

**In Memoriam**  
**Ahmad Fuad Nigm, The People's Poet**  
(May 22, 1929-December 3, 2013)

It is with much grief and a great sense of loss that I inform our AUD community that the renowned Egyptian poet Ahmad Fuad Nigm died early this Tuesday morning at the age of 84. He is one of Egypt's most famous vernacular poets. Since 1967, his popular poetry has been frequently heard at protests and political rallies, and during January 2011 Egyptian revolutionaries sang many of his poems.

Nigm published over a dozen collections of poetry and his popular autobiography, under the title *Al-Fagoumi*, was recently made into a movie.

In 2007, Nigm was chosen by the United Nations Poverty Action as Ambassador of the poor, and he won the 2013 Prince Claus Award for "Unwavering Integrity".

His presence on the Egyptian scene, as a poet and a commentator with biting remarks, will be sorely missed.

I met Nigm for the first time in 1989, and have kept in contact with him until very recently. I still remember and relish my visits with him in his apartment in a popular neighborhood, and how we used to sit on the floor of his roof, chatting about our country while chicken were running and cackling around us.

Nigm's work has been one of the main topics for my academic studies, about which I published my first book, *A Study of the Vernacular Poetry of Ahmad Fuad Nigm* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1990). I later published two books about him in Arabic; the most recent was earlier this year (2013).

Nigm's poetry portrays Egypt as a society with distinct social forces whose interests run counter to one another: the rich vs. the poor or what Nigm calls the residents of the main streets and those of the alleyways; the villager vs. the urban *afandi*; the native *ibn il-balad* vs. the rulers; the patriot vs. the colonialist *khawaga*. These conflicting forces create a totality that is greater than the sum of its individual units. The secret behind this seeming paradox is attributed to a hidden factor—or in the words of Lucien Goldmann, a

hidden deity—that has to be sought in the "dialectical" relationships among these social forces.

Egypt's common folk are Nigm's heroes. They are portrayed as simple and unassuming but they are shown to possess native cunning that has enabled them to survive poverty, political oppression and foreign invasion. Helpless and downtrodden as they may be, they are at the same time forbearing and have a sharp sense of humor.

Nigm is concerned with the cause of liberation for Egypt's folk. For him the only way to achieve liberation—from class inequality and political oppression—is through a people's revolution (is this not what happened in January 2011 revolution?) that will rid the country of both the exploitative class of "fat cats" and the oppressive political establishment, and pave the way for a new brave and free society. What is remarkable about Nigm's poetry is its appeal to widely diverse segments of the society such as students, laborers, and intellectuals. What is it in the language and the subjects of these poems that makes them so popular?

The reason must ultimately be sought in the relevance of this kind of poetry to its societal concerns. One can spot three factors which may account for both the effectiveness and popularity of Nigm's poetry: it is expressed in the colloquial and put in various folk poetic forms; it is protest poetry full of political and social criticism of society; it is highly melodious and thus easy to memorize. The first factor is perhaps the most potent. Nigm's diction is simple and earthy since it is, by and large, derived from the everyday colloquial and it embodies the racy witticisms of the Egyptian street. Like the French Francois Rabelais, Nigm's work is peppered with the bawdy double-entendres beloved by his Egyptian coffee-shop audience.

But unlike the case in the formal Arabic (*fusha*) poetry, Nigm's work is composed in a language that is closer to the mind and the heart of the great majority of Egyptians, a language in which they think, express their pain or grief, sing, talk tenderly to their children, express their love to others or insult whomever they need to insult. In other words, it is the language which reflects the world of reality for Nigm and his fellow Egyptians.

Moreover, Nigm's poetry derives its basic forms from the Egyptian folk traditions. He uses folk poetic forms of long standing such as the *mawwal*, folk songs,

children's songs, puzzles and others which he adroitly utilizes to convey his revolutionary message.

The second factor is no less potent. For Nigm's poetry is in the first place a protest work. It takes upon itself the task of not only exposing and criticizing but also agitating and for this reason; it was often curtailed by the establishment. In this sense, Nigm's work becomes a genuine mouthpiece for the oppressed and the unlettered folk.

The third factor accounts for both the appeal and the popularity of Nigm's poetry. It is highly melodious with short staccatos that are catching, especially when sung to the *'ud* by Sheikh Imam. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, hundreds of Nigm's political chansons, sung and recorded on cassette-tapes, were surreptitiously making the rounds in Egypt and some of his anti-government lines have since been shouted in demonstrations in Tahrir Square in Cairo and elsewhere. In a country that suffers from a high rate of illiteracy, it is little wonder that Nigm's poems are popular. Those who cannot read, can, at least, listen to and understand these poems when they are recited. In this way Nigm's revolutionary poetry can be potently effective as a protest tool. Perhaps that is the reason why Nigm's poems have, by and large, been considered subversive by the Egyptian authorities and Nigm himself was regarded as a provocateur and as a result was in and out of jail (like the medieval French poet, Francois Villon, Nigm got into numerous scrapes with the authorities and his first jail term was for theft.).

Furthermore, Nigm's political chansons with their earthy, Egyptian colloquial Arabic (*'ammiyya*) and their deep involvement in folk poetic traditions seem to pose a serious challenge to those scholars and literary critics to whom *'ammiyya* works have no place in their canonical definition of "high" literature. In his own way, Nigm appears to confirm the *'ammiyya* as a respectable and effective medium of literary composition. He has tried to popularize poetry, making it a common currency for all his countrymen, be they rich or poor, lettered or unlettered. His work seems to be aimed at breaking the monopoly of "official" *fusha* writing and "official" writers who are state-salaried and, by and large, state-controlled and whose function is to "explain" the ruler to the people and not vice versa. And finally he wants "high poetry" to come down from its pinnacle and get dirty in the dust and the human waste of the alleyways. In this sense Nigm's poetry presents an example of genuine cultural expression.

Ahmad Fuad Nigm lived by his own principles. He was a fearless poet who spoke truth to power. And the truth he spoke was delivered with an impressive combination of force and beauty.

Nigm's Poetry Collections:

1. *Suwar min il-Haya wil-Sign*. Cairo: The Supreme Council of Arts and Literature, 1964.
2. *Baladi wa Habibti*. Beirut: Dar Ibn Khaldun, 1973.
3. *Ya'ish Ahl Baladi*. Beirut: Dar Ibn Khaldun, 1973.
4. *Iyun il-Kalam*. Cairo: Ash'ar al-Thaqafa al Jadida, 1976.
5. *Ughniyat il-Hubb wil-Haya*. Cairo: Madbuli, 1978.
6. *Ana Fen*. Baghdad: Dar al-Hurriyya lil-Tiba'a, 1979.
7. *Ishi ya Masr*. Beirut: Dar al-Hurriyya lil-Tibaa, 1979.
8. *Tahran, Ughniyat wa Ash'ar lil-Thawra*. Beirut: Dar al-Kalima, 1979.
9. *il-'Anbara*. Cairo: Madbuli, 1982.
10. *Aghani min il-Mu'ta'al*. Montreal: Le Cercle de la culture arabe du Quebec, 1980.
11. *Five Poems By Ahmad Fu'ad Nigm*, tr. Miriam Lowi. Ottawa: Jerusalem International Publishing House, 1982.
12. *Sandu' il-Dunya*. Cairo: Madbuli, 1985.
13. *The Complete Works of Ahmad Fuad Nigm*. Cairo: Mirit, 1998
14. *Al-Fagumi* (autobiography). Cairo: Dar Al-Ahmadi, 2003

Studies on Nigm:

Abdel-Malek, Kamal. *A Study of the Vernacular Poetry of Ahmad Fuad Nigm*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1990.

-----, *Ahmad Fuad Nigm* (in Arabic). Beirut: Allprints, 2010.

-----, *The Road to the January Revolution: The Poetry of Ahmad Fuad Nigm* (in Arabic). Cairo: Ministry of Culture, 2013.

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