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The People Already Know: Positionality of the Intellectual, Connective Agency and Cultural Memory

Abstract: In this chapter, El-Desouky explores the positionality of the intellectual in the aesthetic spheres of amāra. Expressions of amāra, of how the people ‘know without illusion’, in Foucault’s words, index a collectively shared knowledge of the group, while the binding character of this knowledge, or its connective agency, works through cultural memory as the ability to establish connections and to constitute identity. El-Desouky offers analytic examples of narrative interpretations of the cultural memory of revolutionary acts as offering a phenomenology of narrated memory. Expressions of cultural remembering, El-Desouky argues, radicalize conventional textuality, as they involve interpretive horizons of experience surrounding what constitutes the text in its pastness as well as the transmission and reception of this text.

I understood it! I finally understood it and I returned to the Square day after day just to make sure that what I was witnessing was not a dream. What I have seen to be the people really were the people, alive and well, and it wasn't just an afternoon uprising that would disperse with the onset of evening.

I realized all of a sudden, then and there, that I never really gave the people their right space in my imagination. The people, the collective, are absent in my novels: there are characters, individuals... but none of the novels has the people in it... Until that day, I saw the people only as a handful of stragglers seeking their own individual interests. When Egyptians became themselves the people, our world, the world of the narrators and storytellers of Egypt, completely transformed.

(Fichere, 2011, p. 228)

In an earlier article on Mahfouz’s *Children of the Alley*, I have attempted to explore the historical possibility of rendering the people’s popular imaginary and modes of knowing in narrative, in particular in the modern Egyptian novel (2011). Unless the very possibilities of narrative art are imploded from within, the writer intellectual as I have argued will almost always assume power of discursive expression and of form. The issue is not about whether Egyptian colloquial registers or creative forms could be used in the modes of fiction (we have strong examples such as Yusuf al-Qa’id’s 1994 novel, *Laban al-‘Asfour*’Asking for the Impossible’, or Khairy Shalaby’s many experimental novels that deploy Egyptian *‘ammiiyya in significantly resonant styles*). What is at stake is, as Foucault has pointed out, the absence of ‘a certain kind of knowledge’. For Foucault, however, this knowledge is the knowledge that the people can exercise power, beyond narrow economic demands. But what I seek here is precisely how the people construct their knowledge and in what modes.1 Pursuing this ‘knowledge’ is what will allow us to investigate further the modes of socially cementing and resonant speech, as opposed to the fragmenting discourses of power, whether hegemonic or resistant.

With regard to historical practice, Hobsbawm outlines the challenges to the attempt to write the hitherto unknown dimension of history, the