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An intimate portrait of an iconic poet

Ferial J. Ghazoul, Tuesday 30 Nov 2021

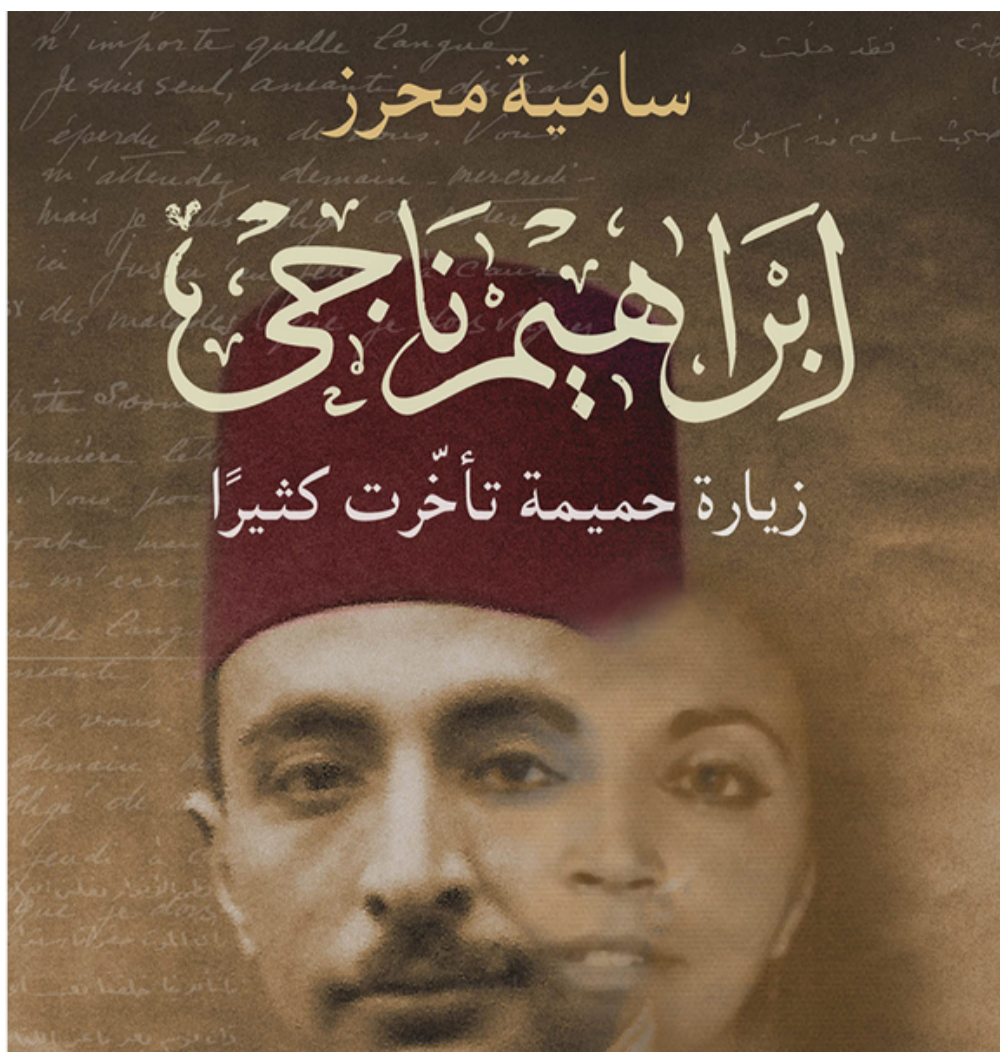
Samia Mehrez, Ibrahim Naji: Ziyara Hamima Taakharat Kathiran (Ibrahim Naji: A Very Belated Intimate Visit). Cairo:Dar Al-Shorouk, 2021



Naji



Mehrez's book about an eminent modern Egyptian poet is difficult to classify: it is a genre-bending text that brings together biography, autobiography, cultural history, translation studies, textual criticism, and archival documents — all overlapping and yet presented in an accessible style. The author calls on conversations with her mother, son, and kin as well as critics to construct an intimate portrait of her maternal grandfather, whom she never met — the iconic poet Ibrahim Naji (1898-1953). The accessibility of the book camouflages the critical brilliance which makes it a pioneering work of multi-faceted literary scholarship.



The text opens with a visit of Gamal Al-Ghitani to Samia Mehrez in Cairo when she was involved in writing a dissertation in an American university on modern Arabic fiction focusing on Ghitani. Discovering through the portrait on the wall, that Mehrez is the granddaughter of Naji, Ghitani comments on how she looks very much like her grandfather. This comment was not welcomed by the PhD candidate Samia, as she did not think she resembled her grandfather physically or otherwise. At the very end of her book, and having undertaken a journey into her grandfather's life and works — thanks to the archival material her maternal aunt had gifted her with — she came to proudly see the resemblance that annoyed her in the opening of the book.

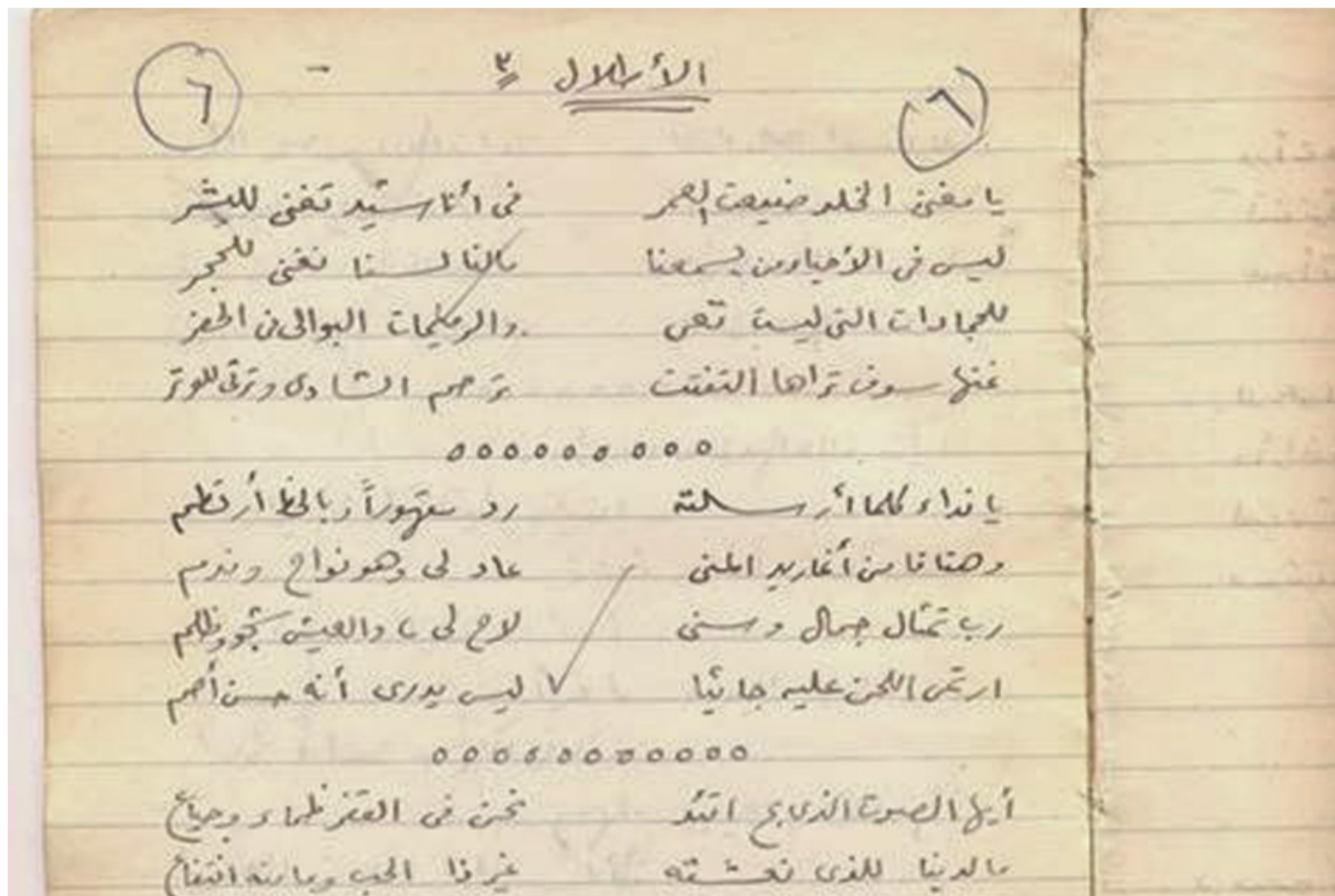
As a school girl, the author was exposed to her grandfather's poetry since it was assigned in Arabic classes. She takes this starting point to show how Arabic poetry has been taught and continues to be taught with emphasis on rote learning rather than artistic appreciation. This creates an inevitable discontent, if not dislike, with one's own literary heritage. She contrasts it with the way she read and discussed English literature and poetry and how she was able to relate to Western canonical works and even identify with characters in Elizabethan drama she encountered in her studies.



One can sum up the journey in the book as a need not only to connect with an ancestor, but also to find the authentic Ibrahim Naji. In order to accomplish such an endeavour, Mehrez had to separate Naji the man from the way he has been covered (up) by family and critics. Naji has been viewed as a romantic poet exhibiting emotional delicatessen. Identifying his muse and the addressee of his love poetry had engaged critics — often following wrong paths—while his family chose silence over such concerns. Furthermore, Naji has been dubbed as a poet while rarely acknowledging his other writings, including short stories and a novel. Though known as a doctor poet, no one has bothered to point to his scientific writing on medical guidelines for the layperson, and to his forays into psychology, sociology, and literary criticism. In fact, Naji—as a practicing doctor and a talented poet with limitless intellectual curiosity—had been encyclopedic in terms of interest. Rather than viewing him as a Renaissance man who mastered several languages and explored new trends in the humanities and social sciences, he has been reduced to only one aspect of his rich life, that of a poet. Mehrez is out to show a wholesome picture of her grandfather. She calls on the French cultural critic, Pierre Bourdieu, to explain cultural fields and cultural capital in relation to Naji. She shows how the translations of literary works by Naji — whether Baudelaire's *Fleurs d'Amal*, or Shakespeare's *Sonnets* — attest to his poetic sensibility as well as to his broad knowledge that goes beyond a single professional field.

Mehrez zooms on the presence of Shakespeare in the corpus of Naji to discuss various perspectives related to translation studies as well as reception aesthetics. As the director of Translation Studies Center at the American University in Cairo for more than a decade, she explains the intricacies of poetic translation by presenting the different renderings of Sonnet 55 that opens with “Not marble nor the gilded monuments . . .”. The sonnet is then presented in Arabic translation by different pens, allowing the readers to engage in what she calls “the game of comparison”. She cites the translations of this Sonnet by Jabra Jabra, Sargon Boulus, Abdul-Wahid Lu'lua, and the translation of her students in colloquial Egyptian Arabic in the context of a seminar she taught. Avoiding jargon and specialised idioms, Mehrez invites her readers to partake in evaluating translations of the Sonnet and leave the judgment on preference to her audience.

Naji was particularly taken by Hamlet, encountered first when he was a student in secondary school, and the fascination continued until much later. Naji could see the Oedipus complex in the Danish prince as well as locating the text in the stressful trajectory of Shakespeare's life. Mehrez, in turn, sees the vulnerability of her grandfather paralleling that of Hamlet and Shakespeare. Yet when she discusses the draft of that chapter with her son Nadim, he questions, in a postcolonial vein, the veneration of Shakespeare, pointing the role of Shakespearean studies in anchoring imperial culture. Mehrez takes this conversation as a starting point to show the cultural reception of the English bard by her grandfather, herself, and her son. The reader learns not only about the three attitudes towards Shakespeare but how critical history is propelled.



Naji is known by laypersons as the author of one the best known songs of the Egyptian diva Um Kulthoum, “Al-Atlal” (Ruins). Mehrez cites an excerpt of the complete translation of the poem as it appeared in Al-Ahram Weekly in March 18 and 25, 1993 by Wadie Kirolos. Having had this poem translated by Mehrez herself in 1978, when she was a graduate student of English Literature studying with the comparatist, Michael Beard, she discusses two approaches to translation. I cite here the first verse line of the poem in its two renderings in English, the more literal by Kirolos and the freer with more poetic license by Mehrez:

Yafu'adirahama Allahu Al-hawa

Kanasurhan min khayalin fa-hawa (Ibrahim Naji)

Oh my heart, may God have mercy on our love;

it was an edifice of illusions destined to collapse (Wadie Kirolos).

Oh heart! Ask not where love has wonder'd to

'Twas Fancy's labour then today all lost (Samia Mehrez)

She also takes opportunity of the case to comment on the circumstances of turning the poem into a song and the role of the poet Ahmad Rami in shortening the 134-line poem and conflating it with another poem of Naji to make it suitable for singing. The case also triggers the memory of Mehrez as a teenager who could not appreciate the repetitions of Um Kulthoum and her past preference for the songs of the Beatles. In such a narrative, we learn about generational differences, changes in taste, and the mechanisms of transforming a poem into a lyric.

Ibrahim Naji is unveiled in this book without having to cover up his many escapades and affairs. Mehrez's work resembles a detective search to find the real man behind the slogans, as well as the women who inspired him, including his own wife Samia (after whom the author was named). But not only Naji's relations with women are divulged with all their passions and frustrations, but also his hurt feelings when Taha Hussein or Abbas Mahmoud Al-Aqqad criticised him. Mehrez points to Naji's generosity to his poor patients despite his financial difficulties, his disappointment with denial of promotion, his emotional roller coaster, and his intellectual interested—all of which are revealed as the work unfolds. But the book is not only about Ibrahim Naji; it is also about his granddaughter Samia Mehrez and the stages of her life from a rebellious student resisting her poetic heritage to an accomplished scholar teaching her literary heritage in Arabic Studies courses. The book is also about the literary and cultural history of Egypt in the twentieth century delineated through the analysis of a case study.

The book ends with the demise of Naji having succumbed to a heart attack in his clinic. His daughter Amira, Mehrez's mother, is reluctant to remember the intensely sad moments and of her loss, but Samia insists and gets what she is after. The ritual sacrifice, the condolences in the daily papers, the political dignitaries attending the funeral procession are recalled. By association, Mehrez notes the study of the historian Hussein Omar who found in obituaries a source of social history. Having a literary frame of reference, Mehrez recalls as well how the protagonist of Sonallah Ibrahim in his novella, The Committee, uses the obituary to present a required report. Here the author thinks metonymically — one obituary recalls the use of obituaries in fiction and in social

sciences. She also uses a contrapuntal reading of the ending of her grandfather who complained bitterly about his marginalisation to his best friend Wadie Philistina few months before he passed away. She contrasts his complaint to his friend's response: "You are a great man even in your predicament". Equally ironic, she draws attention to Naji's glorification when he died to undermining him during his life.

Mehrez concludes that the novel Naji wrote towards the end of his literary career, *Zaza*, resembles in many ways his own affair with the young woman in his neighborhood, thus she invokes the relation between art and life. The ending of the book may seem sorrowful with the disappointments of a great soul, yet on the other hand Mehrez's book has a fulfilling finale as the author comes to know firsthand her grandfather despite the lack of temporal overlap between her and the protagonist. Thanks to her meticulous research, leaving no stone unturned, we have an intimate portrait of a twentieth-century man of letters. Mehrez became reconciled and even proud for being the progeny of this misunderstood and misrepresented figure. The cover of the book, designed by Nadim Jacquemond, is striking: It conflates the image of Ibrahim Naji with that of Samia Mehrez, summing up the plot and the essence of the narrative.

****A version of this article appears in print in the 2 December, 2021 edition of Al-Ahram Weekly.***

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