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WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE ARAB SPRING: ALBERT COSSERY'S PHILOSOPHY OF REVOLUTION IN *THE JOKERS*

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ABSTRACT*: This paper investigates Cossery's philosophy of revolution in his novel* La Violence et la Dérision *(1964), translated into English as* The Jokers *in 2010. I examine Cossery's philosophy in the light of Michel Foucault's concept of power and his views on revolutions in general and the Iranian 1979 Revolution against the Pahlavi regime in particular. I argue that Foucault's analysis of the revolutionary situation in Iran still applies to the revolution that took place in Egypt on January 25, 2011. This argument extends to Cossery's novel*. The Jokers *represents a revolution that is similarly "out of history" with a similar hope for success. While the January revolution is located at the extremely serious and reverent, the revolution in Cossery's novel wallows in ridicule and irreverence. Due to the opposite directions taken by the serious revolution in reality and the ridiculous one in the novel (the former soaring up to heaven, the latter falling down to earth), both of them are, in Foucauldian terms, located out of history, challenging the dominant power structures. Cossery manages to bring a group of Diogenean characters to the frontlines of an extraordinary revolution. These characters usually play secondary roles in works of art about resistance and revolution. In this novel, they are the leaders, the planning and the executive body of Cossery's philosophy. In the end, the Diogeneans succeed, but their ultimate success still depends on the abandonment of traditional ways of revolution, because governments are used to these ways, and those in power know how to turn them to their advantage.*

KEYWORDS*:* revolution, foucault, diogenean, dominant, violence, indifference.

INTRODUCTION

It is commonly held now among Egyptians that the January Revolution (2011) failed because the only thing it achieved was the overthrow of Mubarak, while the state apparatus has remained intact. In the heat of the revolution, the fortnight preceding Mubarak's resignation, the demonstrators had their focus on the person of the president. Slogans and banners were all about one person versus a revolting people: The chanting "He goes, we stay" dominated the revolutionary scene. It took a while until people started to find out that this was not enough, and that Mubarak's whole political system had to be overthrown. This realization has been accompanied by political disenchantment and apathy, and the question

why the revolution failed to bring about the desired change has occupied the minds of disillusioned citizens. Here comes the value of the writings of the Egyptian Francophone novelist Albert Cossery (1913- 2008). For the failure of the revolution was anticipated in the novels Cossery had written in the mid-20th century.

The present study focuses on Cossery's philosophy of revolution in his novel *La Violence et la Dérision* (1964). The novel has been translated into English as *The Jokers* by Anna Moschovakis with an introduction by James Buchan in 2010. I examine Cossery's philosophy in the light of Michel Foucault's concept of power and his views on revolutions in general and the Iranian Revolution against the Pahlavi regime in particular. I argue that Foucault's analysis of the revolutionary situation in Iran in 1979 still applies to that of Egypt in 2011. In Foucauldian terms, both revolutions do not "belong to history," and thus, according to Foucault, they could have succeeded. Each one of them was motivated by eschatological aspirations and ended up with an Islamic government in power. A revolution like these two could succeed only if there were really a society that could live out of history in the age of globalization. Is it possible that one can live up to his metaphysical beliefs, voluntarily rejoicing the loss of any worldly gain for the sake of heavenly promises? The Islamist Salafi rhetoric that gained a lot of momentum and enthusiastic power after the Egyptian revolution suggests there were ample potentials for a positive answer to this question. This argument extends to Cossery's novel as he represents a revolution that is similarly "out of history" with a similar hope for success. While the January revolution is located at the extremely serious and reverent, the revolution in *The Jokers* wallows in ridicule and irreverence. Due to the opposite directions taken by the serious revolution in reality and the ridiculous one in the novel (the former soaring up to heaven, the latter falling down to earth), both of them are, in Foucauldian terms, located out of history, challenging the dominant power structures.

DISCUSSION

A glimpse at Cossery's life reveals his resentment of the dominant social and political powers.

Cossery was born in Cairo to parents of Syrian origin. He lived in Egypt during his childhood and early youth. He received his education in French schools in Cairo, which gave him the opportunity to read French classical literature at early age, and then was influenced by Modernism. He became a member in Arte de Liberte, a Surrealist art group that was active in Egypt in the 1930s. In 1940, he moved to Paris and lived in Montmartre until the end of the war. He moved to Saint-Germain, and lived alone in a Hotel room all the rest of his life. There in Paris he was acquainted with many great French writers like Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. Cossery was not a prolific writer. All throughout his long career he wrote only eight novels and a number of short stories. He wrote them all in French, and most of them have been translated into Arabic and English. It should be noted, however, that though living in France most of his life and writing in French, Cossery refused to have a French nationality. He identified himself as Egyptian, writing about Egypt

from a universal perspective. “I am not French. I am a French speaking writer” he says. (cite)

For an Arab, or an African, to write in French, the colonizer’s language, is a subject of criticism from a postcolonial point of view. In his *Decolonizing the Mind* postcolonial writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o criticizes Chinua Achebe’s writing in English. Achebe explains his choice of English: "I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings." (cite)

Like Achebe’s altered English, Cossery’s French has been adapted to Egyptian surroundings, and was not the only Arab Francophone writer to do so. It seems that staying with one's original identity was characteristic of Arab Francophone writers in general. In his book *Al-adab Al-araby al-maktoob Bel-lugha Alfransiya* (Arab Literature Written in French), Mahmoud Qassim maintains that literature written in French by originally Arab writers and published by French publishers, has never been French literature. "(A different) language has never created a different national identity for a writer who was born Arab, but due to the conditions of his upbringing and education, French became his first writing language without subverting his Arab identity." (Qassim 7, my translation) Likewise, despite his universal appeal, Cossery belongs to Arabic, particularly Egyptian literature. The settings, characters, and themes of his novels and short stories relate to Egypt and reflect on his experience during the period he lived there.

Cossery’s philosophy of revolution as illustrated in most of his works reflects not only his disillusionment with the Egyptian Revolution in July, 1952, but also an anticipation of the January Revolution (2011). In his study of Albert Cossery's work, " Albert Cossery’s Revolutionary Poetics of a Poetics of Revolution," Bassem Shahin classifies Cossery's revolutionary characters into three categories:

> Cossery’s starting point is with the traditionalist revolutionary, always a local and often miserable character .By traditionalist, Cossery is referring to a pre-industrial society where the classical revolutionary believes that the siege of power is located in the person of the tyrant-ruler. Sovereignty is examined from its antithetical position: for every tyrant, another tyrant looms dressed in revolutionary clothes. Cossery simultaneously examines another category—that of the radical urban revolutionary, also a local character but imbued with European ideals… . Alongside these two revolutionary types, Cossery will introduce a third and final category, that of the radical non-militant revolutionary who believes that power is not located in a place but is instituted through imposed relationships (financial, social, political, among others), in what Cosserian narrators call “the universal imposture” (Shahin 8)

From the three categories explained in the above quoted analysis,"the pre-industrial traditionalist," "the radical post-industrial," and "the radical non-militant," it seems that the

third category is Cossery's choice. Cossery's revolutionary characters in all his novels are radical non-militants. The January revolution that took place half a century after Cossery's speculations, however, belonged to either the first or the second, and that might explain its failure. Sam Sacks argues that

> Cossery left no room for political hope, roundly deriding the struggles of reformers and rebels alike. "I'm suspicious of most revolutionaries," says the pickpocket Ossama. "They always end up as tame politicians defending the same society they vilified in the past." Given recent events in Tahrir Square, it's not clear yet whether the worldly cynicism of Albert Cossery was behind the times or far ahead of them. (Sam Sacks,Tales of Jaunty Anarchy on the Nile)

Both the pre-industrial traditionalist and the post-industrial revolutionaries would not consider cynicism, apathy, and self-centeredness as legible instruments for resistance. On the contrary, these are generally considered passive attitudes, an anathema to serious enthusiasts. Works of literature that deal with themes of revolution include characters who are apathetic and disillusioned with the possibility of change from the beginning. But these are usually a hindrance to revolutionary aspirations. Harry Kahn in Arnold Wesker's play *Chicken Soup with Barley* and Benjamin in George Orwell's novel *Animal Farm* are disillusioned and apathetic from the beginning, not because they have experienced a failed revolution of any of the first two of Cossery's categories, but because they are silent revolutionaries, which fits into Cossery's third category. These characters do not make principal roles; protagonists are usually the unfazed enthusiast like Sarah Kahn in *Chicken Soup with Barley*, or the enthusiast turning apathetic as her son Ronnie. Therefore, it is to Cossery's credit that he gives apathetic characters the leading roles. Henry Miller praises Cossery for giving voice to voiceless people, the socio-politically marginalized. (cite) But representing them in his novels, Cossery goes beyond that as he finds out in their non-violence and derisive irony the most effective revolution against dominant power structures that post-revolution theorists have illustrated as impossible to break, or revolt against.

Capitalism has managed to incorporate subtle ways to encounter revolutions against capitalist order, and occupied the places where the failure of these revolutions would be inevitable. Thus, more to his credit, Cossery anticipated Michel Foucault. According to Foucault, power in society is so pervasive that it penetrates "the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives." (citation) Therefore, "one is never 'outside' power that there are no 'margins' for those who break with the system to gambol in." (citation) Ironically Cossery allows his characters to gambol, but not in a margin of power –for this margin, as Foucault contends, is unavailable– but in the margin of life, a powerless position from which the only effective revolutionary weapon left to them is irony.

Judging the Egyptian January revolution, Bassem Shahin argues that it "is structurally bound to confirm, not challenge, the existing power structure because, as Foucault says in "Useless to Revolt," "the age of 'revolution' [. . .] constituted a gigantic effort to domesticate revolts within a rational and controllable history."(cite) However,the title of

Foucault's article (Useless to Revolt?) as quoted by Shahin is misleading because Shahin does not show that it is a question, as if Foucault were stating that revolts are useless, not questioning their uselessness. At the beginning of this article Foucault maintains, "Revolts belong to history. But, in a certain way, they escape from it." (cite) This suggests that his answer to the titular question is a "yes but" sort of answer, not just "yes" as Shahin contends. Shahin ignores the context in which Foucault was writing this article, i.e. the Iranian Islamic revolution (1979). Foucault believes modern revolts fail simply because they "belong to history" and are bound to the power structure in the modern age. So the Iranian revolution could be successful because it was "out of history." Because it was not bound to the logic of our age due to the fact that it was colored by Islamic "eschatology," the Iranian revolution, according to Foucault, belongs to another age, an age equivalent to Europe's 15th rather than 20th century:

> I believe that there was indeed in this movement— a movement that was quite broadly popular, millions and millions of people accepting to go up against an army and a police force that were obviously all powerful—it seemed to me that there was something there that owed its force to… what you could call a… a will at once both political and religious, a bit like what occurred in Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries when the Anabaptists both revolted against the political power they were facing and drew the force and the vocabulary of their revolts from a religious belief, a profound and sincere religious aspiration. There you go, that's what I was trying to say. (Foucault 326)

The will of the Iranian people that fueled their revolution is described by Foucault as both religious and political. This is a sort of "political spirituality," where religion plays the main role in motivating the people to take political action. Reviewing Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi's *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution after the Enlightenment*, James Barry relates the author's argument that

> professional and self-appointed analysts have consistently failed to understand the nature of revolutions as they unfold mainly because these experts are too reliant on pre-existing narratives; by labeling the Arab spring as 'spring', for example, they 'subjected the uprisings to historical inevitabilities'… For this reason, Foucault's writings on Iran offer a useful alternative in understanding revolutions, because the French sojourner was consciously opposed to teleology and able to describe the revolution through an original framework. James Barry (2018) Political spirituality: an interpretation of Foucault and the Iranian Revolution, Postcolonial Studies, DOI: 10.1080/13688790.2018.1472522

Here the connection between the Iranian revolution and the Arab spring is made clear as both do not yield to teleology as a predominantly Western philosophy. Foucault's understanding of the political and the epistemological workings of power in the enlightenment society on the one hand, and the nature of revolutions in the middle east on the other, enables him to see the role of religion in fueling the Iranian revolution in a way

that is clearly independent from prevalent currents of Western thought. Here is how Foucault describes the Iranian revolutionaries:

> […] for anyone who tried to understand what was going on in the heads of these men and women when they were risking their lives, one thing was striking. They inscribed their humiliations, their hatred for the regime, and their resolve to overthrow it at the bounds of heaven and earth, in an envisioned history that was religious just as much as it was political. They confronted the Pahlavis, in a contest where everyone's life was on the line, but where it was also a question of millennial sacrifices and promises. (Foucault, Useless to Revolt?)

Foucault's description of the Iranian Revolution in 1979, I argue, still applies to the Egyptian revolution in 2011. Both revolutions were motivated by eschatological aspirations and ended up with an Islamic government in power. A revolution like this could succeed only if there were really a society that could live out of history in the age of globalization. Is it possible that one can live up to his metaphysical beliefs, voluntarily rejoicing the loss of any worldly gain for the sake of heavenly promises? The Islamist Salafi rhetoric that gained a lot of momentum and enthusiastic power after the revolution suggests there were ample potentials for a positive answer to this question. When there were shortages in gas and electricity in 2012, the year the Muslim Brotherhood was in power, a religious scholar projected that living in the dark should not affect the Egyptian people because it reminds us of the darkness of graves, and thus urges us to do good so that we might get light hereafter. This is a revolution out of history because a significant portion of its representatives are living, or aspiring to live, in a world different than the one that is bound to history; and its success depends on how many people believe in the Islamist rhetoric and are ready to live according to such "millennial sacrifices and promises."

As religion in the Iranian revolution and the Arab Spring is politically employed, bringing revolution out of history, Cossery, uses apathy as a political tool in *The Jokers*. The connection between the January Revolution and Albert Cossery has been shown, as Alyson Waters observes, in the increasing interest in his writings after the Arab Spring. (cite). Cossery, "a self-proclaimed atheist and anarchist," does not consider religious eschatology as a revolutionary pass, but adopts another kind of revolution that is similarly out of history. James Gifford maintains that *The Jokers* is an example of Cossery's "politics of the unpolitical (Gifford 1067). Gifford's paradox suggests that apathy could be a strong political position. Explaining this political position David Ulin says, "For Cossery, the most profound act of rebellion is choosing not to participate." From the beginning of the novel, Heykal, the leader of what we may call a revolution of apathy in the novel, announces the principles of the revolution: "Number one is that the world we live in is governed by the most revolting bunch of crooks ever to defile the soil of this planet ... Number two is that you must never take them seriously, which is exactly what they want." This is the revolutionary manifesto which is adopted by Heykal's friends, Karim, Omar, and Urfy. James Buchan relates Cossery's jokers to Diogenes: "such subversive indifference makes Cossery's characters disciples of Diogenes of Sinope, the ancient founder of Cynicism.

Diogenes, known for sleeping in a tub in the porticoes of temples, eating with dogs and defecating in public, was a sardonic reminder of how thin the veneer of Athenian civilization could be." (Sacks, but need to see Buchan)

Diogenes is associated with indifference, but he is also a symbol of defiance and rebellion. In his poem "The Indifferent One" Mahmoud Darwish, a well-known Palestinian poet, draws a dialogue between the speaker in the poem and an indifferent person:

I said to him once angrily: 'How will you live tomorrow?'
He said: 'Tomorrow does not concern me; it's an idea
that doesn't seduce me. I am what I am: nothing
will change me, just as I will change
nothing, so don't keep the sun off me!'
I said to him: 'I am not Alexander the Great
and I am not Diogenes'
And he said: 'But indifference is a philosophy
It's one aspect of hope.' (Darwish, translated by Cobham)

It must be noted here that there is a big mistake in Catherine Cobham's translation of Darwish's poem, particularly in the line "I am not Diogenes." The mistake comes from the translator's misunderstanding of a sort of Arabic diacritics called (*tashkil*). Here is the original Arabic of the last four lines:

فقلت له : لستُ اسكندر المتعالي
ولستَ ديوجين
فقال : ولكن في اللامبالاة فلسفة،
إنها صفة من صفات الأمل!

It is clear that *I* in "I am not Diogenes" must be *you* instead. While the word لستُ *lastu* means "I am not," the other word لستَ *lasta* means "you are not." Thus, considering the difference in *tashkil*, "I am not Diogenes" must be "you are not Diogenes."

Diogenes in Darwish's poem is not merely a joker. He is a revolutionary philosopher adopting Cossery's philosophy of revolution. The indifferent one, a Diogenes-like character, says, "Tomorrow does not concern me; it's an idea/ that doesn't seduce me. I am what I am: nothing/ will change me, just as I will change/ nothing, so don't keep the sun off me!" He does not care for tomorrow, and his carelessness has made him immune to the seduction of traditional revolutionary dreams of a rosy future. Disillusionment and apathy lead him to hope for nothing but what nature has generously provided all creatures, the sun with all its connotations. Thus at the hands of Diogenean characters, like that in Darwish's poem and those in Cossery's novel, indifference becomes "a philosophy… an aspect of hope."

In Buchan's analysis of the characters in *The Jokers* he does not apply the term "joker" only to the Digenenean revolutionaries, Heykal, Karim, Omar, and Urfy. For him, the

jokers include the government and the serious revolutionaries (like Taher, whose traditional revolutionary action eventually spoils the work of the Diogeneans). But Buchan maintains, "Karim, Omar, Heykal, Urfy, and their friends are free spirits who see the other jokers for the jokers they are and have cooked up a sophisticated and, most important, foolproof plan to enliven public life with a dash of subversive humor." (cite) The Diogenean plan succeeds and could ultimately destroy the government unless Taher assassinates the governor and thus provides the power apparatus and the mainstream media a golden opportunity to recreate a positive picture of the governor in the minds of the public. Now the ridiculous dictator has become a martyr. By killing the governor, Taher has given a life kiss to his system of power that was collapsing at the hands of the Diogenean jokers. In other words, the violent Taher disappoints the Diogenean jokers and spoils their plan by assassinating the governor and making him martyr in the eyes of the people. "Of course he had no idea that the governor had already been defeated, that he was about to kill a man who was, for all intents and purposes, dead." Karim says to him, "The governor is out. He'll be gone in a matter of hours; the prime minister has demanded his resignation. Soon he'll be nothing but a memory. I have this from a reliable source." Taher does not listen to Karim. He blames Karim and the other Diogeneans for turning a serious revolution against the government into a joke. Taher's violence, however, is not presented in the novel as a caricature of an Islamist suicide bomber, or merely a zealous ideologue. There is an ample psychological probe into his motives, which makes him far from a stereotypical character. Here is how he is delineated by the omniscient narrator:

> His (Taher's) taste for mystery and the insufferable obsession that led him to think of himself as entirely alone in the fight against injustice and oppression. Not ambition but something worse drove him, a sense that the sufferings of humanity were all his own. He planned to commit an act of unprecedented violence that would send him straight to the gallows, and he was marching toward it like a blind man toward an abyss — as if he'd been marked from birth for this and had no choice but to see it through.

Unlike the indifferent one in Darwish's poem, who does not care for tomorrow and does not lay much hope on change, Taher is paranoidly burdened with the smell of corruption, a Hamlet-like character, who thinks he had to set right a world that is "out of joint." Thus Taher represents all that the Diogeneans abandoned. In sharp contrast to Taher, they adopted a non-violent strategy led by Heykal. Instead of violence, they use irony as a revolutionary weapon. They join the camp of hypocrites, apparently to praise the governor, but actually to bring him down by a campaign of exaggerated flattery.

> Has anyone ever known revolutionaries to attack a government with praise? Another thing: the governor himself will assume it's the work of some well-meaning supporters. He'll be flattered – that's for sure. He's too stupid to get right away. But even if he did understand, it would be hard for him to take action against us. We'll go on soft-soaping him indefinitely – and what's the risk? They won't charge us with praising the governor too much…

For their plan to be successful, they depend on the government's familiarity with one sort of rebellion that they usually manage to control. The kinds of action which they take are never thought of by the police as rebellious. For example, at the beginning of the novel Karim makes a mannequin that looks like a beggar and puts it in the street. Then a police officer who worked on the government campaign against beggars kicks and beats it, thinking that it is a beggar. When people see the stupidity of the police officer while he handles the mannequin they would make fun of him, and the omniscient narrator expects the incident to reach the governor.

> The governor himself would hear about this farcical attack on his orders. His thick skull would shatter to pieces—he'd never expect them to come after him in such an unusual fashion. Up to now, he'd been happy to arrest the odd number of the underground revolutionary party, an easy target over the years for whatever governor happened to be in power. Having thus made a show of strength, and having resolved, in the manner of his glorious predecessors, the problem of opposition in the laboring classes, the governor believed his interests to be safe from any damaging propaganda. He was familiar with only one kind of subversive spirit: those scattered individuals who, intransigent in their hatred, sought glory through action and were willing to lay down their lives for the sake of the right and the good. Men who took themselves seriously, in other words, like him (The Jokers, 12).

The narrator concludes that the governor could not have "suspected that the city was also home to a new, budding breed of revolutionary, scathing and funny, for whom he and his kind all over the world were nothing but puppets pulled by strings, their words and gestures nothing but the grotesque convulsions of a buffoon." (12) The universality of this statement brings us back to Foucault and his ideas about the workings of power in the modern age, particularly his assertion that "one is never 'outside' power that there are no 'margins' for those who break with the system to gambol in." With mockery, ridicule, and the paradox of a revolutionary indifference, Cossery creates a new margin for his Diogenean characters to revolt, and a hope for the powerless and the voiceless to speak truth to power.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, Albert Cossery's *The Jokers* represents a philosophy of revolution that is based on indifference. It is not a passive sort of indifference. It is tinged with hope. For as the indifferent one in Mahmoud Darwish's poem puts it, "… indifference is a philosophy. It's one aspect of hope." Cossery manages to bring a group of Diogenean characters to the frontlines of an extraordinary revolution. These characters usually play secondary roles in works of art about resistance and revolution. In this novel, they are the leaders, the planning and the executive body of Cossery's philosophy. The link between this philosophy and the so-called the Arab Spring is represented in Cossery's speculation that traditional revolutions are prone to failure, which goes with Michel Foucault's philosophy of power. That is, revolutions cannot succeed unless they are "out of history." Accordingly, Cossery provides in his novel an alternative strategy that promotes irony, ridicule, and what Sam

Sacks calls "jaunty anarchy." In the end, the Diogeneans succeed, but their ultimate success still depends on the abandonment of traditional ways of revolution, because governments are used to these ways, and those in power know how to turn them to their advantage. The Diogenean tactics have dragged the governor into an inevitable downfall, but his assassination at the hands of Taher, a traditional revolutionary, makes him a martyr and thus spoils the efforts of Heykal, Karim, Omar, and Urfy, the representatives of Cossery's philosophy. The traditional revolution in the Arab Spring has failed as well. The failure in both cases is inevitable because traditional revolutionaries are part of the regime; they not only help it survive, but also provide it with its raison d'être. As these revolutions may resort to violence, governments find justification to use violence as a legitimized tool of curbing what they might call "anarchy." Therefore, Cossery provides his characters with nonviolent tools, enabling them to resist the tyranny of their rulers and at the same time avoid the mistakes of traditional revolutions.

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