

Cafe Riche: Memory in the Formation of Egyptian National Identity

by

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Introduction

This study analyzes how an Egyptian coffeehouse-café, Cairo's well-known Café Riche, contributed to the formation of national identity in Egypt. Literary and historical writings serve as the basis for this paper. Personal interviews contribute memories of some loyal patrons, making up for the scarcity of the written record and providing an insider's look at the significance of the Café to the intellectuals of Cairo.

Café Riche had a wide reputation among writers, poets, journalists and intellectual Egyptians and foreigners living in Egypt. As an intellectual café, it was a meeting point for this class.¹ This Café Riche study focuses on how the memories reputation and nationalism, augmented by the literature generated by intellectuals of the time, combine to create a popularly understood reputation of the Café and the character of Egypt to form a collective memory of the recent history.

Café Riche: The Origins of the Structure

Much has been written about coffeehouses. Ralph Hattox in his book Coffee and Coffeehouses² wrote that during the sixteenth century, coffeehouses in the Middle East became more and more important as they turned into something of a literary forum. The coffeehouse society became popular for exchanging information where news of the day was quickly spread by word of mouth.

We jump forward to the 20th Century to find Café Riche opening its doors at a time when the mass media informed readers and listeners—when information sources in modern societies reached far beyond individual conversations

Located in central Cairo, from its beginnings in 1914, Cafe Riche operated like coffeehouses of the past, but it also hosted an entire generation of Egyptian intellectuals who frequented the establishment between revolutions and, for several decades after the last one. While various middle class patrons and groups frequented the Café, this paper examines the Café's most distinguished patrons, the literati. The intellectuals' center of discussion was public affairs, but their conversations contributed to the literature generated by patrons. Inevitably the introduction of certain controversial topics led to direct attacks from the politically powerful. Thus, public affairs issues furnished much of the fuel for comment and criticism among coffeehouse patrons. In this way, literature and public affairs melded together.

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¹ Impressions of Egypt, Vol XVII, February 2002, p. 73.

² Ralph Hattox, Coffee and Coffeehouses. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1985).

Egyptian businessman Azer Farag Azer, a loyal patron of Café Riche since 1960, explained the value of café society.

. . . because you couldn't meet at home. . . the middle class people had no access to aristocratic (outlets) . . . so the café was a meeting point for history of the 20th century. Coffeehouses played a very active role in political and intellectual life in Egypt.³

Café Riche had an important role in the patriotic and revolutionary movement in Egypt, especially the revolution of 1919.⁴ Over steaming pots of coffee, writers talked of and exchanged ideas, political activists hatched revolutions. Many forged alliances, while nearly all made life-long friendships. Many, too, discussed the ideas they later used, fictionalized in fact and detail, in important literature, which they produced for the print media including novels, newspaper columns, poetry and other print genre. The works established the major themes in modern Egyptian literature.

The café's physical structure dates only from the early 20th century. In 1905, Prince Mohamed Ali, son of the Khedive Tawfik (King of Egypt) and brother of Khedive Ismail, moved from his palace in Soliman Pasha Square to settle in el-Manial Palace. As a result, the old palace on Soliman Pasha Square (now Talaat Harb) was sold to Nobar Pasha who razed it and sold the land in 1907. On part of the palace site, a building was constructed, which included No. 29 on Sheikh Hamza Street.⁵ According to the revenue files of 1910-1918, Cafe Riche occupied part of this building as a coffeehouse with four doors on Soliman Pasha Street.

In 1914, a commercial guide to Egypt showed that the owner of the coffeehouse was a German businessman called Bernard Steinberg. Later, a Frenchman, Henry Recine, bought the coffee shop and named it Café Riche. He added to it a neighboring shop to gain a fifth door on the street. As World War I continued, however, Recine was called back to France. He sold the cafe in May 1916 to Michael Nicolapolits, a Greek businessman and connoisseur of art.⁶ Cafe Riche partitioned its space to form a long narrow restaurant and an equally long narrow cafe-coffeehouse. It was comfortable and informal. The open doors gave patrons a view of the street and its teeming activities. Several tables were placed on the streets until renovations in the 1990s removed them.

Today, the Café retains its two main halls, the coffeehouse and the other as restaurant. The restaurant in the inner hall is decorated with some 40 photographs of Egypt's prominent novelists, journalists, actors and poets—literary celebrities who were once permanent customers of the Cafe, including a dominant photographic portrait of Nobel Laureate Naguib Mahfouz. A new bar occupies the lower hall but is opened only for special occasions. Above the staircase is large portrait painting of Umm Kalthum,

³ Azer, Azer Farag. Interview by Peggy Bieber-Roberts, May 8, 2002, Cairo, Egypt.

⁴ *Impressions of Egypt*, Vol. XVII, February 2002, p. 73.

⁵ *Impressions of Egypt*, Vol XVII, February 2002, p. 73.

⁶ Werr Patrick. "Missing out on Growth" in *Business Monthly*, September 1999, p. 46

Egypt's most celebrated singer who began her career performing in Café Riche. Café Riche's present owner, son of a Greek businessman, obtained the Cafe in 1960. The current owner restored the building in the 1990s preserving its old style. The owner, who wishes not to be listed in publications, sits at the front door behind his office desk, surrounded by several wooden chairs set out for guests who stop by for visits. Boxes of historical memorabilia and documentation are stashed behind the desk, and he sifts through them with plans to archive the material. He is there every day from morning to night, having dedicated his life to maintaining Café Riche's renowned reputation and history.

Café Riche in the First Revolution and Aftermath

National identity in Egypt became an issue of concern among writers and intellectuals as a result of the imperialistic ventures of European powers, as well as the earlier invasions by the Ottoman Empire.⁷ After the end of World War I, British occupation over Egypt intensified. Although not direct, British rule operated through a puppet on the Egyptian throne. Intellectuals and revolutionaries yearned for Egyptian independence. The 1919 revolution was led by Saad Zaghlul and others from politics, business and the literati. Leaders of the 1919 revolution met at the Cafe to plan their strategies. Abdel Rahman al-Rafe'y, in his book on the 1919 Revolution titled National History of Egypt between 1914-1921⁸ spoke about Cafe Riche as one of the secret spots of the revolution.⁹

In an interview, Dr. Kamil Al-Zahry, who belonged to the Café Riche literati, talked about the 1919 revolution:

For many years it (Cafe Riche) played an important role, situated in downtown, close to Soliman Pasha Square and Tahrir Square or Midan al-Kedive Ismail and on the way to Midan Obra. It was a station for intellectuals. It has been proved that the men of the 1919 revolution used to get together there.¹⁰

Besides the revolutionary plotters, there were writers, poets and artists who expressed their love for the Egyptian nation in their literary works, poems, columns and songs. These intellectuals represented various ideologies. Some were leftists; others, nationalists. Among the most distinguished were writers Naguib Mahfouz, Tawfiq al-Hakim, Yusuf Idris, Taha Hussein, Abdel Rahman el-Abouni, Gamal el-Ghitani, Anis Mansour, poet Naguib Sarour, poet and cartoonist Salah Jahin, the Iraqi poet Wahhab el-

⁷ Lorez Joseph P. Egypt and the Arabs. Foreign Policy and the Search for National Identity. (San Francisco: Westview Press, 1990), p. 35

⁸ Rafeiy Abdel Rahman. 1919 Revolution. National History of Egypt Between 1914-1921

⁹ An old printing machine was discovered in the secret wine cellar of the cave located in the Cafe. The current owner believes the press was used to print political flyers because it was hidden underground. Even though no flyers have been found, the fact it was hidden suggests political activity.

¹⁰Dr. Kamil Al-Zahry. Interview by Lamis Muhammad Rifa'y, May 20, 2001, Cairo, Egypt.

Bayyaty and the Sudanese al-Feytury.¹¹ Through their writings, they contributed significantly to the revolution by constructing an evolving sense of Egyptian nationalism. At the same time, the events of the revolution shaped their writings.

These intellectual and political discussions created interesting debates at the tables of Café Riche. The interactions brought forth important literature, too. Playwright and novelist Tawfiq al-Hakim was part of this intellectual group. In 1918-19 he wrote An Unwelcome Guest, a play about a man who visits his friend who is a lawyer, supposedly for a day, but winds up staying for months. The play was clearly an allegory of the British occupation. Later on, in Awdat al-Ruh¹² (1928), Tawfiq wrote again about the British occupation. Muhsin's love for his neighbor Saniya is a metonymic stand-in or embodiment of love for the authentic nation.¹³

Writings by Nobel Laureate Naguib Mahfouz were also very critical of the British occupation and influenced by that event. As a young boy Mahfouz witnessed the 1919 revolution whose major events took place in Cairo and some of its confrontations with the British in the very square in which he lived. In Mahfouz's Palace Walk, for instance, the first novel of his trilogy about Egypt, he relates the story of Fahmy, the brilliant son who is caught in the nationalistic movement against Britain in the early 1920's.¹⁴ Fahmy's family is the locus of narrative and the traditional quarter of Gamaliyya is the main location of the novel. The novel's world is in the grip of historical tradition. As in the title Bayn al-Qasrayn indicates, literally between the palaces and not Palace Walk, Egypt was in a critical space between two political orders -- The Ottoman Caliphate with its waning traditional legitimacy and the new independent nation whose difficult birth required the sacrificial blood of Fahmy.

The strong association between the rise of the novel and the awakening of the national consciousness made Mahfouz's experience of this major national event a vital development of his literary education, and a rich source of inspiration for his Trilogy.¹⁵ Since the beginning of Mahfouz's literary career, articles and short stories were used to shape the imaginary community and bolster bruised national identity. The events narrated in these novels are mainly metaphoric representations of aspects of the national condition about which the author was very concerned.

In the Trilogy, finished in 1952 concurrently with the collapse of the old regime, Mahfouz provided a response to national and personal needs and recorded political transformation of modern Egypt in its quest for national identity and a role in the modern world. It is the story of three generations, covering twenty-seven years (1917-44) of Egypt's modern history, covering all political shades and encompassing all social strata of community.¹⁶

¹¹ Rakha Youssef. "Down to the Cafe, Again," in Al-Ahram Weekly Online, 5-11 October 2000, Issue n. 502

¹² Al-Hakim Tawfiq. L'Ame Retrouvee (Paris, Fasquele Editeurs, 1928)

¹³ Sheehi Stephen. "Desire for the West, Desire for the Self." <http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/jouy>

¹⁴ Mahfouz Naguib. Palace Walk (Cairo: AUC Press, 1990)

¹⁵ Sabry, Hafez. "Representing the Nation," in Al-Ahram Weekly, 13-19 September 2001.

¹⁶ Sabry, Hafez. "Representing the Nation," in Al-Ahram Weekly, 13-19 September 2001.

Azer remembers Mahfouz as extremely organized in life.

He used to come at 6 o'clock exactly...and if he came between 5 and 6, he would not enter because he is so punctual. He is a special man...very punctual and he said to me "in Third world Countries, nobody can live" ...so he was obliged to work as a public servant until the end of his career. He was chairman of the cinema authority during Nasser's time, but he never used the power of government...¹⁷

Lifetime waiter at Café Rich, who prefers to be known as Filfil, was a witness to Mahfouz's lectures at Cafe Riche around 6-7 p.m. on Fridays.¹⁸

Filfil described the clientele in the 1940s as lawyers, merchants, writers, and employees, all who used to come in the morning. Ordinary customers would come at night. "Before the 1952 revolution, there were Egyptians, Greek, Armenians, Jews, Italians, all nationalities. They used to come in large numbers. They were all friends, there were no sensitivities in these days. They used to invite each other and sit together." Filfil also remembered cotton merchants and brokers as loyal customers. He described the various groups as friends: "They did not sit according to their jobs. . .they all talked together and they knew each other well."¹⁹

Café Riche in the 1952 Revolution and Aftermath

It was during mid-century decades that the young Egyptian generation of intellectuals gathered together in animated discussions about the English control over Egypt, planning the revolution of 1952.²⁰

At the time, Café Riche's popularity increased substantially. Among those who frequented the café in these years were authors Naguib Mahfouz, Yusuf Idris and Tawfiq al-Hakim and the leftist colloquial Egyptian poet Ahmand Fouad Negm. Sorour's ironic poems of 1977, "The Whole World is Café Riche," emphasizes the cultural contribution of this café to Egyptian literature and art.²¹ During their meetings at the café, the authors, poets and journalists discussed numerous social, cultural and political issues including national identity. These issues were later re-discussed in their works, reflecting concerns of their readers and producing illuminating national allegories.

¹⁷ Azer, Azer Farag. Interview by Peggy Bieber-Roberts, May 8, 2002, Cairo, Egypt.

¹⁸ Filfil, interview by Peggy Bieber-Roberts, May 1, 2002, Café Riche, Cairo, Egypt; Arabic to English translation by Assya Yassin Ahmed. According to Filfil, when he (of Sudanese ethnicity) was 13 years old, his uncle who worked for Pasha Weisa' palace, brought him to work at Café Riche under the Greek owner who was working at the British embassy at the time. At first Filfil worked under the supervision of other waiters who were training him. Bit-by-bit, he learned the trade.

¹⁹ Filfil. Interview by Peggy Bieber-Roberts, May 1, 2002, Café Riche, Cairo, Egypt; Arabic to English translation by Assya Yassin Ahmed.

²⁰ Werr, Patrick. "Missing out on Growth" in *Business Monthly*, September 1999, p. 46

²¹ Saad el-Din, Mursi. "Plain Talk," in *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 4-10 December 1997.

The 1952 revolution was led by the “Young Officers.” One of them was Gamal Abdel Nasser. These days, it is said that Nasser sat in the Cafe Riche while he plotted the 1952 overthrow of King Farouk.²²

"The July 23 Revolution represented the realisation of a long cherished hope – a hope entertained by the Egyptian people in modern times to aspire towards self-government with the last word in determining their own destiny," wrote Nasser in his memoirs, titled The Philosophy of Revolution.²³ Later, it was Nasser and his colleagues who tried to mobilize mass opinion in the pursuit of common objectives underlying the potential power of Arab solidarity. His ideas of Arab nationalism, articulated in The Philosophy of the Revolution,²⁴ demonstrates the convergence of intellectual debate and political action.

Filfil describes the atmosphere at Café Riche during 1950s after the 1952 revolution:

. . .people were worried, anxious, but hope and expectations were the same and they were unified. The journalists were writing to achieve a better position for the country. The same issue and the same motive were backed by each of the groups attending their profession. The journalists write, the directors do films, the writers write and soon to serve the Egyptian dream and future.²⁵

But when Nasser gained power in 1952, the leading role of Cafe Riche as a meeting point for intellectuals and activists of every kind, changed. Retribution was the main concern for these writers, artist and journalist who were forced to leave the country if they did not agree with government policy. Mahfouz stopped writing because, in his words he could not have freely expressed his opinions in the repressive atmosphere of Nasser's Egypt.²⁶ Journalist Saad Zaghloul expatriated to France to continue his activities independently. Mahfouz became silent.

Ahmed Shawki describes the effects of the Nasser's era on patron behavior as becoming quieter:

I remember in the '60s, we were whispering, you know, because of the Nasser era. The political issues are not welcomed. You cannot discuss it openly because some people were sitting around you. I think some of the journalists were reported to the police and removed. The next day we don't find Eddin and we learned that . . . because of all that discussion that happened yesterday. He talked about Nasser and the military junta. They just removed him for a couple of days or so and then they released

²² Werr, Patrick. "Missing out on Growth" in Business Monthly, September 1999.

²³ Abdel Nasser, Gamal. The Philosophy of the Revolution, (Washington D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1956), p.10.

²⁴ Owen, Roger. "A Kind of Arabism," in al-Ahram Weekly Online, 20-26 April 2000, Issue n. 478

²⁵ Filfil. Interview by Peggy Bieber-Roberts, May 1, 2002, Café Riche, Cairo, Egypt; Arabic to English translation by Assya Yassin Ahmed.

²⁶ Al-Ghitany, Gamal. Mahfouz sur Mahfouz, (Paris:Editions Sindibad, 1991)

him...So we were whispering at the time, so people around us could not hear us. . .²⁷

According to Filfil, patrons were afraid to talk then. He added that in the Sadat era, people talked frankly about politics. But during the "king's era, they were not talking about politics, especially for certain people."²⁸

During this time, novelist Yusuf Idris, a regular customer at Café Riche, was active in writing about despair and lack of confidence, factors that were holding Egypt back. He wrote about the struggle of having seen the West, the desirable "other," but not possessing the resources to join it, or the insight into how to integrate Western ideas and civilization into Egypt's own traditions and circumstances. Idris' short story The Cheapest Nights²⁹ is a powerful allegory of the way Egypt, lacking the moral and financial resources to overcome its colonial past, simply falls back into old patterns of action that perpetuate its misery.³⁰ In the story, Abdel Karim, who represents Egypt, is overburdened with children, irritated with his own, and frustrated by the teeming numbers of them in his village. The night is cold, and he is unable to sleep because of the strong teas he has drunk. Like Egypt, Abdel Karim is attracted to things that are beyond his reach. He has not one piastre with which he could go to Abou al Assaad's den, for instance. Like Egypt, he is at a loss and confused: anyone... seeing Abdu Karim planted in the middle of the square like a scarecrow would be. He returns to old patterns and the problems grow even greater.

Ideas for these stories may have come from Idris' patronizing the café. Dr. Kamil Al-Zahry described Idris' conversations at the Café.

Yusuf Idris for example used to tell his political stories there. For example Sadat who wanted to develop the socialist union. Or the National Union. Or about articles he wrote. We continued to discuss in the Cafe what we started in the newspaper.³¹

A few years later, another important Egyptian writer, Taha Hussein, launched the literary magazine Al-Katib al-Misri from Cafe Riche. Taha Hussein also reported in its writing the discussions that used to take place in the Cafe. In his book The Future of Culture in Egypt,³² he opposed the idea of Europeanization on the grounds that it threatened Egypt's national personality. Again, the ideas might have sprung from the conversations.

Ahmed Shawki, a career journalist, remembers the atmosphere at Café Riche in the 1950s and 1960s, especially the journalists who served as mentors to him and other university

²⁷ Shawki, Ahmed. Interview by Peggy Bieber-Roberts, April 8, 2002, Cairo, Egypt.

²⁸ Filfil. Interview by Peggy Bieber-Roberts, May 1, 2002, Café Riche, Cairo, Egypt; Arabic to English translation by Assya Yassin Ahmed.

²⁹ Idris, Yusuf. The Cheapest Nights, (London, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1996)

³⁰ Fox, J. Elisabeth. "Egypt: The Search for Identity." http://dike.edu/~efox/Mals_Paper.html

³¹ Al-Zahry, Dr. Kamil. Interview by Lamis Muhammad Rifa'iy, May 20, 2001.

³² Hussein, Taha. The Future of Culture in Egypt. (Washington: American Council of Learned Societies, 1954)

journalism students at the time. As a bystander, Shawki listened to distinguished Egyptian journalists in conversation.

We used to see these people there and we were with them -- these big shots. And they discussed issues, political issues, economic issues, and we just listened to them. As students we did not bother to go closer to them. Gradually we used to sit around them and hear the discussion, discussing major issues concerning Egypt. One of the biggest issues that we remember in 1956 was when the Suez Canal was nationalized – it was a turning point in Egyptian history. And they were saying we expected the British and French to attack Egypt and that’s what happened . . .The British, French and Israeli invasion. They were anticipating that this was going to happen and we were just watching. They were inflamed by this .
 . . .³³

Poet Abdel Rahman El-Abouni described Cafe Riche from the vantage point of a struggling artist:

At the beginning of the ‘60s a group of intellectuals, writers, artists, fine artists, novelists, TV and cinema scenario writers, play writers and historians met in Cairo. We were all poor, we all came from remote villages and we did not know each other. We were the ‘60’s generation. Isavic Café was the only place that gathered us and helped us to consolidate. It was owned by a Yugoslavian man but he was Egyptian more than any other Egyptian. When Tito came to visit Egypt, Isavic, the café and the restaurant were closed. The waiter in Isavic was called Am Gomaa, he came from the south like all of us. We were usually broke so he used to pay for our sandwiches and drinks until we get money to pay him back. We were a very large group of intellectuals. A few yards away there was Café Riche. It was for the elite of intellectuals, the high class of them. A very important thing used to take place there and it is the great writer Naguib Mahfouz's seminars and we used to go and hang around him there.³⁴

The “glory days” of Café Riche was the period from the 1950s to the 1970s. During its existence, the cafe became so popular that when Gamal Qasim, a little known documentary filmmaker, offered the National Center of Cinema a 20-minute film project about Café Riche, he was told the project only would be accepted on condition that it be expanded into at least a one-hour feature. Riche was considered to be too important and complex a subject to be dealt with in a cursory manner.³⁵

³³ Shawki, Ahmed. Interview by Peggy Bieber-Roberts, April 8, 2002, Cairo, Egypt.

³⁴ El-Abouni, Abdel Rahman. Interview by Lamis Muhammad Rifaiy, May 2000, Cairo, Egypt.

³⁵ Rakha, Youssef. "Down to the Cafe, Again," in Al-Ahram Weekly Online, 5-11 October 2000 , Issue n. 502

But it was during the Sadat presidency, in the 1960s and 1970s, that national identity was subsumed under the concept of pan-Arabism. Sadat's emphasis on pan-Arabism is mentioned frequently in his memoirs titled In Search of Identity. For instance, in writing about the October war, he says: "... the Arab people were no longer a "lifeless" body but a world power - they could fight, and in fact defeat, Israel."³⁶ The writers of the Café Riche group, even if they were not constrained by the oppressive censorship, likely would have been surprised at this turn. Egypt's own national identity, as well as an opportunity to expand Egyptian political, cultural and economic interest into the wider Middle Eastern world, no longer represented the prevailing political view. Along with the withering of Egyptian nationalism, Café Riche faded away.

At the end of February 1990, Café Riche was closed as a result of a dispute with the government concerning a public passage the cafe occupied. The owner won the case, but the October 1992 earthquake caused serious damage to the building. As a result, the place had to stay closed for a longer period. Repairing the building was not an easy task since it had been constructed years before earthquake-resistant building standards were established.³⁷

When the Cafe reopened in 1999 after a decade of closure, its clientele had changed. Gone were the very active Egyptian intellectuals. They were replaced mostly by international visitors. To the dedicated patrons of earlier years, the Cafe Riche is now seen as a nostalgic place—a place remembered for its renowned intellectual heritage and lively discussions about Egypt and its national identity, but a relic from the past. After the closure, Cafe Riche's literati reputation faded, given over to an international business community steeped in global communication.

Summary

Egypt's national identity was formed by renowned Egyptian novelists using literary formats.

Café Riche served a significant role as social and communication center for the articulation in literary formats by renowned Egyptian novelists, including Nobel Laureate Naguib Mahfouz's writings. Meetings at the Café contributed to the literature on Egypt as well as ideas of national identity.

This paper uses memories of patrons to add flavor to the historical documentation. The collection of these memories as it is recorded by Cafe Riche patrons of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, confirms that a heavy control of news causes writers to create national identity in literary formats. Outlets of expression about important national issues revert to fictional forms, such as the novel, poetry, plays. The intellectuals and writers, in creating this shared history, were themselves participants and witnesses to important political events. Often from such vantage points as the tables at the Cafe Riche, they

³⁶ Sadat, Anwar. In Search of Identity (Toronto: Harper & Row Publishers, 1977), p. 304

³⁷ Sadat, Anwar. In Search of Identity (Toronto: Harper & Row Publishers, 1977), p. 304

viewed the political evolution of Egyptian nationalism. The discussions they had there on national identity, among themselves and with political activists, became the substance for their literary works. These works provide guides for and added to the historical and collective memory of Egyptians about Café Riche as the prominent intellectual café but also Egyptian national identity, not only during the changing times of the Nasser and Sadat presidencies, but throughout the struggles of the 20th century.

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