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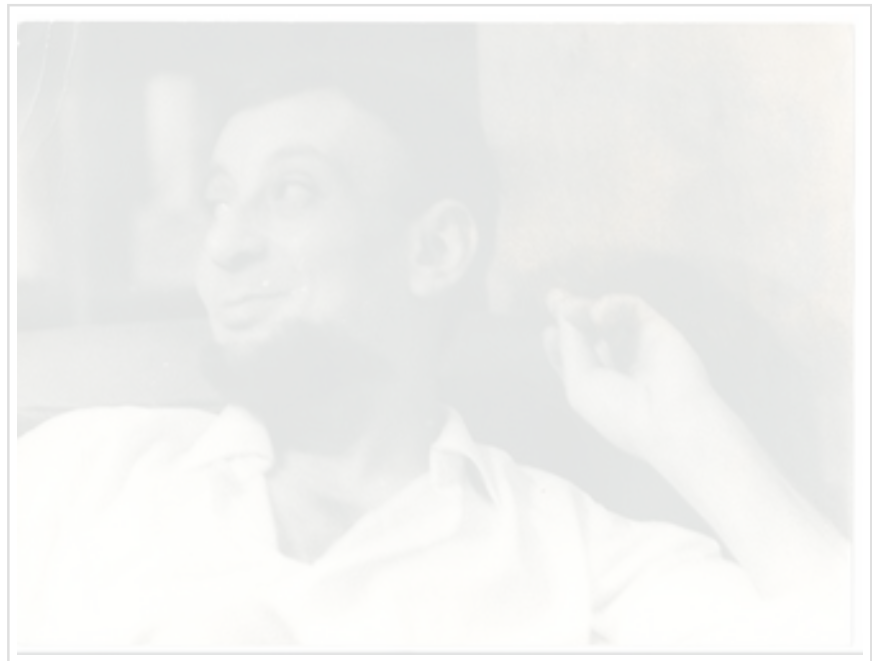
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Waguih Ghali: 'Beer in the Snooker Club' - 19

=Susie Thomas=



Waguih Ghali - with permission, see below

[What did Waguih Ghali look like? There can be few modern authors whose likeness is so little known. Now Ghali is published in the recent editions of Beer in the Snooker Club, and the only image which comes of him. So it's quite remarkable to be able to include with this article the photograph above. It's from Diana Athill's photo she has of Ghali. It was taken by a professional photographer in Paris - Diana Athill believes it dates from the early 1960s. The photograph is posted here with Diana Athill's permission, for which I am grateful. It cannot be used elsewhere without her consent. Then ... shortly after this article was first posted]

Ghali, one with Diana Athill, appeared on the internet, [here's the link.](#)]

Waguih Ghali's only published novel, *Beer in the Snooker Club*, is wonderful and tragic. It is also a love letter to two cities: Cairo, where he was born, probably in London, where he committed suicide shortly before his fortieth birthday. For the character of the novel, Ram, as for his creator, London's literary and political scene is a powerful magnet and yet he also feels that 'the mental sophistication' of Europe is not his natural self. The novel moves back and forwards between Cairo and London. Ghali himself adrift between countries and cultures, radicalised by the 1956 British invasion of his native land, but demoralised by the intolerance of Nasser's brand of Arab nationalism.

Not much is known about Ghali's life. I once queued at a book-signing to ask him: 'Ah, *Beer in the Snooker Club*,' he said immediately: 'A wonderful novel, I don't know.' Diana Athill, who was Ghali's editor and lover, provides the main source of information in her memoir, *After a Funeral* (1986). Ghali's family were Coptic Christians, part of Egypt's landowning, cosmopolitan elite. They were members of the Gezira Sporting Club, which is mocked in the novel as a place where 'middle-aged people play croquet': today its website boasts that it has the 'oldest golf club in Africa'.



Gezira Sporting Club

Athill believes that the former UN Secretary General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali himself was the poor relation, with the insight that so often goes with not being a member of the club. His father died soon after he was born and his mother was eight. His childhood was one of emotional humiliation and neglect as he grew up around the wealthy relatives. Although he remained loyal to his extended family, he became estranged from them politically, hating the way they squeezed the peasant family for rent, which they spent on shopping sprees in Paris and Rome. Ghali grew up speaking French but his Arabic was 'deplorable'; English was his literary tongue.

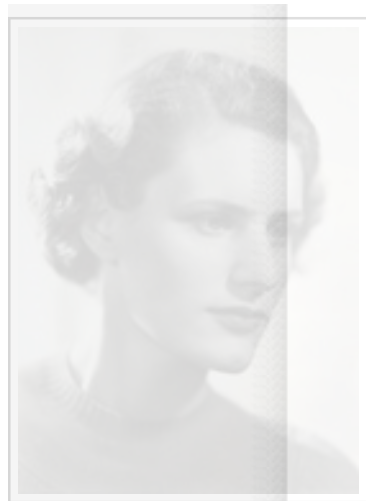
'The only important thing which happened to us was the Egyptian revolution'

Ghali viewed his life as raw material for literature and he gave Ram, the narrator of *The Englishman's Boy*, a similar upbringing to his own. In the novel Ram takes part in demonstrations against the British occupation of Egypt. Later, he and his friend are taken to London by an older Jewish-Egyptian woman called Edna with whom Ram falls in love. When the 1956 Suez War occurs Ram is shocked: 'In spite of all the books we had read about the slyness and cruelty of England's foreign policy, it took the Suez war to make me realise it was true.' Ram joins the Communist Party and is deported from England after hitting a policeman during a demonstration in Trafalgar Square.



A demonstration in Trafalgar Square, late 1950s. Museum of London

He returns to Egypt hoping that Nasser will have significantly changed Egypt in the four years Ram has been in London. Ram and Font supported the 1952 revolution 'wholeheartedly and naturally, without any fanaticism' but they are bitterly disappointed on their return to Egypt to find that injustice and corruption are still rife: the fellahs are not better off, despite Nasser's attempted land reforms, and Jews and communists are persecuted. The beautiful Edna has been whipped by a soldier (because she is Jewish) and is now scarred. Ram and Font seem to drift, disillusioned idealists, drinking homemade gin and tonics and an interesting-sounding cocktail of Egyptian Stella, vodka and whisky. As a superb linguist and intellectual, Font has been found a job 'brushing the snooker tables with the *Supplement*.' In order to engage in meaningful political activity, Ram secretly joins a group of men who are accused of torture in Egyptian prisons for a human rights organisation at considerable risk to himself. His activism backfires: Ram has 'the terrible feeling that some of the pictures in the *Supplement* are gory if we didn't pay for them' and none of the newspapers dares to publish them. To overcome this with a sense of futility, the novel ends with a cynical Ram heading off to gamble and get drunk in Groppi's, Cairo's most elegant café.



Diana Athill

In real life, Ghali was forced to leave Egypt in 1958 under the pretext of being a member of the Communist Party. He was living in London when his passport expired: unable to either return to Egypt or stay in London, he was exiled to Germany where he worked in a factory and wrote *The Snooker Club*. Tragically, Ghali was unable to complete his novel based on his miserable experience as a *gastarbeiter*, and he died of an overdose in 1969 in Diana Athill's flat. In every way, Ghali is placed in a betwixt and between: an anti-colonialist who is also an Anglophile; a communist with aristocratic tastes; an Arab who could not write in Arabic; a member of the elite who was also an outsider.

There are three Londons in *Beer in the Snooker Club*: the London of Ram's dreams; the London he lives in for four years, which changes him irrevocably; and the memory of London that haunts him on his return to Cairo.

“Life” was in Europe’

The London Ram dreams about as he lies on his bed in the sweltering heat of literary fantasy: ‘a whole imaginary world ... where pubs were confused with nightclubs where Piccadilly led to the Champs-Elysees’ :

I wanted to live. I read and read and Edna spoke and I wanted to live. I wanted to be a countess and to fall in love with a barmaid and to be a gigolo and to be a winner and to win at Monte Carlo and to be down-and-out in London and to be an elegant and also to be in rags.

Having devoured all the London fiction they can get their hands on, Ram and Port Said to Tilbury.

‘Jesus, Font; here we are, London and everything’

Unlike the majority of writers from the colonies who came to London in the 19th century, Ghali was not disappointed by the city of his dreams. Partly, this must have been because as an Egyptian he was not subjected to the kind of racial prejudice that Africans and Asians routinely suffered at this time. In Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*, 'the boys are turned down for jobs and housing when they show their faces but no one spits at Ram in public. One potential landlady asks Ram if he is 'coloured'. He isn't sure how to answer the library and discovers that he is officially 'white'. For the most part he sees little prejudice he encounters. Like the morning when Ram, Font and Edna are talking in a room in Hyde Park Corner:

The maid suddenly came in and said: 'Oo, 'xcuse me.'

'Not at all, luv,' I said. 'Come in, we're one short.'

She went out saying, 'goings on', and then said 'wogs' which angered Font and I burst out laughing.

The friends make literary pilgrimages to the places they have read about: 'We went underground to Aldgate and walked in Commercial Road, looking for W. W. Jacobs (1863-1943) was the once popular author of comic maritime tales and it seems a dark irony that Ram should track down the setting for 'The Brown Man' about an avaricious Jewish pawn broker who is destroyed by a sinister Burmese black magic. The story is a thesaurus of racist stereotypes, written by the son of a ship dockerman, who was probably of Jewish descent.

Edna mockingly tells Ram that an Egyptian who loves W.W. Jacobs cannot get a permission to stay in England. A series of 'nasty and humiliating' interviews at the immigration department is enough to 'dissipate all our illusions' and eventually he is deported.

But in the beginning of his stay in London, Ram is delighted simply to walk in the city as he discovers the area around the Edgware Road:

A gang of teddy boys, Irish labourers and other odds and ends used to play dice. We Egyptians are gamblers. It's not that we want to make money or anything, we just like to gamble. Font and I won a lot of money on that pavement once, and went to a silversmith on Edgware Road and bought the two silver beer mugs we now keep behind the snooker club bar.

Today the Edgware Road, lined with shisha cafes and Lebanese restaurants, is known colloquially as Little Arabia. Although Egyptians began to settle in this area when Ghali was writing *Beer in the Snooker Club*, Ram is not interested in finding other Arabs. On the contrary, he is on a quest for authentic, or at least, literary Englishness.

Carrying a letter of introduction from his headmaster in Cairo, Ram and Font enter Hampstead: 'We walked and watched and felt the little hustle of people attempt to penetrate to us.' They feel obscurely that 'Hampstead was more England than anywhere else.' As they walk up the narrow, sloping street to the house, Ram fantasises that he will offer them Ouzo 'or whatever we Arabs are supposed to drink.' As the fantasy fails to materialise, the Dungates and their adult children take Ram and Font to a pub where they discuss left wing politics and anti-colonialism before going home to eat Sunday roast.

Ram is delighted that reality conforms so closely to his fantasy, and impressed that the Dungates can criticise their own foreign policy. But he is appalled to discover that he is not the only one: 'the one participating and the other watching and judging.' Ram develops a form of colonial schizophrenia exacerbated by an awareness of class.

When Ram learns that one of the Dungate's young female cousins was raped by a gang of Egyptians in Suez, he retreats to his hotel room to console himself with the thought of being an anti-Imperialist hero. He imagines giving a magnificent diatribe to a pub:

When an Englishman wants a thing, he never tells himself he wants it. He wants to his mind a burning conviction that it is his moral and religious duty to conquer who possess the thing he wants, and then he grabs it. When he wants a new and adulterated goods, he sends a missionary to teach the natives the gospel of peace. If he kill the missionary, the Englishman flies to arms in defence of Christianity, fights and conquers for it, and takes the market as a reward from heaven.

This is a fair critique of the rapacity which lay behind the rhetoric of the white man, but the reader is also aware that Ram needs to justify the death of the Dungal to maintain the simplistic paradigm of Imperial oppressors and victimised natives.

Typically, although Ram is sarcastic about the English, he is also self-mocking.

This speech wasn't Bernard Shaw, but my own spontaneous composition. And there was a colossal silence and then a phenomenal ovation with tears in some eyes and women begging me to be their lover.

Ram starts to see the Dungalites, and gradually all the English people he meets seem less than human beings. He is particularly appalled to realise that his judgment of the lower class.

When Ram and Font and Edna visit the Kilburn flat of Mrs Ward, a conductor on the bus, he notices that they do not buy her flowers although they took a bouquet from the Dungalite. Mrs Ward is nice, Ram thinks, but she is boring. Worse, when they are in Kilburn (where, Edna informs him, the Irish live), Mrs Ward's son Steve starts to talk about his time as a soldier stationed in Suez. Steve spouts the typical English prejudice about the natives: 'I don't know what the wogs are like' -- without realising that Ram and Font will be offended. He encourages Steve to make a fool of himself, but Ram is the one who ends up laughing because he knows that Steve is not malicious; he is just uneducated and not very bright. This scene is typical of Ghali in its humanism and in the way that class invariably informs its social critique.

Ram forgives the working class Steve for his bigotry, just as he laughs at the cabbies who call them 'wogs'. But when he goes to South Kensington and encounters Cass, a snobbish wife, who is letting a room 'purely out of a sense of social duty', Ram meets Mrs Treford, who is impressed by Ram's elegant suit and linen handkerchief and her husband met 'a surprising number of very intelligent Egyptians at the Club' while they were stationed in Cairo. Ram pretends to arrange for his chauffeur to bring his bags and asks if they have a garage for his Bentley before storming out: 'but I didn't feel as victorious as I might have been.'



Battersea - Danny Robinson, Creative Commons

Ram learns to navigate the housing system as he searches for a room in a neighbourhood where he can afford to live. Fearing that he is becoming a snob, he first decides to move to a room in the East End. The faith in himself "falters when F. T. Lewis gently: 'are you sure the East End is not a part of the East End you have read?' The temptation to sentimentalise poverty is a brief taste of the reality of the East End for a whole

wouldn't like to live there after all'.

In terms of class, if not geographically, Ram finds a halfway house between South Kensington and Bethnal Green by moving to Battersea. He takes a room with a mechanic who says 'strangely enough I began to live'.

When all Ram's savings have run out, and he is unable to work or renew his savings, his only friend is Vincent, a working-class free thinker, whom he met through

As the Dungates and his other 'New Statesmen friends' drop him, he finds refuge with Vincent and his drunken Irish stepfather Paddy: a man so lazy that his feet have 'two large callus on the seat of his trousers'.

'We left that day and we shall never return, although we are back here'

On his return to Cairo, Ram is a changed man: disillusioned by England's failure of the Egyptian revolution, and crippled by class consciousness. He joins the Communist Party and gone is the breathless excitement about 'civilizational speech', 'culture'. These values are contained in quotation marks, as if they are

All this is London [...] All this comes of hearing Father Huddleston speak, of how Luxembourg was, of seeing Gorki's trilogy in Hampstead. It comes of Donald Soper at the Corner, of reading Koestler and Alan Paton and Doris Lessing and Orwell and the Question and even Kenneth Tynan. Of knowing how Franco came to power and how he befriended him since, of Churchill's hundred million to squash Lenin and the telegram; of knowing how Palestine was given to the Jews and why ... of the bombing of Damascus and Robert Graves's Good-bye.

Ram's feelings about London on his return to Cairo are characteristically ambivalent. London is the centre of the campaign for international pacifism (Donald Soper), the anti-imperialist centre (Father Huddleston) and the home of radical writers such as Lessing, Orwell and the Question. At the same time it is the HQ of Hypocrisy, epitomised here by the reference to Churchill's support of the White Russians against the "Bolshevik Jews" but also supported the Zionists. It is impossible for Ram to reconcile London as the 'centre of civilization' with its role as the centre of the Empire.

Ram's remembered London does not refer to a physical locality but to a state of awareness: from the French bombing of Damascus in 1925, to the murder of the revolutionary Rosa Luxembourg and the torture in Algerian prisons described

La Question (1958). London is the place where Ram gains an understanding of injustice, of class and racial politics. He laments his lost innocence:

'Oh, blissful ignorance. Wasn't it nice to go to the Catholic church with my mother before I ever heard of Salazar or of the blessed troops to Ethiopia?'

What has been 'killed' is Ram's complacency and the dream of Europe. He is reborn as a cosmopolitan activist, opposed to tyranny everywhere, from Salazar's Portugal and Franco's Spain to the Italian occupation of Ethiopia.

Drinking beer in the snooker club, in the wake of Egypt's failed revolution, Ram reflects on London:

Since London and all that, I always seem to move towards the tragic things, a will of my own. It is funny how people – millions and millions of people – go to the telly and singing and humming in spite of the fact that they lost brother or a war; and what is stranger still, they contemplate with equanimity seeing the lovers off to yet another war. They don't see the tragedy of it all. Now and then a book, or starts thinking, or something shakes him, and then he see tragedy or He finds it tragic that other people don't see this tragedy around them. Then he or other, or marches behind barriers until his own life, seen detachedly, become hate tragedy.

There is no better account of attaining political consciousness during an era than this. Having lost his faith in both Arab nationalism and Communism, Ram wasted life. But as Egyptians gathered in Tahrir Square and the Arab Spring unfolded, the novel has never felt more timely.



Cover illustration

Further Reading

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- A Ghali online archive was posted in 2013, here's the link: <http://ghali.library.cornell.edu/>
- [posted June 2011; Ghali photo information updated April 2012; references updated 12 September 2011; reformatting January 2018]

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