

Stronger Than Time: A Critique of Yusuf al-Siba'i's Story

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They all revolve around the building of the dam at Aswan, and the source of that, of course, is Mr. Yusuf al-Siba'i's keenness — as I mentioned not long ago — to record the great contemporary events that he witnesses; just as he recorded the Revolution and its events, and just as he recorded the story of the nationalization of the Canal and the troubles it stirred up, and just as he recorded the union between Egypt and Syria and recorded Syria's secession from Egypt, so too does he record, in this dramatic story, the building of the dam, and all the wonder and admiration it stirs in people's hearts, however they may differ.

I shall not attempt to summarize this story as it ought properly to be summarized, for we have no need of that; for people's opinion of it — Egyptians and foreigners alike — is known and needs no further detail; rather, I shall content myself with the framework the author has devised, so as to add something new to what is already known about the dam, something that only a writer of exceptional imagination could devise; for just as it is customary in the long novel that is told for its fabric to carry something of love within it, so too in the dramatic story some measure of love is indispensable, to stir the readers' longing as they read, and the spectators' as they watch the performance.

And the love our author has devised in this dramatic story is truly strange; for it bursts forth suddenly between two people who could only ever meet in imagination — one a contemporary Egyptian engineer working on the building of the dam, and the other likewise an Egyptian girl, save that she lived thousands of years ago: Mirit, daughter of one of the Pharaohs who ruled Egypt in one of the most ancient ages of ancient Egyptian history.

As for how these two persons met, that is the wonder of all wonders; for this engineer, whose name is Omar, was in a car with a colleague helping him, and their car suddenly stopped because it needed some water, and the driver was reluctant to take the water from the river, fearing his foot might slip and the water swallow him up; but he saw before him a temple, and it occurred to him that he might find in this temple what he needed of water, for he was accustomed to mosques,

which never lack an ablution fountain, and although the engineer pointed out to him that this was a temple and not a mosque, he was resolved to seek water in it, and he went with his vessel to the temple; and before long he was calling Omar and his colleague Mustafa to the temple, insisting urgently on his call, for he had seen in it a marvel, and the two engineers went to the temple and saw in it a marvel indeed — they saw in it a beautiful girl, wondrously lovely, who was Mirit, daughter of Pharaoh.

It did not occur to either of them that they were seeing a silent phantom among phantoms, for this girl spoke to them, asking about them and about their work, and no sooner did Omar see this girl than her love struck his heart like a thunderbolt; and conversation passed between them, and she learned something of their work on the dam, and it occurred to her that they were the vanguard of an army come to invade her homeland, for certain soothsayers had prophesied to her father that an army would come from the north to invade this land, and she was on the verge of calling the guards to seize these two engineers, but Omar had captivated her just as she had captivated him, so she gave warning but did not dare to carry out what she warned of.

Instead, she went on talking with these two engineers, and her brother came hurrying her along, and she told him that she would return to him in a little while, and she did return to him after a little while, as she had promised him; but she had also promised Omar that she would come back to him, to find out the truth of their affair.

And she did come back to him, as she had promised him, and before long the love between them took hold of them both and claimed them entirely, so that each confided to the other what filled his heart and mind of love; but an obstacle stood between the girl and her yielding to this love, for this was Omar's sister, who worked in broadcasting and had arrived with her recording equipment; and no sooner did Mirit learn who she was than despair rose up within her, for she had become certain that Omar was married to his sister, but Omar informed her that marriage between brother and sister was forbidden, so she could scarcely believe it, since she herself was betrothed to her own brother; but she was soon reassured, remembering that she was no longer in the age of the Pharaohs, but in another age, utterly remote from the age of the Pharaohs.

She does not understand, just as we ourselves do not understand, how she came to reach this age, remote as it is from her own; but the one

thing beyond doubt is that love had taken hold of her just as it had taken hold of her companion, so the two resolved to be joined in marriage, and she invited her companion and his colleague to go with her to where the marriage would take place.

And just as we did not understand how this girl leapt from her ancient age into our modern age, so too we do not understand how the two engineers leapt from their modern age into the age of the ancient Egyptians! For they come before Pharaoh, around whom are his wife, his son, his vizier, the commander of his army, and many guards, and not far from him the equipment for the wedding celebration has been prepared, for the banquet tables have been laid, and the dancing-girls stand awaiting the order to dance; and Mirit has managed to convince her father and mother and those around them that it is entirely in her interest to marry her companion, after having broken off her betrothal to her brother. And the marriage between the two lovers takes place; but Omar speaks to his colleague Mustafa of what will become of them, drowned, once the dam is completed, and his colleague argues with him somewhat over this, and the girl's brother overhears this conversation, as do some of those present with him, and so the girl's brother orders the two engineers and their driver to be seized and placed in prison until their trial is complete.

And they are placed in prison, and are now in one of its cells, and the story must needs have something to make one laugh, and this thing is the driver Subhi, who has fallen for the girl's maidservant, whose name is Sekhmet, and whom Subhi calls: "Sakham al-Birak," or "the soot of the ponds."

And I forgot to point out that these three Egyptians, before they entered before Pharaoh, had given themselves the names of the ancient Egyptians, and had assumed for themselves positions of consequence in the North. So Omar is the Prince of the North, named Mehib, and his assistant Mustafa is the commander of the army, named Osiro, and the driver is the high priest, named Semenkare; and they are now in prison, but the high priest feels a sharp need to smoke, and he presses the prison guard to give him a cigarette, and the guard understands nothing, and the priest's insistence only grows, just as it grows harder for the guard to understand what he wants.

Meanwhile Mirit comes and tells them in secret that everything has been prepared for their escape from prison, and it is only moments before

it appears that they can escape through the window of their cell, which has been made ready for that purpose, and the two lovers despair of ever meeting again.

And when the sixth act of this story comes, Omar and his colleague have returned to their work, but Omar lives in continual bewilderment, for he has left his heart with his beloved, and he has no way to forget or find consolation, and his colleagues have noticed this bewildered life his companion is living.

And the story must needs come to an end, and its ending must be entirely satisfying to its readers and to its spectators in the theater, if it is performed, and in the cinema, if it is shown to the public, as I expect it will be tomorrow or the day after.

And since he cannot find consolation or forgetfulness, he has no choice but to go from time to time to the temple, in hope of seeing his beloved; and if that is not granted him, then he must pause, briefly or at length, at "the house of the loved ones," as the ancient poets used to say, and our ancient poet spoke truly when he said to his two companions:

*Stop with me a while at Mayy's, you two, before parting
casts us away, or before a separation removes her from me;
for if nothing remains but the memory of one brief hour,
even that little is of benefit to me.*

And one day Omar returns to the temple and sees a beautiful girl, wondrously lovely, who comes close to resembling his beloved, so that he does not doubt that she is her; and he approaches her and learns that her name is Mariam, and that she is an Egyptian girl who graduated from the Department of Antiquities in the Faculty of Arts, and he has no doubt that he has found his beloved, for the two names resemble one another, and the two forms resemble one another entirely; so he clings to her and does not wish to part from her. And he keeps at her until she comes out with him, but no sooner have they gone out than the temple guard cries out, calling urgently for the police; and when asked what is wrong, he reports that a mummy has been stolen from its sarcophagus, and Mariam tries to go back to see what has happened, but Omar will not let her go after what she wants, for he has won her back after despairing of her; but the driver Subhi says to the guard: "You are always a hapless guard, from whom the living and the dead alike escape."

And I think the reader has no need for me to detail for him the wit and charm in this story; this brief summary, in the utmost conciseness, spares the need for any further detail.