



THE CAIRO REVIEW INTERVIEW

PLIGHT OF AN ARAB INTELLECTUAL

Egyptian novelist Sonallah Ibrahim reflects on authoritarian rulers, religious extremists, imprisoned writers, and his refusal to abandon hope for the Arab World

The twelve novels of **Sonallah Ibrahim** span the reigns of Gamal Abdel Nasser, Anwar Sadat, and Hosni Mubarak. His works have explored how ordinary people are affected by the vicissitudes of Egypt's politics, from the waning days of the Egyptian monarchy (captured in *Stealth*, published in 2007) to the Islamicization of culture (*Zaat*, published in 1992). His prison diaries, written on cigarette paper and smuggled past guards, laid the foundation of his 1966 debut, *That Smell*, whose coarse minimalism upended the conventions of the Arabic novel.

Ibrahim, 79, is a lifelong agitator, “a symbol of the independent intellectual,” as *Al-Masry Al-Youm* put it. In Nasser's time Ibrahim was imprisoned for Communist Party affiliation while working as a journalist. In 2003, he took to the lectern of the Cairo Opera House to refuse the Arab Novel Award, a literary prize given by the state, objecting to the Mubarak regime's corruption. He joined the protests that overthrew Mubarak in 2011, but later criticized them as lacking a viable political agenda. To the surprise of many (and dismay of some of his admirers), Ibrahim initially supported the military's ouster of democratically elected President Mohammed Morsi amid popular protests in 2013. *Cairo Review* Contributing Editor **Jonathan Guyer** interviewed Ibrahim at his apartment in Cairo's Heliopolis district on March 27, 2017.

JONATHAN GUYER: *Why do you write novels?*

SONALLAH IBRAHIM: When I was a teenager I would buy every newspaper available. If I didn't have money, I would agree with the seller that I would read it and bring it back for half price. Really my passion was the press. All my attempts to join a newspaper or magazine failed. Right after coming out of prison I went to *Rose El-Youssef*, and they said no. I went to other papers. Someone I knew was in charge of *Al-Gomhouriya*, a daily paper. I started doing stories and submitting them. I did an interview with the Soviet poet [Yevgeny] Yevtushenko, who had come on a visit. I noticed that he was wearing a watch in the shape of a triangle,

◀ **Sonallah Ibrahim,**
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and I wrote that in the interview. The man at the paper said to me, “Really, what kind of watch? Are you making it up?” At that time, when I had started writing *That Smell*, I started to feel that that form of expression was more comfortable for me, completely free, that I could say or do anything.

JONATHAN GUYER: *What’s your opinion about the Arab media today?*

SONALLAH IBRAHIM: It is in a very bad situation. First there is no independent journalism at all—either everything is under the control of the state or they take money from other countries. In Lebanon for example, every Arab state, and Western state—the Americans have a paper, the English have a paper, Saudi Arabia, and so on. It is the same in Egypt in another form, meaning there are the three papers or the magazines that the state publishes, and there are other papers, called independent, but they are nothing like independent. They are owned by major capitalists, and for them, they’re not journalists or interested in journalism. It’s side work, or side activity, to help the main activity of theirs, which is imports or business or whatever. Also, the government, by means of the intelligence services, interferes with newspapers. They make phone calls and say, “Don’t talk about that subject, or else.”

JONATHAN GUYER: *What happened to Marxism in Egypt?*

SONALLAH IBRAHIM: That’s a very big subject. But we can say that, first, there was a struggle, a power struggle, with Gamal Abdel Nasser. Gamal Abdel Nasser was victorious in that power struggle. The Communists just thought about getting rid of the English. Well, Nasser got rid of them and then immediately started with industrialization, factories, nationalization of big companies, and started on a path, that might have been wrong or right, that’s not my point. It was a practical effort. He had an apparatus to implement things. He pulled the carpet out from under the feet of the Communists. But the general ideas of the Communists are still around today, even if there isn’t strong organized action. But the same ideas of social justice, freedom, equality, ideas on health-care, things that most people agree with, even the liberals. You know that the ancient Egyptians were the first to go on strike. “Give us our beer!” The builders of the pyramids every day received sun-baked bread, onions, and a glass of beer. A divine right!

JONATHAN GUYER: *In the novel Zaat, for the first time your protagonist is a woman.*

SONALLAH IBRAHIM: Because when I thought about writing that book, I was feeling angry because of the people’s position toward the regime, keeping quiet, accepting, being patient, in need, under oppression. In what I had been writing before then, one, two, three, four novels, the main character was a man. So I felt that the political situation in the country required a woman. Yes, political solutions required a

woman, and my writing required the presence of a woman. I had the idea of a woman. When I was in the Communist Party there were girls, comrades, with me. I was in a cell where the senior figure was a woman. Something great. The woman I wanted as the main character was Zaat, Princess Zaat Al-Himma. There is a myth about an Arab princess who led the armies against foreign enemies. But after a while Zaat became a very simple woman, like the woman who lives in the apartment next door, like my sister, like the majority of women. The woman who has inner power to sustain the family, to care for the husband and children and school and kitchen and everything, see. But still she is not sharing the common public interest. She does not have a role in politics, in taking decisions. Sure, she's the main power in this house, but she has no force or power in the decisions taken, the main decisions taken.

JONATHAN GUYER: *In your novel Stealth, there's a story about the Jewish school.*

SONALLAH IBRAHIM: Yes, my house was opposite the Israelite School. That's what was written: the Israelite School. There are Muslims and Christians, and there were Jews. It's amazing, but the Jews were completely integral to daily life. There were people who you knew, and you only found out they were Jewish much later.

JONATHAN GUYER: *Things started changing with the Israeli attack in 1956, or with the founding of Israel in 1948, or even before then?*

SONALLAH IBRAHIM: No, from 1948. Problems began because of the reaction to what was happening in Palestine. And that reaction was used or exploited by two fascist groups, Masr Al-Fata and the Muslim Brotherhood. They said, "No, no, no." The Jews started to be afraid. Some decided to leave, not many, until Israel worked on that idea. Israel itself started to make them scared. They frightened the Egyptians. There was something called the Lavon Affair. They frightened the Jews: "They will kill you, the Egyptians will. Leave." So that happened.

JONATHAN GUYER: *How has the rise of the Gulf countries changed the Arab World?*

SONALLAH IBRAHIM: Religious fundamentalism. Saudi Arabia, for example, found itself with a lot of money. Egyptian teachers, doctors, lawyers, they go and stay for four years and come back. There is no cinema, there is nothing for them to do but sit around at night and play cards. Or people go to the mosque, and wear a white *gallabiyah*, and grow a beard, and so on. They start to use the language or the words that signify what's good and virtuous. They come back here, a very poor country, with a car and a copy of the Quran, and a *gallabiyah*. When I was young it was not possible for someone to go out in the street wearing a *gallabiyah*. He had to wear a suit. That affects the whole society.

JONATHAN GUYER: *What do you think about President Donald Trump?*

SONALLAH IBRAHIM: A pig, a big pig, a fat pig, in office. But I don't think he'll last long. He represents a part of American society well. There is something strange about that country. A great country, with the most powerful inventions, the new successes, the boldness to go into the unknown. Despite the problems of big capital, all this ferment, it is the pinnacle of Western civilization. People who produced someone like Will Durant, or Einstein, people with wide horizons. Yet, there is intolerance. It's hard to believe they'd bring forward someone like Trump. Excuse me if I've hurt your feelings, if you're one of the Republicans who supports Trump.

JONATHAN GUYER: *How do you regard America's policy in the Middle East today?*

SONALLAH IBRAHIM: I think there is confusion. Painful to see what's happening in Syria. I think all the people bear responsibility. Of course Bashar Al-Assad most of all. He's a criminal. As though we were in the Middle Ages.

JONATHAN GUYER: *What's the place of the Arab intellectual in all these affairs?*

SONALLAH IBRAHIM: He tries to understand what's happening, but that's difficult. Then, I think, I'm not expecting action from him. I'm not expecting much. Because, ultimately, the respectable Arab intellectual, if you give him an invitation to Saudi Arabia, and give him an envelope with something in it, he'll write you an article saying this and that. Understand? That is the dilemma of the intellectual all over the world.

JONATHAN GUYER: *How do you see the Mubarak era, which covered much of your writing life? On the streets, we hear the public saying that they want another Mubarak.*

SONALLAH IBRAHIM: Because the situation under him was better.

JONATHAN GUYER: *What future do young Egyptians face?*

SONALLAH IBRAHIM: A beautiful generation. A beautiful generation and lots of things will come from it. I expect many things from it, and the generation after it. It's a natural story for any country or people.

JONATHAN GUYER: *Did Abdel Fattah El-Sisi save Egypt in 2013?*

SONALLAH IBRAHIM: Yes, that's correct. That's correct. The situation then: the Muslim Brotherhood, with the backing of America, Germany, France, and England had a plan that the whole region should be in the hands of the Muslim Brotherhood. They imagined that they represented moderate Islam, and they would be able to reach an understanding with them, because they have the same mentality of the shop owner, of the merchant. And there's the army. They've become present in everything. They

have schools, factories, making everything, even pasta. They became a power, an economic power, and in consequence a political power. With that, they did not want the Brotherhood. The liberals and the left: there was no unity, no organization, no plans.

JONATHAN GUYER: *Why did El-Sisi have to save Egypt?*

SONALLAH IBRAHIM: It wasn't just El-Sisi who rescued the country. The people were vigilant, the people said no. First, a retrograde wave of Islamic rulings had begun about bizarre things, like a hadith about selling women, for example. Then there was the presence of Gamaa Al-Islamiyya, the group which assassinated Sadat and others, at the October 6 War commemoration. There were many things that were illogical, or that the people hadn't asked for. The people realized the opportunity to again rectify the situation. In addition, the Brotherhood didn't have any solution or proposal for the economic problems of the people. That's it.

JONATHAN GUYER: *Morsi's policies were against the people?*

SONALLAH IBRAHIM: No, it wasn't against the people or the populace, not against. It didn't comply with what the people demanded.

JONATHAN GUYER: *Now it seems that you don't like El-Sisi's administration at all. Do you regret what happened in 2013?*

SONALLAH IBRAHIM: On June 30, do I regret what happened? It was the only way to repair the calamity.

JONATHAN GUYER: *It's fifty years since the Six-Day War.*

SONALLAH IBRAHIM: The meaning of 1967? The meaning of 1967 was the victory of the Western or American vision for the Middle East. To get rid of Arab nationalism.

JONATHAN GUYER: *Did the 1973 war restore dignity?*

SONALLAH IBRAHIM: A bit.

JONATHAN GUYER: *How?*

SONALLAH IBRAHIM: You said restoration of dignity, but was it a restoration of right? No.

JONATHAN GUYER: *The right in Palestine? Or the right of the Arabs?*

SONALLAH IBRAHIM: It's one right. Palestine for us isn't just the issue of Palestine. Palestine isn't the issue for Israel. Israel's slogan is from the "Euphrates to the Nile." The whole of this region. Something direct. The target of Israel is not only Palestine.

JONATHAN GUYER: *Why are so many Egyptians drawn to Islamism?*

SONALLAH IBRAHIM: The same reasons that help spread fundamentalism in American society. Frustration at the failure of processes and attempts to make progress or create openness, tolerance, progressive ideas about social life, a new vision of sexual relations. There is a reaction to all of that, which is fundamentalism. The return to certainty, to the constant. The Quran, the Book, is there. Everything is in it, and the story's over.

JONATHAN GUYER: *Is there any chance for liberalism in the Arab world?*

SONALLAH IBRAHIM: Of course. I believe that what is happening now in terms of chaos and disorder will in the near future give birth to—look, waves, it is waves. In the West if you look, think with me, 1920, 1936. A leap forward, then reaction, fascism. And after fascism, reaction, a leap forward, then comes the reaction. Then come the 1960s. Wow, the 1960s, we want to change everything, and everything changed. The greatest possible actualization of the self, of freedom, of breaking out, of creativity in art, in film, in music, in writing, in everything. Afterwards, there's a reaction. And so on. It's always like that. Bang, then a reaction going backwards, then another reaction going forwards. But in the whole process, the ideas of progress are winning.

JONATHAN GUYER: *Where is Egypt in 2017?*

SONALLAH IBRAHIM: Going down completely. And afterwards we'll head upwards. The reaction will happen.

JONATHAN GUYER: *Who are the new generation of Arab leaders?*

SONALLAH IBRAHIM: One of the beautiful things for the whole world, not just for Egypt or the Arabs, is that the age of the leader—of a sole, unique leader—is over. There was Stalin, Brezhnev, Khrushchev, Kennedy, Clinton, De Gaulle, Mitterrand, Gandhi, all of that, and Gamal Abdel Nasser. The halo has broken.

JONATHAN GUYER: *Can you imagine another revolution in Egypt?*

SONALLAH IBRAHIM: Uh huh.

JONATHAN GUYER: *What form would it take?*

SONALLAH IBRAHIM: Its form, now at this moment, would be vicious, oh, something like the first days of the French revolution. People who go and smash things up and steal. For one reason: because the regime, and El-Sisi in particular, is very stupid, and does not want an official opposition. If there were an opposition, official, organized, there could be dialogue, pressure. Understand? That would prevent chaos. If

there is a revolution, it will be chaos, and I don't want that. Revolution yes, I want revolution, but not chaos. An organized revolution, and that takes time.

JONATHAN GUYER: *What have you been writing?*

SONALLAH IBRAHIM: A novel on the last day in the life of Gamal Abdel Nasser. The idea is, who is Gamal Abdel Nasser? What were his motives?

JONATHAN GUYER: *The role of the writer during Nasser's time, is it similar to the role or duty of the writer now in Egypt?*

SONALLAH IBRAHIM: All the time the same, I suppose. The role of a real writer, he should have a kind of vision. The revolt against the status quo, against the situation, the desire to reach new horizons.

JONATHAN GUYER: *You were an expert witness at the 2015 trial of Egyptian novelist Ahmed Naji, who was convicted of violating public decency.*

SONALLAH IBRAHIM: There has to be a form of solidarity with people, when I myself could at any time be in his position. I'm threatened with the same thing.

JONATHAN GUYER: *Do you see a connection between your first novel That Smell and Ahmed Naji's Using Life?*

SONALLAH IBRAHIM: Perhaps yes. There is a single line, which is the desire that exists for a writer to say things as they are. Freedom of expression.

JONATHAN GUYER: *Naji is a bit scared now of expressing himself.*

SONALLAH IBRAHIM: Of course. Me too, I'm scared.

JONATHAN GUYER: *Scared of what?*

SONALLAH IBRAHIM: Scared that I did an interview with a newspaper called *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, about a month ago. I said that El-Sisi had to go. They came with a photographer and took pictures, and then they didn't publish the interview.

JONATHAN GUYER: *Why?*

SONALLAH IBRAHIM: I talked about parliament, and the government, the whole regime. That isn't what we expected from June 30. That's all. It wasn't published. Okay. Afterwards, a few days ago, a week ago, I did an interview with a website, *Al-Tariq*, the site of the Social Democratic Party. I told them that El-Sisi has to go, as he's no longer able to solve the problems, and that if he continues, we'll have a revolution of the chaotic kind. And in order to prevent that, he should go.