narration, poetry, the Sufi tradition, historical texts or folkloric legacy."

Our next meeting is in his study at his home in New Maadi. Books are everywhere, some piled on the floor, others standing on shelves. He has had many mentors: Moussa Sabri, he says, was a great influence in journalism; Naguib Mahfouz is the greatest contemporary literary inspiration. Both were sons of Al-Gamaliya. Reading occupies much of his time, and El-Ghitani can spend an entire day alone with his books in his study. He is interested in a wide range of topics – history, travel books, novels and magazines. He values clarity and elegance above all. "The Quran is the ultimate reference of the Arabic language," he says.

His shelves include Al-Jahiz, Al-Tawheedi, ancient Arabian poetry. Music features prominently among the books, which are punctuated by cassettes and CDs of classical Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Tibetan and Chinese music.

In sharp contrast the rooms housing *Akhbar Al-Adab* may vary in size from tiny to moderately commodious but they are dark and dingy. The hallways are as sombre as the offices where El-Ghitani says he no longer spends hours. His health has deteriorated in recent years and he needs long periods of peace and quiet. He is toying with the idea of retiring.

El-Ghitani was born in 1945 in the village of Juhayna, in the Upper Egyptian governorate of Sohag. But he was raised in Al-Hussein – Al- Gamaliya district of Old Cairo. El-Ghitani has a tremendous sense of affinity with the historical district. “At the age of 15, I became fascinated by the novels of Naguib Mahfouz whose titles were drawn from my own Cairene neighbourhood.”

He spends 10 minutes extolling the architectural marvels of the Mosque of Sultan Hassan. “It was part of my childhood. I spent days on end contemplating the calligraphy and the architecture.” He is hungry for more opportunities to explore the richness of his native Al-Hussein. “The streets still bear the same names as in the Mameluke period. There is a continuity,” he points out. “My familiarity with Al-Hussein lends specificity to my writing,” he says.

It is impossible not to be distracted by his air of other-worldliness. Nefertiti’s unfinished head stands on his desk while a bust of El-Ghitani himself sits, appropriately enough, atop one of his own books. A voracious reader, he does not limit himself to the Arabic literary tradition. “My reading developed spontaneously in two directions: translated world classics on the one hand and Arabic classics on the other,” he explains. “One of the works that influenced me at a young age was Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams*. I remember borrowing the Arabic translation by Mustafa Safwan from Dar Al-Kutub. I could not afford a copy – they then sold for LE1.50. So I copied it by hand. That’s why I can still recall entire pages from the book.”

El-Ghitani’s writings touch on the subversive and he frequently tackles counter cultural questions. He encourages his staff at Akhbar Al-Adab to do the same. He may be best known for novels set in the distant past, but he is outward-looking and focussed on the future. The office of the editor-in-chief of Egypt’s leading literary publication is not particularly inviting. It is dimly lit but there is a buzz about the place. As the interview progresses El-Ghitani flings the windows wide open to let in the sunlight. He has the strong, roughly-hewn features of an Upper Egyptian. Bespectacled and dark-skinned, with a balding head of thinning grey hair, El-Ghitani’s gaze is arresting. He looks strikingly like the ancients as he tells me about his fascination with Ancient Egypt and how the remarkable civilisation of his ancestors has influenced his writings. He is equally proud of his Arabian roots. His ancestors hailed from the Juhayna tribe – originally nomadic Arabians who settled in Upper Egypt and integrated with the Egyptian peasantry.

His father inherited a small plot of land and later came to Cairo to study at Al-Azhar University. His grandfather died when his father was two years old, a tragedy which he says shaped his father’s character. “He was a determined and highly disciplined man. After graduation he lived and worked in Al-Hussein, near Al-Azhar,” El-Ghitani recounts. “He tried odd jobs including a stint as an acrobat in a circus.” El-Ghitani is fiercely proud of his humble origins. His father had a tremendous impact on him as a child and he, in turn, is keen to attract younger readers. “I’m happy to have come in contact with a younger generation. Writing is essentially all about now, about today.”

Yet in his own work he frequently time-travels back to mediaeval Cairo. “For me the subject matter defines the form of the novel. In my *Livre des Illuminations* the subject is time and death, time and amnesia. That’s why I veered towards the Sufi tradition.”

It was thanks to Edward Said that El-Ghitani’s masterpiece *Zayni Barakat* became the only Arabic novel in the Penguin series until *Season of Migration to the North*, by Sudanese novelist Al-Tayeb Saleh, appeared last year as a Penguin Classic. The opening chapter introduces a restive Egypt in a state of turmoil. The knell of Mameluke rule was sounding as Cairenes anxiously awaited the fate of their city as it prepared itself for the Ottoman onslaught of 1517.

I spot a bewitching photograph of a colourful perfumery shop. El-Ghitani explains its significance. “I love the scents of traditional aromatic oils and perfumes and this particular shop belongs to an old Nubian man, a life-long friend. He makes scents especially for me. He says that each individual requires a unique combination of aromas. I believe the perfumes he creates are Ancient Egyptian

concoctions. These are the scents of the ancient past. They hint at eternity – they are a whiff of Ancient Egypt.”

El-Ghitani moves on to the 1966-67 prison experiences that have left an indelible mark on his writings. Other inmates included Salah Eissa, editor of *Al-Qahira*, celebrated poet and writer Abdel-Rahman El-Abnoudi and Sabri Hafez, Arabic literature professor at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. “It was in late October, and it was bitterly cold. We squatted on the floor of a tiny cell in the Citadel Prison and slept, huddled together. There was absolutely no furniture in the cell,” El-Ghitani recalls.

Worse, he heard the screams of those tortured by electric shocks. “Torture was confined to three notorious prisons: the Military Prison, Abu Zaabal and the Citadel,” El-Ghitani says, and the three prisons vied with each other to inflict the most pain on the unfortunate inmates. The opportunity to develop his own literary interests, however, came during this time in jail. Prison is an experience susceptible to neither argument nor explanation. And it was an experience that changed the focus of his writings as much as the direction of his politics.

“Zayni Barakat is not Nasser,” El-Ghitani says. Yet it is difficult not to draw a parallel between Zayni Barakat and Gamal Abdel-Nasser. “In his obsession with purity of life, with honesty, with reform, as well as puritanical and retributive justice, Zayni corresponds with Gamal Abdel-Nasser, also a popular figure, genuine reformer, [and] ambitious patriot,” noted Edward Said. More to the point “El-Ghitani’s disenchanted reflections upon the past directly associate Zayni Barakat’s rule with the murky atmosphere of intrigue, conspiracy and multiple schemes that characterised Abdel-Nasser’s rule during the 1960s,” Said continues. El-Ghitani does not want to analyse the matter further “because it is a painful reminder of memories I’d rather forget”.

El-Ghitani lights another cigarette. “Creativity is a personal experience whereby writers have the freedom to see and explore things from a different and unique perspective.” The first book he read following his release was a translation of Victor Hugo’s *Les Miserables* from which he can still quote entire passages.

He criticises both the state and the wave of religious fanaticism that has engulfed the country. “You can’t apply morals to an artistic work,” he insists. “What about Abu Nawass whose work has been read for more than a thousand years and became part of our heritage. All of a sudden the Ministry of Culture judged the man as obscene and confiscated some of his work. I can’t expect worse.”

El-Ghitani speaks his mind and stands his ground. He resigned from the editorial team of the Ministry of Culture’s series *Al-Zakhaar* (treasures) in protest at the ministry’s policy on popular culture even though he felt that he was providing a useful service giving young and low-income people access to classical Arabic works.

These were the same works that so influenced El-Ghitani and shaped his thinking, moulding his writing style in the process. Al-Tawhidi’s *Al-Muqabasat* (Borrowed Lights); *Al-Maarif* by Ibn Qatiba; *Al-Kamel* by Ibn Al-Mobrad; *Al-Aali* by Ibn Ali Al-Kali; *Nafh Al-Teeb* by Al-Maqrizi ... the list goes on. El-Ghitani studied fine art, specialising in Persian carpets and tapestry. He read Sufi classics and swiftly climbed the ladder of cultural accomplishment.

What, among his reading, would he particularly recommend? He singles out *The Perfect Man* by Abdel-Qadir Al-Jilani; Ibn Arabi’s concept of *The Oneness of Being*; and *Al-Futuhāt Al-Makkiyya* (Meccan Conquests) by Ibn Arabi, the mediaeval Arab scholar, poet and mystic. He also cites *Shah Nameh* (The Epic of Kings) by Abul-Qasim Mansur Bin Hassan Al-Firdawsi.

From fine arts he tried his hand at journalism. Mahmoud Amin El-Alim, then editor-in-chief of *Al-Akhbar*, appointed him. El-Alim, El-Ghitani says, was another mentor.

El-Ghitani is as interested in new writing as in the classics. "To examine the past and learn from it is an excellent idea in principle, but," he says, "you play with history at your own peril."

He married a journalist, Magda El-Guindy, who is currently editor-in-chief of *Alaaeddin* -- Al-Ahram's children's publication -- and has stood by his side through thick and thin. The couple have a son and a daughter: Mohamed is a Sagittarian like his mother. Magda, like her father, is Taurean. Mohamed looks very much like his mother's family while his daughter is the splitting image of her father.

Is the pen supposed to be stronger than the sword, I ask, after which the conversation veers towards the subject of war. "After the defeat of 1967," he tells me, "I discovered Ibn Iyas who lived in a similar period, that in which the Ottomans defeated the Egyptian army. His grief felt very similar to that we experienced following the defeat of 1967."

History turned on the outcome of the 1967 defeat. "Our troops were unaccustomed to battles of this kind," El-Ghitani remembers. "They exhibited unflinching courage one day and were beset by elemental fear the other."

In 1967 there were gallant retreats against overwhelming odds. El-Ghitani reported the battles first hand. "I wanted to go to the frontline. I belong to a generation that exhibited deep concern with public events."

As a war correspondent El-Ghitani refused to use the lexicon of defeat. His fruitful working relationship with photographer Mohamed Abdel- Rahman drew parallels with that of Mohamed Hassanein Heikal and Mohamed Youssef, *Al-Ahram's* celebrated photographer during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. Individual acts of heroism did not escape El-Ghitani's keenly observant eye, and he continued to write about war long after the battlefields had been cleared of its dead.

And it was, tellingly, during his years as a war correspondent that he felt an irrepressible urge to write a novel himself. And the rest, of course, is history, if history of a different sort.