



**The Suppressed Voice of the
Marginalized Aristocracy in
Serageldin's *The Cairo House*:**

A New Historical Approach

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Abstract

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Contemporary new historical theory has obliterated the boundaries between history and fiction. History, a discourse constructed by “literary imagination” and “power relations,” is now seen as ideological and subjective, always open to multiple inquiries and re-interpretation by multiple voices including literary ones. *The Cairo House* by Samia Serageldin is just one voice that tells the history of the 1952 Revolution from a different perspective; the perspective of the aristocratic class that was done great injustice, especially after the nationalization of the Egyptian economy and the confiscation of their possessions. The novel helps ensure that a master narrative will no longer control our understanding of this era in our modern history. For example, the dark side of Nasser's character appears in the young heroine's nightmares. Like all children, she dreams of a bogeyman. “For Gigi,” however, “the bogeyman was

real; he had a name and a face. The black-browed face was inescapable on a million posters throughout the country ... The name was whispered: Nasser, El-Raiis; his thousand eyes and ears lurked behind every corner” (Serageldin, 58). This is how the aristocratic daughter views Nasser: a scary monster that has eyes everywhere, whether or not the reader agrees with the description. The novel, therefore, brings to the foreground the suppressed voice of the marginalized aristocratic class which was often misrepresented in history books and cultural artifacts alike.

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New Historicism is a literary theory that developed in the 1980s largely through the work of Stephen Greenblatt. In contrast to old Historicism which views history as linear and objective, new historical theorists see it as ideological and subjective, open to multiple inquiries and re-interpretation by multiple voices including literary ones. Literary works do not embody the author's intention or illustrate the spirit of the age as traditional historians believe. Rather, they are cultural artifacts that can tell us about the interplay of discourses operating in the time and place in which the text was written. For new historicism, text (the literary work) and context (the historical situation that gave rise to it) are equally important and mutually constitutive. Like the dynamic interplay between individual identity and the society, the literary work shapes and is shaped by its historical context. Perhaps we can better understand the difference between traditional historians and new historicists when we contemplate the questions asked by each. Traditional historians ask

questions such as: “What happened?” and “What does the event tell us about history?” New historicists, on the other hand, ask: “How has the event been interpreted?” and “What do the interpretations tell us about the interpreters?” (Tyson, 282-284)

According to new historicists, no discourse by itself can adequately explain the complex dynamics of social power. Discourses are always in a state of flux negotiating exchanges of power. Just as discourses give power to those in charge, they also stimulate opposition to that power, for power does not only emanate from the top political and socioeconomic structure. Rather, it circulates in all directions, to and from all social levels as the French philosopher Michel Foucault argues. Throughout Egyptian modern history, mainstream novels that were turned into movies tended to consolidate the power of the ruler, express his policies and achieve his dreams. For example, mainstream novels published in Nasser's era such as Yusuf El-Siba'yi's *Rudda Qalbi* or *Back Alive* (1957) attack the aristocratic class of Pashas and feudalists who owned large pieces of land and enslaved poor villagers while glorifying the socialist leader who

had the magic wand to solve all the problems of the Egyptian society. Only in the seventies is the previously banned fiction that criticizes Nasser's era turned into movies. *Al-Karnak* film based on Naguib Mahfouz's novel *Karnak Café* criticizes the wave of political detention after the 1967 defeat in the accounts of those who frequent the coffee shop about the students who were tortured and even raped in prison because of their talks about politics. *Shai' Min El Khouf* or *A Certain Fear* based on Tharwat Abaza's short story with the same name tells the story of the god-like villain, Atres, who crushes the villagers under his iron fist and forces Fouada to marry him against her will as an allegory of Nasser's dictatorship.

New historicists readily accept historical narratives from marginalized people because such plurality of voices helps ensure that no master narrative will control our historical understanding (Tyson, 284-288). *The Cairo House* by Samia Serageldin is just one marginalized voice that helps ensure that no master narrative controls our understanding of modern Egyptian history since the 1952 Revolution. Born in an aristocratic family around the time

of the 1952 Revolution and growing up in Egypt under a revolutionary regime at a time of great political and social upheaval had a dual influence on Samia Serageldin the person and the writer: as a person, she suffered all the consequences of Nasser's sequestration decrees; as a writer, however, she was inspired and her wits sharpened. At the age of twenty, she married and left for England where she studied for her Master's in Politics at London's School of Oriental and African Studies. Under Sadat's rule and the brief glimpse of hope he gave for political and economic reform, her uncle reestablished the Wafd Party. However, the situation rapidly deteriorated with Sadat's assassination and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. Unable to adapt to the world of contradictory morals and social inhibitions, Serageldin immigrated to the United States in 1980. There she worked as an interpreter for an international organization, a professor of French and Arabic, a freelance writer and a book columnist. "But I returned to Egypt constantly," Serageldin emphasizes, "in my mind, weaving my memories into stories I stored away in that virtual filing

cabinet all writers carry around in their heads” (“The Alternative Universe,” 8).

First published in the U.S. several months before the September 11 attacks, Serageldin’s *The Cairo House* is named after the family house that was first built as a small palace for Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany, later bought by her grandfather Serageldin Pasha, and recently declared part of Egypt’s national heritage. Although it draws heavily on her personal history, Seragseldin decided to call it a novel rather than a memoir because: “I could not have written as freely without the fig leaf of fiction; I would have felt far too inhibited by concern for family members and friends.” (“Seeing with Bifocal Vision,” 4). Moreover, narratives are always far more interesting than memoirs because as Serageldin argues, a novelist can merge more than one character into one, incorporate historical material naturally and “explore the path not taken at a crucial juncture in the story” (5). Although the novelist declares that she never intended to tell the story of the 1952 Revolution from the point of view of the class victimized by the regime, “some diehard

Nasserites, in particular, took umbrage against what they considered revisionist history” (5).

In the second part of his book, *The Philosophy of the Revolution* (1954), Nasser laments the intellectual and spiritual slumber which he largely attributes to the greedy feudalists, the landowners who for many centuries have exploited the masses, oppressed them in mind and spirit and blocked any economic, social and political reform that could make them stand on their own feet. To awaken the masses from their long slumber and bring about social justice, Nasser enacted the Agrarian Reform Bill that set a ceiling on land ownership, dispossessed the feudal aristocracy from their land-holdings and sold them out to small farmers. The Egyptian peasants were no longer viewed as servants of the big landowners but their own master. According to Margold, 175.000 feddans were confiscated from over 200 landowners and distributed on peasants who were encouraged to produce more per feddan (for example, the yield in the sugar-cane belt in Upper Egypt increased from 733 to 908 kantars per acre), which resulted in a substantial increase in their real income (p. 9-10). Education and social services were also

provided for rural communities. Brought into the countryside were schools, training centers, potable water, electricity, municipal councils, health centers and a large number of technical and professional personnel.

Yusuf El-Siba'yi's *Give My Heart Back* or *Rudda Qalbi* (1957), which was turned into an iconic film in the history of Egyptian Cinema, demonstrated that education was the only means for social ascent while depicting the class of land owners as greedy, despotic villains. The love story between the aristocratic Ingy, whose family have to give away all their possessions, and the gardener's son, who later becomes a military officer, is a manifestation of the power of education and the social changes effected by the sequestration decree. In a moving scene, the officer comes to implement a sequestration order on her family's belongings. Ingy gives him all her jewelry except one tiny chain which he gave her as a present a long time ago.

From the point of view of aristocratic landholders, however, the Agrarian Reform Bill was totally unjust because it deprived them of their rightful claims to the land of their ancestors. When she is only nine years old,

Gigi, Serageldin's representative heroine, experiences the repercussions of the Land Reform Act for her family. Shortly after Nasser's speech on July 3rd, 1961, which repeatedly referred to aristocrats as "the enemies of the people" (Serageldin, 22), Gigi is shocked to find all her uncles including the Pasha sent to an internment camp, all their servants gone, and all their possessions including her own dolls taken away. At home, she overhears her father suggesting to divorce her mother so that she can keep her property; at school, girls refuse her birthday party invitation because their parents think it is unsafe to associate with her. She feels nostalgic to "the good old days" (Serageldin, 29), in which the gates of their house remained open for strangers and guests alike. "No beggar off the streets was turned away without a meal or a handout. Anyone with the most tenuous claim, whether of kinship or former service, could be sure of a regular stipend or a place to spend the night" (Serageldin, 29). Despite their kindness towards the peasants, the latter's reaction to their plight was one of resignation and indifference. There were even some instances of violence as when they besieged Makhlouf's country house and set

fire to it before the agents arrived to carry out the sequestration decree.

However, "Nasser's sequestration decree went far beyond the confiscation of wealth or the stripping of civil liberties," Serageldin emphasizes, "It was the sharply-honed instrument of his malice: it emasculated, it isolated, it muzzled, it humiliated, it stigmatized; it forced retirement on men in their prime; it immured them in their own homes"(59). The heroine's father, for example, is not allowed to practice law, belong to a professional syndicate, or subscribe to a social club. Moreover, he cannot leave the city without clearance from the authorities. Serageldin offers the reader a heart-rending description of the physical condition of Gigi's father after years of house arrest and forced inactivity. Though still in his prime, he looks like an old man with gray hair, sallow color, stale smell and a tray full of different sorts of medication on his bedside table. "When he had his first heart attack, when the severity of his condition was confirmed," Serageldin ironically informs the reader, "he secretly welcomed the diagnosis: he finally had an occupation, a justification, a job description: invalid" (99)

Spying is another plight the aristocratic class had to bear during Nasser's rule. Serageldin puts it plainly: "It was no secret that the intelligence agent at the door took note of every visitor, that the telephone was tapped and the servants were spies. Even in the privacy of our own bedrooms, between parent and child, we still whispered" (Serageldin, 56). Fear of Nasser's eyes deprives the young heroine of sleep at night. "All children Have nightmares about a bogeyman. For Gigi," however, "the bogeyman was real; he had a name and a face. The black-browed face was inescapable on a million posters throughout the country ... The name was whispered: Nasser, El-Raiis; his thousand eyes and ears lurked behind every corner" (Serageldin, 58). This is how the aristocratic daughter views Nasser: a scary monster that has eyes everywhere.

In *The Cairo House*, there are multiple references to the reports sent to the 'Abbedin Palace about the movement of any cars belonging to the Pasha's address. One reference, however, is worth reflection. The government informant assigned to watch Gigi's aunt, Zohra, ended up driving her around. The narrator explains that Zohra had pity on "the poor *Mukhabarat* agent" who

was fasting during Ramadan and nobody thought of relieving him from duty to break his fast. She invited him for the Ramadan meal and ever since he bowed politely whenever he saw her. One day, it occurred to Zohra, who could not drive, that Omar, the government informant can drive for her and know her exact whereabouts instead of chasing after her. "The man fell in with her plan immediately and that was the beginning of a long, mutually profitable association. It was one more instance in which the Kafkaesque shadow of the police state was undermined by the irresponsible common sense of the people" Serageldin (62) comments.

Following the Suez Canal and other nationalizations, the regime found itself the owner of a major part of Egypt's economic structure. In 1962 the private sector had controlled 56% of industry, but by 1963 the percentage fell to 20%. By the end of 1963, not only did the public sector become a major influence in industry but in commerce and transportation as well. To improve the trade balance and save earnings in hard currency, Nasser had to reduce non-essential imports of foodstuffs and manufactured goods (Johnson, 7). In her novel,

Serageldin sarcastically criticizes "state-controlled production under Nasser's Socialism: one kind of car, one kind of sofa-bed, one government-controlled newspaper, El-Ahram. A monopoly on everything, even the name: every other product seemed to bear a variation of the name Nasser: Nasr cars, Nasr sofa-beds, Nasr City, Nasr Sesame halva" (214).

In the name of national unity, Nasser banned all political parties. Serageldin writes: "Party politics were banned in Egypt; there was only one party, the regime's National Socialist Party. Football mania was a substitute for party politics" (77). Nasser's habit of getting rid of all opposition is depicted by Serageldin when relating the original order to throw the Pasha into an internment camp for allegedly laughing with his friends at the Gezira club on the night Nasser gave a speech acknowledging the terrible defeat after the Six Day War. Only when brave men interceded to point out that the Pasha had never approached the Gezira Club for ten years did Nasser reduce the sentence to house arrest. Despite such unjust acts of punishment inflicted on the aristocratic class, the author asserts that they remained patriotic. The heroine's

father, for instance, feels devastated upon hearing Nasser admit in a televised speech the crushing defeat in the Six Day War although victory would have meant throwing him into an internment camp for a lifetime.

When Nasser died, "Egypt was waking as from a long spell. Yet to the man on the street Nasser had remained the charismatic demagogue. In Nasser the masses had seen their champion, their vindicator, their father. His genius had lain in finding scapegoats on whom to blame the eternal misery of his people" (Serageldin, 90). The heroine describes Om Khalil's grief over the death of Nasser whom she has always regarded as a father and wonders how she can ever harbor these feelings towards their enemy. "The political climate had changed to the better since Nasser's demise" comments Serageldin (97). "The pall of the police state had lifted. Sadat had kicked out the Soviets and welcomed in the Americans. He had promised free parties, free elections, free press. The buzzwords were 'democracy' and 'Infitah', economic open door policy" (Serageldin, 118). To restore confidence and encourage local entrepreneurs, Sadat promised to gradually lift the sequestration decrees and

compensate the families whose property was arbitrarily confiscated. This favorable political atmosphere encouraged the Pasha to establish "an opposition party to contest the upcoming elections after a quarter of a century of single party rule" (118). The party soon gained popularity and its newspaper was snatched off the stands that Sadat referred to the Pasha, representing Serageldin founder of the Wafd Opposition Party, as "a phoenix rising from the ashes" (118).

Nevertheless, the so-called democratic experiment was soon discovered to be made only for foreign media consumption. In effect, Sadat could only tolerate what he named loyal opposition. The pasha, therefore, announced the dissolution of his party, which remained secular in nature and in which top positions were held by Copts, rather than joining the ranks of Sadat's "loyal opposition". He called Sadat "bluff" for making a marriage of convenience with Muslim Brotherhood and rejected Sadat's plan to give the Japanese the right to develop the pyramid plateau describing it as a sacrilege and a scandal. In a press conference, the Pasha stresses: "the pyramids are not Disneyland... The pyramids are not Sadat's to

exploit by selling the concession to the Japanese; they are the heritage of all Egyptians, indeed of the whole world" (147). Ironically, the Pasha finds himself sharing one cell with Nasserite Heikal who has so often attacked him in the press. Serageldin comments: "In his last year of life, Sadat was a man in fear of his own shadow. The experiment in democracy was aborted. Towards the end Sadat's prisons made for strange bedfellows: the right and the left, Nasserites and Communists, Islamists and Coptic bishops, journalists and students" (167).

Sadat's Open Door Policy that aimed at reintegrating Egypt with the world's developed economies and encouraging private investments turned out to be an evil monster that made radical changes in the fabric of the Egyptian society. According to Weinbaum, the gap between the rich and the poor widened: While the lowest 20 percent of the population held 6.6 percent of national income in 1960 and had improved their share to 7.0 percent in 1965, they dropped to 5.1 percent by the late 1970s. By comparison, the income of the highest 5 percent dipped slightly to 17.4 percent from 17.5 percent

between 1960 and 1965 but increased markedly to 22 percent after several years of Sadat's policies (217).

In *The Cairo House*, Serageldin depicts overnight millionaires gliding in their Mercedes and shops full of imported goods after decades of selling only shoddy domestic products. She also describes how Gigi's father in law makes the most of Sadat's Open Door Policy importing medical equipment from Europe and hiring Egyptian technicians to install and run them in Saudi Arabia. For the common man, however, nothing changed. Bureaucracy continued to plague the life of common men. Serageldin comments on the reasons behind this bureaucracy: "The bureaucratic under-class was not paid enough to subsist, and supplemented its income with under-the-table kickbacks extorted by surliness" (119). She also refers to the new class of facilitators who "existed for the express purpose of dealing with this petty bureaucracy: running errands, greasing palms, and smoothing the way for those who kept them in their entourage" (119). She finally comments: "Between the two, government offices were a no man's land for the uninitiated or unprepared" (119) such as the heroine who

does not dare go to government offices alone to have her passport renewed. She asks her father to accompany her but she regrets having made that decision when she finds her father unable to handle the insolence of government employees.

Serageldin traces the history of the relationship between Egypt's rulers and Muslim Brotherhood. She says that King Faruk flirted with them, Nasser patented new methods of torture for them in his prisons, but Sadat encouraged them to counterbalance the diehard Nasserites. However, he forgot that the antidote could be worse than the disease. There was tension in the country similar to the one preceding the Khamaseen, the fifty-day winds. "Like the annual Khamaseen sandstorms sweeping out of the desert to reclaim the city for the sand dunes, religious fanaticism periodically launched an onslaught to reclaim the country for an atavistic Islam" (168). For example, Serageldin implies that Yussef Siba'yi was assassinated by some fanatic Islamic group because he had been under a death threat since his visit to Tel Aviv. Yet, Muslim Brotherhood's fiercest attack is the one done against Sadat himself in retaliation of his about-face to the

west, his flight to Israel and his appearance on television hand in hand with "my friend Kissinger" and "my friend Begin, "which were too radical and too abrupt for many Egyptians (150).

For more than a decade after Sadat's assassination, Muslim Brotherhood expanded their activities and intensified their violence. In *The Cairo House*, there is reference to their act of blowing up a tourist bus in front of a church in Abassia (213). There is also reference to an aborted attempt at assassinating Nobel Laureate Naguib Mahfouz because of his allegorical novel, most probably *Awlad Haretna* or "Sons of our Alley", which they interpreted as subversive of Islam or because of his support for the peace with Israel. In *The Cairo House*, fanaticism even reaches the extreme of pronouncing a law professor an apostate on account of his writings and getting the court to rule his marriage to his wife invalid. When one character argues that if there were freedom of opinion, the extremists would take advantage of it, Gigi's cousin, Tamer, replies: "Let them, as long as the moderates get into the arena as well and fight it out. The

problem is that too many people have a vested interest in the status quo, they don't want to rock the boat" (249).

Serageldin also comments on the contradictory morals of the Egyptian society. Despite the rising number of veiled Egyptian women, including Aunt Zohra who protested in her youth against the veil and Leila, the heroine's young cousin who works as a physician, belly dancing is not banned. On the contrary, Fifi Abdu is reported to having headed a delegation of belly dancers to Israel as part of the cultural exchange program that aims at normalizing relations with Israel. Moreover, while a scholar from Al-Azhar argues on Egyptian T.V. that funding the Ramadan "Table of the Compassionate" from a belly dancer's wages is unacceptable, beggars are left to roam the streets of Cairo without any governmental or societal support. Serageldin describes how the very sight of the deformed beggar makes Gigi shrink, a feeling that makes her ashamed of herself. "Some people," Gigi's cousin Tamer sarcastically comments, "would like to crack down on beggars and peddlers. They think it's bad for business when tourists are exposed to disturbing encounters like that. They should get a controlled,

packaged experience. Fly straight to Luxor and Hurghada and back out again" (255). Moreover, Serageldin tells the reader about Gigi's horror at the thought that the poor child collecting garbage at dawn might give the poisoned orange peels to the pigs she raised. However, she soon dismisses the thought and convinces herself that the gatekeeper "Ibrahim would never have put poison in the garbage cans, no matter what I told him to do" (285). Moreover, when she reads the news of the landslide that took place in that part of the Mokkatam plateau where garbage collectors live, she does not comment or show any feelings of sympathy. This indifference to the misery and suffering of the poor, Serageldin seems to imply, is typical of many Egyptians.

In abject contrast to the poverty and misery of many Egyptians stands a new class of investors and businessmen like Bassil, who benefited from Mubarak's privatization policy and the great chances of making a fortune at the stock exchange. Bragging of their huge fortune, Bassil's wife tells Gigi about their great mansion house they were building on a large estate in Mansouriya, complete with Moorish courtyard, swimming pool, tennis

courts, Japanese gardens, English rolling lawns and her own secret garden just outside the bay window of the Jacuzzi. When Gigi asks her if she was not afraid lest any of the fellahin might look in, she replies that all the staff working inside the complex are Filippino. She also tells Gigi about Bassil's plan to send their children to a boarding school in England because education in Egypt is deteriorating. Despite the great investment opportunities which gave rise in Mubarak's age to a new class of people who live on the Egyptian soil separated from the Egyptian society, Serageldin expresses her concerns about the ability of the Egyptian economy to stay strong especially after the low turnout of tourism. She quotes an economist at Dartmouth University who described experts' view of the Egyptian economy as "watching a man walk on water. You wonder how it's done and how long he can keep it up" (246).

Just like her aristocratic author whose feelings of estrangement compel her to immigrate to the U.S. in 1980, Gigi feels foreign to the Egyptian society with all its contradictions and decides to go back to the U.S. In fact, this feeling starts to materialize when she returned to The

Cairo House only to find it rented by an American company which agreed to let her stay in the two-bedroom apartment they built on top of the house for visiting executives. Gigi, or rather Serageldin, describes her feelings to the reader saying: "It feels strange to be home and yet not home, to be the guest and the landlord at the same time; to look out of the window at a familiar view and then turn back to an unfamiliar room" (193-194). Then, she feels strange when she ventures driving in Cairo streets where no one follows traffic law; where the most talented driver is the one who can miraculously avoid collisions. "This requires," Serageldin sarcastically writes, "hairline judgment, peripheral vision, nerves of steel, and a strategy of yielding with good grace when unavoidable and forging ahead with blind faith when an opening presents itself. He who hesitates is lost. Cairo traffic is a microcosm of Egyptian society. Rules are only observed when they are enforced with the active presence of the authorities" (198). Gigi, or rather Serageldin, explains to the reader why she decided to leave for the U.S. Addressing the reader, she says: "I longed for a world in which you did not constantly lose the battle against dust

and bakshish; for release from the pressures of traffic and people; for freedom from watchful eyes, for anonymity, an uncomplicated existence" (280).

Rather than remaining silent forever, Serageldin decides to speak up for the aristocratic class that has been marginalized throughout the history of modern Egypt, even if she were to use a foreign language to express their plights and feelings of estrangement with the Egyptian society. Commenting on the choice of the English language as a medium, Serageldin says in an interview that she grew up trilingual and lived in England and the United States since the age of twenty; therefore, English is her dominant language of written expression. "But," she adds, "the choice is significant in positioning me on this side rather than the other of the cultural divide between the old country and the new, and in defining my 'ideal reader'. Language is also an entire codification of culture and, for me, I admit that Arabic carries certain cultural inhibitions" ("Seeing with Bifocal Vision" 6). The fact that the novel was first published in the U.S. in 2000 is also significant because if it were published in Egypt earlier, it would have been censored or rather confiscated

like all the possessions of the aristocracy. Last but not least, being a "hyphenated" writer, Serageldin could bring a unique perspective to literature: that of the insider/outsider; "the ability to see with bifocal vision, to be at home in more than one culture while continuing to observe them all with an outsider's fresh eye" (6).

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