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Taha Ḥusayn's Thought and the Reshaping of the Egyptian Educational System*

The XIX century – a period initiated by the Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 – is called by research workers and intellectuals of the Arabo-Islamic world and elsewhere as the Age of Revival or Renaissance (*'aṣr an-Nahḍa*)¹. The major characteristics of the period was the dissemination of modern education, the development of the press and publishing houses, the foundation of indigenous cultural societies and political movements, as well as the expansion of the dimensions of cultural contacts with the outside world, and above all with Western Europe.

The representatives of Arab resurgence movements strenuously sought answers for a number of basic questions, which included the following: What were the causes of the then-actual weakness of the Arab/Islamic East, which enabled the European West to penetrate and conquer it? How to arrange the relationship with the West, and what character should they possess? Should we – asked some Arab thinkers – adopt the Western culture, and – if so – have we to do that partially or entirely? What ways lead out of the existing state of stagnation, backwardness and ignorance towards progress, knowledge

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¹ This theme, in addition to the social and intellectual background of the era, are introduced by such works as: Sāṭi' al-Ḥuṣrī, *Muḥāḍarāt fī nuṣū' al-fikra al-qawmiyya* [Lectures on the Nationalist Idea], Beirut 1956; Sāṭi' al-Ḥuṣrī, *Al-Bilād al-'arabiyya wa-ad-dawla al-'uṭmāniyya* [The Arab Countries and the Ottoman State], Beirut 1965; Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798–1993*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997, *Al-Fikr al-'arabī fī 'aṣr an-nahḍa 1798–1993*, Arabic translation: Karīm 'Azqūl, 3rd edition, Beirut 1977; F. Barrū, *Al-Qawmiyya al-'arabiyya fī al-qarn at-tāsi' 'aṣar* [Arab Nationalism in the XIX Century], Damascus [no date]; F. Zakī Muḥammad, *Al-Fikr as-siyāsī al-'arabī al-islāmī bayna māḍihi wa-hāḍirihi* [Arabo-Islamic Political Thought Between its Past and Present], Baghdad 1976; T. Stajuda, *U źródeł egipskiego nacjonalizmu: Egipskie ruchy polityczne 1882–1914* [At the Sources of Egyptian Nationalism: Egyptian Political Movements 1882–1914], Wrocław 1984; Antony Black, *The History of Islamic Political Thought: Form the Prophet to the Present*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2001.

and power? Should the historically established political system be reformed or replaced by another?

In the search for answers to these and other questions, many orientations of social and political thought emerged during the XIX century in the investigated parts of the world. Among the outstanding representatives of the revivalist thought of the time were Rifā'a Rāfi' aṭ-Ṭahtāwī (1801–1873), Ġamāl ad-Dīn al-Afġānī (1838–1897), Muḥammad 'Abduh (1849–1905) 'Abd ar-Raḥmān al-Kawākibī (1854–1903 or 1902). These thinkers, being the forerunners of Ṭaha Ḥusayn (1889–1973), were deeply moved by the existing state of the Ottoman Caliphate and Islamic world. They reached to the conclusion that there is a need for a new type of political relationship capable to unite Arabs and believers in Muslim faith, with the ultimate goal of restoring to them a deserved respectable place within the international community.

Among the major themes of interest for the revivalist thought was the subject of education and the educational system. Starting with Rifā'a Rāfi' aṭ-Ṭahtāwī, he – as early as in his Parisian impressions *Kitāb taḥlīṣ al-ibrīz fī talḥīṣ Bārīz, aw ad-dīwān an-naḥīs bi-īwān Bārīs* (The Book of Refining Gold in Summarising Paris)² dealt specifically with many topics of education, namely: *Fī al-'ulūm wa-al-funūn wa-at-tarbiya 'inda al-Faransiyyin* (On sciences, arts and education among the French), and *Taqṣīm al-'ulūm wa-taṣnīfuha 'inda al-Ifranġ* (The division of sciences and their classification).

More important perhaps in the field was Aṭ-Ṭahtāwī's book *Al-Muršid al-amīn li al-banāt wa-al-banīn* (The Faithful Guide for Girls and Boys)³ where he deals with the essence of education (*tarbiya*)⁴, the necessity of its dissemination (*ta'mīm*)⁵, the participation of girls and boys in learning⁶.

In general terms, Aṭ-Ṭahtāwī was convinced in the following⁷:

- classification and organisation of the educational process and subjects in accordance with pupils' capacities and inclinations, thus dividing knowledge into basic subjects (reading, writing, counting) and others;
- careful consideration of young people's capacities and interests after the passage of the basic stage;
- rejection of education for the sole purpose of repetition of fathers' jobs (called: *ṭabaqiyyat at-ta'lim*);
- classification of public educational system to include three stages: primary (*awwalī*), intermediary (*i'dādī*) and secondary (*tanawī*);

² Muḥammad 'Amāra (academic edition and introduction), *Al-A'māl al-kāmila li-Rifā'a Rāfi' aṭ-Ṭahtāwī* (The Complete Works of Rifā'a Rāfi' aṭ-Ṭahtāwī), Al-Mu'assassa al-'Arabiyya li ad-Dirāsāt wa-an-Našr, vol. II, Beirut 1973, pp. 7–266.

³ Ibid., pp. 269–767.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 277–ff.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 292–ff.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 393–ff.

⁷ Ibid., vol. I, Introduction of M. 'Amāra, pp. 233, ff.

- support for the general introduction of primary education, because – as he put it – it is necessary for people as “bread and water” (*al-ḥubz wa-al-mā'*);
- need for education to start at home and become co-ordinated or integrated with state education;
- rejection of the use of physical punishment of pupils.

As to Ḡamāl ad-Dīn al-Afḡānī, his contribution to our subject of interest was somewhat sporadic, if not marginal. In articles *As-Siyāsa wa-al-'ulūm fī al-Qur'ān* (Politics and arts in the Qur'an)⁸, *Falsafat at-tarbiya* (The philosophy of education)⁹, and *Fī at-tarbiya wa-anna 'ilm* (On education and teaching)¹⁰, he wrote in an apologetic tone on our theme:

- Proper governing of land needs wisdom (*ḥikma*), listening to good opinions and consultation (*ṣūrā*);
- The Qur'an is compatible with scientific attainments: e.g. (*aš-šamsu tağrī li-maqarrin lahā*) [the Sun moves to its own destination] means that the Sun is constant, in the Copernican sense, but only moves around its own axis;
- “Westerners” hamper the advance of “Easterners” by sophisticated means, and the breaking of the siege leads through the introduction of the proper knowledge (*al-'ilm aṣ-ṣaḥīḥ*) to the life of the people of the East; hence – full consciousness, hard work and wisdom are required on a permanent basis;
- The necessity of educating girls likewise boys;
- The dissemination of private schools (*madāris ahliyya*) on the basis of patriotism and high respect for moral standards, alongside the need for being cautious about often the lack of such values and standards in public schools (*madāris amīriyya*).

Muḥammad 'Abduh – in turn – developed his major ideas about the reform of education and educational system in the following directions¹¹:

- treatment of education (*tarbiya*) as a magic instrument capable of transforming the society;
- the absence of education means for him the simultaneous absence of justice or integrity (*kamāl*), because the justice of an ignorant is injustice (*ẓulm*);
- compromises are possible for achieving the goal of convincing the rulers of accepting the need for the introduction of educational reform and dissemination of education;
- 'Abduh's education is based upon – and derives from – religion.

The last Ṭaha Ḥusayn's forerunners chosen by the author of this paper, 'Abd ar-Raḥmān al-Kawākibī, dealt with the subject of education in the wider context of despotism and the future Arab/Islamic system of government. Here, it would be worthwhile to present in short the political and intellectual framework of his views on education. Hence, in

⁸ Muḥammad 'Amāra (academic edition and introduction), *Al-A'amāl al-kāmila li-Ḡamāl ad-Dīn al-Afḡānī* (The Complete Works of Ḡamāl ad-Dīn al-Afḡānī), Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī li-aṭ-Ṭibā'a wa-an-Našr, Cairo 1968, pp. 267–270.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 272–276.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 277–281.

¹¹ Muḥammad 'Amāra (academic edition and introduction) vols. I & III of *Al-A'amāl al-kāmila li-Muḥammad 'Abduh* (The Complete Works of Muḥammad 'Abduh), Dār aš-Šurūq, Cairo 1993.

order to avoid incessant persecution and pressure on the part of Ottoman authorities and to be able to freely disseminate his ideas, Al-Kawākibī decided upon emigration to Egypt, where he published his two famous works: *Ṭabā'ī' al-istibdād wa-maṣāri' al-isti'bād* (Nature of Despotism and Struggle against Servitude)¹² and *Umm al-Qurā* (The Mother of Towns – i.e. Mecca). At these times Cairo became a safe haven for many Arab thinkers from Syria and Lebanon. In Egypt, they were free to write things that were unpleasant to the Ottoman rulers.

Shortly after the departure of Al-Kawākibī from Aleppo, the echoes of his articles published in the Egyptian press reached Syria. Hence, the treatise *Nature of Despotism...* was successively published in the Egyptian gazette “Al-Mu‘ayyad”. This work was – as its author stated – the result of thirty years of contemplation and studies upon the real causes of the “great question” occupying the nations of the East – i.e. “the social question of the East in general, and believers in Islam in particular”¹³. Al-Kawākibī defines further the subject of his interest by formulating a question: What brought about the downfall of the Islamic civilisation and what is the way out of that situation? Every time, when the solution seemed close, it appeared that the essence of the matter was not tackled but only a minor matter. “The person, who states that the root of the ailment lies in turning away from religion, stands helpless as to the answer for the question: Why people turned away from religion?” The same could be said about illiteracy as the cause of backwardness¹⁴. Al-Kawākibī’s public activities and as a publicist led him to the conviction that the source of the “social ailment” of Islam and the East is political despotism.

Presenting the results of his contemplation, the author of *The Nature of Despotism...* starts with the notion of politics in connection with – and opposition to – despotism, in the sense that politics as a science and field of human activity deals by definition “with the administration of public issues in compliance with the requirements of reason”. It follows that the primary sphere of its interest should be despotism – i.e. “dealing with common matters in an arbitrary way”¹⁵.

According to Al-Kawākibī, investigation upon despotism should determine the definition and meticulous meaning of despotism. The investigator should also answer

¹² The full title of the work is: *Ṭabā'ī' al-istibdād wa-maṣāri' al-isti'bād. Wa-hiya kalimāt haqq wa-ṣayḥa fī wadd in dahabat al-yaum ma' ar-rīḥ, fa-qad tadhab ḡadan bi-al-awtād! Muḥarriruhā ar-raḥḥāla “Kāf”* (The Nature of Despotism and Struggle against Servitude: They are the Words of Truth and a Shout in the Valley [which] if Today They go with the Wind, will perhaps Tomorrow go in the Pillars! Published by the Traveller “K”). The author of the present article made use of three editions of this work, namely: 1) the edition of Mu‘assasat Nāṣir li-aṭ-Ṭaqāfa of the series “Ḥizānat al-Fikr al-‘Arabī” Beirut 1980 (128 pages of small form); 2) the edition of M. ‘Amāra in the already quoted *Al-A‘amāl al-kāmila...* (pp. 328–338), covering thence 111 pages of large form enriched by lengthy specialist commentaries, whereas the text was based on three earlier publications of the treatise; 3) the latest edition of the work, in the above mentioned *Al-A‘amāl al-kāmila...*, pp. 413–535 of large form, also having an academic commentary.

¹³ Al-Kawākibī, *Ṭabā'ī' al-istibdād...*, op. cit., p. 5.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 8.

a number of questions, of which the most important are: What are the sources of despotism? What are its causes, symptoms and essence? What dangers are connected with this phenomenon? What is the impact of despotism upon religion, science (*'ilm*), human dignity, property, morality, progress and education (*tarbiya*)? Who are helpers of the despot? How to get rid of despotism? What to supersede despotism? What is the nature of despotism?

The author of *Ṭabā'ī' al-istibdād...* refers to historical evidence to establish his case by stating that clergy representative named themselves as intermediaries between people and the Creator, utilising that for emphasising their own greatness and consolidating their personal influence upon the people. The same path was followed by despotic political leaders, who force obedience and acceptance of their own conduct through fear. "In this manner, they create similarity between the image of God and the ruler, while the people do not feel empowered to supervise the conduct of the despot, similarly to their inability to supervise God's deeds"¹⁶.

Al-Kawāḳibī treats the phenomenon of political despotism, emerging in the societies of his times as extremely dangerous, because it leads to the disintegration of those societies, and even to political impotence, in which case every solution would be useless. The mechanism of the emergence of the state of impotence is explained by our author through exploring the impact of despotism upon various aspects of social life.

One of the important aspects discussed in *The Nature of Despotism...* was science and the attitude of the despot to it. Science and scientists are hated by the despot, who is specially unfavourable towards human, natural, philosophical – rational and theoretical sciences due to their role in the enlightenment of the people. Tyrants are interested in the preservation of people's ignorance, because it facilitates the long duration of their rule. A struggle is taking place between scholars and enlightened people on the one hand and the despot on the other; both sides endeavour to win over the people. Moreover, in spite of the atmosphere of tyranny and attempts to deprive the nation access to education, representatives of various fields of sciences work for the enlightenment of human minds. However, there is always the despot, who hinders these efforts, "because what he mostly fears [...] is the realisation by human beings, that freedom is more precious than life"¹⁷.

What should, hence, be the task of the intellectuals? They should not blame the "captives of despotism", particularly the poorer people, but show sympathy towards them. Furthermore, intellectuals have an obligation towards nations and mankind to strive for the removal of pressure upon minds. Al-Kawāḳibī directs fervent appeals to his nation: Wake up from your ignorance! Ignorance stimulates fear from death, while fear from death throws people in the arms of death! Do not assign to anybody the right to your own property, family, life, dignity, religion – justifying ahead any treason or wasting of resources! He further appeals to non-Muslim Arabs to let themselves forget the disputes and injuries of the past, which were the work of provocateurs. We should – he

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 35.

writes – proceed on the path of Austria and the United States of America, where relations are based on the principles of brotherhood, national unity or political links, and not on the spirit of religious, sectarian and regional differences.

The themes, which – according to *Al-Kawākibī* – should be seriously investigated before answering the basic questions of the work, are:¹⁸

1. Essence of the community or nation (*umma*): Is it “a collective of slaves of the victorious owner”, or else a community of race, language, homeland and rights?
2. Separation of political authority from religious authority and education: Should it be allowed to concentrate functions from the various mentioned fields, or prefer specialisation in one of them to the exclusion of others?
3. Progress in science and knowledge: Should the government be empowered to influence the freedom of expression, or the freedom of education – besides the compulsory attendance to primary schools – is to be introduced?
4. The situation of agriculture, handcraft and industry: Is it not better to make the government responsible for activities leading to development in these fields in order to match other rival nations or neighbours?
5. Efforts for the abolition of despotism: Should we expect that from the government itself, or else the acquisition of freedom and abolition of despotism in an irretrievable manner is the task of the nation’s thinkers?

The seeds of the formation of the intellectual stature of Ṭaha Ḥusayn were rooted in late 19th or early 20th century, when an evident struggle took place between the then-called (*muğaddidūn*) and traditionalists (*qudamā’* or *salafiyyūn*). It was the time, when the revivalist thinkers (*nahḍawiyyun*) reached the end of their lives, leaving their message to be continued by the next generation. So, ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān al-Kawākibī parted in 1903 after publishing in Cairo his *Umm al-Qurā* (Mother of Towns), while Muḥammad ‘Abduḥ lectured at Al-Azhar until his death in 1905. Earlier (in 1897) Ğamāl ad-Dīn al-Afġānī ends his life in his “golden cage” in Istanbul as the guest-captive of the despotic Ottoman Sultan.

Perhaps the publication of the work of Qāsim Amīn *Tahrīr al-mar’a* (Emancipation of the Woman) in 1899, followed later by *Al-Mar’a al-ġadīda* (The New Woman), could be regarded as the dawn of new 20th century enlightened orientation. Then we have a series of ideas and demands for social and cultural reforms, propagated by successive thinkers (to mention Muḥammad Rašīd Riḍā, Luṭfī as-Sayyid, ‘Alī ‘Abd ar-Rāziq). It was demanded to cancel religious courts (*šarī’a*), which meant the introduction of civil laws based upon modern legislative foundations; or the innovation of modern secular (both state and private) education: schools and universities were hitherto subject to the nearly sole domination of religious education supervised by the religious institution; or above all the application of parliamentary and party political life to replace the absolute power of kings and rulers.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 115–120.

Among the other major themes of thought to be singled out were: the compatibility of civilisation with Islam, education as the path towards modernism, the relationship between modern statehood and the caliphate, the idea of an Egyptian *umma*, Arab and Islamic identity. A quite comprehensive reflection of all that is found in the ideas and activities of Ṭaha Ḥusayn.

Ṭaha Ḥusayn was born in 1889 in a small locality Kilū, so called because of being one kilometre from Maḡāḡa, and administrative centre of the department of Al-Minyā in central Sa'īd. His father Ḥusayn 'Alī was an official at the local sugar plant. As the seventh among thirteen children, Ṭaha learned above all how to fight and defend himself. This consideration explains to some of his biographers the polemic nature of the writing of this Egyptian thinker – among others – in the press¹⁹. At the age of six he was unfortunate to lose his sight as a consequence of trachoma – badly treated by the barber²⁰. After this accident he joined the circle of the local *faqīh*, who headed a Quranic school, leading the boy to know the Qurān at the age of nine and receive the title of *ṣayh*.

At this stage of life, Ṭaha Ḥusayn was brought up in a tradition society, characterised – according to his own autobiography – by low culture and feeble level of education, as well as susceptibility to superstition²¹. At the next stage, he left his home to study at the famous Al-Azhar. This religious educational centre was not keen on listening to calls for reform or innovation. Here, during the years 1903–1905 he is found among the beginners²².

At Al-Azhar, in spite of the prevailing rigidity and unjustified excessive duties²³, a live intellectual life was focused on Imām Muḥammad 'Abduh. Ṭaha Ḥusayn points out to the impact of the movement inspired by the Imām upon the very conservative university and beyond it²⁴. He mentions about his generation of Azharites that they were strong adherents of the freedom of speech, antagonists of obsolete opinions, and supporters of the right to interpret the sources of faith (*iğtihād*). He reminds himself too about attending the lectures of 'Abdu in the field of Quran interpretation (*tafsīr*), rethoric (*balāḡa*) and logic (*mantīq*). Together with friends, they believed to be distinguished from other students. They regarded themselves as messengers of reform, modernity and revivalism. They decided to wage a struggle against backwardness and polygyny, also to endeavour for limiting the right to divorce. Their plans envisaged the innovation the philosophy of Ibn Sīnā and Ibn Ruṣd, besides the complete neglecting of obsolete scriptures that had hitherto devastated the mentality of Al-Azhar and the minds of Azharites²⁵.

¹⁹ 'Abd al-'Azīz Šaraf, *Ṭaha Ḥusayn wa-zawāl al-muğtama' at-taqlīdī* (Ṭaha Ḥusayn and the Demise of the Traditional Society), Al-Qāhira 1977, pp. 17–18.

²⁰ Ṭaha Ḥusayn, *Al-Ayyām* (Diary), vol. I, Al-Qāhira 1929, pp. 20; 1–3; 145–146.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 93; 96.

²² 'Abd al-'Azīz Šaraf, op. cit., p. 23.

²³ Samīḥ Karīm, *Maḡā yabqā min Ṭaha Ḥusayn?* (What has remained of Ṭaha Ḥusayn?), 2nd edition, Bayrūt 1977, pp. 29–30.

²⁴ A press interview delivered to Salāma Mūsā: *Sā'a ma' Ṭaha Ḥusayn* (An hour with Ṭaha Ḥusayn), "Al-Hilāl", November 1927.

²⁵ Ṭaha Ḥusayn, *Riḥlat al-rabī' wa-as-sayf* (The Spring and Summer Trips), Bayrūt 1957, pp. 134–135.

With the death of Muḥammad ‘Abduh, al-Azhar introduced substantial restrictions against supporters of innovation. For this reason, Ṭaha and two of his colleagues (Aḥmad Ḥasan az-Zayyāt and Maḥmūd az-Zanātī) stopped attending lectures with the exception of selected ones – for which they were relegated from the list of students; and students rights were only restored to them only due to the intervention of Luṭfī as-Sayyid. However, even then he shifted from one group to another, showing simultaneously dislike for the atmosphere of combating the innovation movement and ideas on the part of traditionalists. Hence, we note an early readiness on his side to reject the traditional mode of thinking, while years spent at al-Azhar he regarded as an exceptionally dark period in his life²⁶.

Shortly, in 1908 a private Egyptian University, also called Old University (*Al-Ġāmi‘a al-Miṣriyya al-Qadīma*) was established. Without interrupting studies at Al-Azhar, where he continued his education until 1912, he started to attend lectures at the Egyptian University. In contrast to Al-Azhar, here lectures explained issues and it was not necessary to explain the very lectures²⁷. The general intellectual transformation he underwent directed his interests towards the knowledge of sources, as against the acceptance of opinions of self-declared authorities. He focused his main attention upon literature, and not theology as his father wished. The gap in the substance and method of teaching between Al-Azhar and the Old University, as well as his increasing adherence to the latter, lead Ṭaha Ḥusayn to the path of revolt against the religious university and collision with its *ṣayḥs*. He expressed this clearly in press publications on the need to reform this institution and its curriculum²⁸.

At *Al-Ġāmi‘a al-Miṣriyya* he was among listeners to lectures of Aḥmad Zakī on Islamic civilisation and of Aḥmad Kamāl on ancient Egyptian civilisation. Thinking about attaining a scientific grant to France, he learns the French language. At the same time he prepares a doctoral thesis *Dikrā Abī al-‘Alā’* (In the Memory of Abū al-‘Alā’), devoted to the also blind Arab poet-philosopher of the 10th–11th century. The public discussion of the dissertation took place in May 1914, and he was granted the title of doctor with distinction. It was the first Ph.D. title granted by the so-called Old University.

Ṭaha was granted a stipend to France, and instead of Paris he travelled in 1914 to Montpellier (after the outbreak of World War I, the French capital came within the war zone). After a brake in studies in connection with the bankruptcy of the Egyptian University, he again returns to Paris (1915), this time to the Paris Sorbonne, where he attends lectures on the history of ancient Greece, Rome and Byzantium, as well as modern history, philosophy, sociology and French literature. In addition to these, he attended lectures on the Qurān and the field of psychology, delivered at College de France. Moreover, he was often present at the Library of St. Genovef. He learned Latin, too. Everywhere

²⁶ He used to indulge into polemics with Azharite professors, and they did not spare him invectives: *Mudakkarāt Ṭaha Ḥusayn* (The Memoirs of Ṭaha Ḥusayn), Bayrūt 1967, pp. 7–8; Samīḥ Karīm, op. cit., pp. 35–36.

²⁷ *Mudakkarāt Ṭaha Ḥusayn*, op. cit., p. 11.

²⁸ Samīḥ Karīm, op. cit., p. 29.

he was educated under the guidance of prominent professors, and doctoral thesis on the social philosophy of Ibn Haldūn was prepared at the seminar of Émile Durkheim²⁹.

The sources that shaped Ṭaha Ḥusayn intellectually were:

- a) Egyptian sources such as literature and folk writing, and also the heritage of ancient Egypt; for him new Egypt shall rise upon the eternal pillars of old Egypt, including antic culture³⁰;
- b) Arab sources, which are composed, according to him, of language, literature, religion and civilisation (*ḥaḍāra*);
- c) Foreign sources, always present and influential in the history and life of Egypt; however, in individual case of the discussed thinker, the primary factors are French culture, next Latin civilisation.

It is difficult, even briefly, to present the works of Ṭaha Ḥusayn. None the less, it is necessary to point out to some of them, posing upon the most significant one for our deliberations, namely: *Mustaqbal at-ṭaqāfa fī Miṣr* (The Future of Culture in Egypt). We find among them the Arabic translation from Greek of Aristotle's *The Athenian System*, translation of Greek dramas (including *Electra* and *Antigone* of Sophocles), an autobiography *Al-Ayyām* (The Days), works from the field of literary criticism, fiction and short stories, commentary to the life of the Prophet Muḥammad, history of the Rightly Guided caliphs. In 1926 his controversial book *Fī aš-ši'r al-ġāhili* (On the Poetry of the Ġāhiliyya Period) appeared. Soon, it was withdrawn from bookshops, and the author had to face a judicial trail against the background of hostile intimidation carried out for religious, political and scientific or rational considerations³¹.

The professional career of Ṭaha Ḥusayn was as spectacular as his writings. After his return from France in 1919 he was appointed lecturer of ancient history of Greece and Rome at the Egyptian University, and when in 1925 it attained the status of a government institution (from that time it became called the New University: *Al-Ġāmi'a al-Ġadīda*) he was nominated lecturer of Arabic literature at the Department of Humanities (*Kulliyat al-Ādāb*). Next, he occupied the post of Dean of that Department, but had to resign when the political and religious elites reminded themselves about the mentioned work *Fī aš-ši'r al-ġāhili*, to return to that function in 1930. However, in 1932 another scandal broke out, because – in the name of preserving the prestige of academic titles – Ṭaha Ḥusayn rejected the requests to grant four ministers the title of doctor honoris causa ('Alī Māhir, Ibrāhīm Yaḥyā, 'Abd al-'Azīz Fahmī, Tawfiq Rif'at). It should be noted that the four

²⁹ Ṭaha Ḥusayn, *Étude analytique et critique de la philosophie sociale d'Ibn Khaldoun*, Paris 1917 (a doctoral thesis, Sorbonne 1917); arabic translation: Muḥammad 'Abd Allāh 'Inān, *Falsafat Ibn Haldūn al-iğtimā'iyya: taḥlīl wa-naqd* (The Social Philosophy of Ibn Haldūn: An Analysis and Criticism), Al-Qāhira, 1st edition, 1925.

³⁰ Ṭaha Ḥusayn, *Mustaqbal at-ṭaqāfa fī Miṣr* (The Future of Culture in Egypt), [in:] *Al-Mağmū'a al-kāmila li-mu'allafāt ad-duktūr Ṭaha Ḥusayn* (The Complete Collection of the Works of Dr Ṭaha Ḥusayn), vol. IX, p. 16.

³¹ More on the subject, in: *Muḥākamāt Ṭaha Ḥusayn. Naṣṣ qarār al-ittihām didda Ṭaha Ḥusayn sanat 1927 ḥawla kitābihi Fī aš-ši'r al-ġāhili. Taḥqīq wa-at-ta'ālīq* Hayrī Šiblī (The Trial of Ṭaha Ḥusayn. The Text of Indictment Against Ṭaha Ḥusayn of 1927 about his Book *Fī aš-ši'r al-ġāhili*), Bayrūt 1972, p. 70.

received doctoral honorary degrees from the University's College of Law, and Ṭaha Ḥusayn was altogether dismissed from the posts of Dean and lecturer (1932)³².

During the following years, he worked as editor-in-chief of the newspaper "Al-Wādī" (The Valley), again as lecturer at the Department/College of Humanities (since 1934), Dean at the College (1936–1939), simultaneously inspector of culture at the Ministry of Education (1939–1942), adviser to the Minister of Education and at the same time Rector of the Alexandria University (1942–1944). It is worthwhile to add, that he played an important role in the establishment of this University. This was in line with his concept of creating an academic-didactic centre, free from government and party pressures, capable to draw its own criteria and goals and to attract the best students, open to Mediterranean culture, and able to become a centre of humanistic and classical studies³³.

He was however dismissed from Rector's post in 1944, because the King disfavoured him and Alexandria was then the summer capital of Egypt. After this date he worked at non-governmental posts until 1950, when he received the post of Minister of Education in the Wafd Party government. He occupied the post until January 26, 1952 (the known Cairo fire). In his capacity as Minister, he soon decided to introduce free intermediate and technical education (primary education became free in 1944). He attempted to cover higher education by his decision, but King Fārūq rejected the idea. Besides, Minister Ḥusayn brought about a change in the status of a huge number of semi-primary schools (*awwaliyya*) into primary, and opened thousands of new classes. His motto was: "Education is as necessary for people as water and air", for which he was mockingly called "minister of water and air" (*wazīr al-mā' wa-al-hawā'*)³⁴.

These activities for the cause of educational reform, also his later activity after the Egyptian revolution of 1952 (membership of Supreme Council of Arts, Literature and Social Sciences, chairmanship of the Academy of Arabic Language in Cairo, membership of the Egyptian Academy, correspondent membership of numerous foreign academies of sciences), in addition to his incessant intellectual creativity – were an embodiment of his convictions and thoughts declared since his return from studies in France. The arising deep thoughts took the shape of a detailed programme in his work: *Mustaqbal at-ṭaqāfa fī Miṣr*.

The background for the book were such historical events as the signing of British-Egyptian Treaty that granted Egypt formal independence, the liquidation of the capitulation system in 1937 by the Montreux International conference that hitherto crippled Egypt's economic life, the joining by Egypt the League of Nations in the same year, in addition to the expectations and hopes that at last Egypt will follow the example of democratic countries³⁵.

³² Samīḥ Karīm, *Ma 'ārik Ṭaha Ḥusayn al-adabiyya wa-al-fikriyya* (The Intellectual Battles of Ṭaha Ḥusayn), Bayrūt 1977, 2nd edition, pp. 56–57.

³³ Albert Hourani, op. cit., p. 404.

³⁴ S. Karīm, *Maḍa yabqā...*, op. cit., Chapter *Wazīr al-mā' wa-al-hawā'* (Minister of Water and Air), pp. 97–110.

³⁵ Ṭaha Ḥusayn, *Mustaqbal at-ṭaqāfa fī Miṣr*, p. 7; William L. Cleveland, *A History of Modern East*, Westview Press, Oxford-San Francisco 1944, pp. 185–186; A. Hourani, op. cit., p. 390.

The work *Mustqbal at-taqāfa fī Miṣr*, which was first published in 1938, was accompanied by intense widely-publicised discussions, not less than those that accompanied the publication of *Fī aš-ši'r al-ġāhilī* in 1926. *Mustqbal* however occupies an exceptional place among the attainments of the author. It has consolidated his position as an outstanding writer, also in the capacity of a reformist and modernist thinker – author of an original socio-political thought. He remained a steadfast continuator of the work of 'Alī 'Abd ar-Rāziq³⁶.

The investigated work is an important milestone in Ṭaha Ḥusayn's intellectual development. In the previous period, he was inspired by literature as well as by ancient thought and culture. After the publication of this book, his writings started to become dominated by interest in the political, social and educational life of his times and society³⁷. Here we find the basic elements, which he developed later in academic lectures published, among others, in such collections as *Ḥadīṭ al-arbi'ā'* (Wednesday Talks), *Qādat al-fikr* (Pioneers of Thought), *Min ḥadīṭ aš-ši'r* (Talks on Poetry).

The ideas covered by the analysed book could be briefly presented as follows:

The Egyptian path towards the future and progress will definitely be the same as the one followed at present by Europeans. Proceeding in that direction Egyptians become their partners, and consequently participants in the creation of human civilisation. Since the dawn of history, the Egyptian mind had been functioning within the sphere of Mediterranean culture, in ancient times the Egyptian mind did not possess an oriental nature.

We have undertaken an obligation towards Europe (meaning the treaty with Britain and the Egyptian constitution) to apply the same doctrine of government, a similar administrative system, an analogical legislation, and so on. Now, if we reject these obligations and return to our archaic pattern, we can entangle ourselves into troubles. The next important case is the old-fashioned thought of al-Azhar and Azharites. This consideration, against the background of the strong position of the institution in the Egyptian educational system, creates a barrier that encounters the introduction of patriotic and citizenship ideas in the modern European sense³⁸.

For Ṭaha Ḥusayn, neither faith nor language are an adequate basis for the formation or functioning of the state. It should be remembered that in the past Muslims arranged their relations with the outer world, and formulated their policies, on the basis of the category of practical benefits³⁹ – and not religious, linguistic or ethnic arguments. In other words, a long time ago believers in Islam discovered one of the foundations of our contemporary life, i.e.: politics is one thing, while faith is something else.

³⁶ During the wide campaign of fierce attacks against 'Alī 'Abd ar-Rāziq, the author of *Al-Islām wa-uṣūl al-ḥukm* (Islam and the Rules of Governance), Ṭaha Ḥusayn publicly and steadfastly defended him.

³⁷ 'Alī Sa'īd, *Mustqbal at-taqāfa fī Miṣr fī maṣīrat Ṭaha Ḥusayn al-fikriyya* (*The Future of Culture in Egypt in Ṭaha Ḥusayn's Intellectual March*), [in:] *Ṭaha Ḥusayn: Al-'Aqlāniyya, al-dimuqrāṭiyya, al-ḥadāta* (Ṭaha Ḥusayn: Rationalism, Democracy, Modernity), Dimašq (n.d.), p. 210.

³⁸ *Mustaqbal...*, op. cit., pp. 438–440.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 21.

Ṭaha Ḥusayn refutes the idea, which puts the allegedly materialist West in opposition to the spiritual East⁴⁰. According to him, the opinion regarding the material civilisation as the sole product of matter is unjustified. Surely, it is the product of imagination (*ḥayāl*) and spirit (*rūḥ*), the outcome of live spirit attached to the mind, and the result of thought that generates activity. Thus, he regarded the mentioned opposition of East and West as ridiculous.

In general terms, the work is an “attempt to outline Egyptian identity”⁴¹. The strong sympathy for the Egyptian society was coupled with an excellent awareness of its weaknesses and shortcomings, as well as the ways of their correction. A central moment of his thought is culture and its value. “Had it not been for Egypt’s carelessness, willingly or not, towards the essence of culture and science, it would not have lost its freedom, and would not have needed such a glorious relentless fight for the restoration of freedom and independence”⁴².

The book works out then a comprehensive programme of reforming the entire sphere of culture, a programme bringing in effect the regeneration of culture and the nation.

The development of education has to be the first remedy, and only the state in the foreseen future should be assigned with educational issues. Due to the fact that the decisive majority of Egyptians were illiterate, it is the state which has to prepare them to understanding the fundamentals and goals of democracy⁴³. It is worthwhile to add that the insignificant number of the literate among Egyptians (Ṭaha Ḥusayn estimates them as about 20% of the population) were subjected to diversified types of education.

First, there was the state-secular type. The British had seriously limited its range and level. “For years we have been doing what we can to repair what the English had put out of order”⁴⁴. There was besides the foreign education, established as a result of grand concessions, which were not subjected to Egyptian government jurisdiction. In this case, the idea was to emancipate Egypt from alien biased education. The same idea applied to French, Italian, British, American and German secular schools. Among the functioning types, there were also the private Egyptian educational institutions of different levels; a type of education that disseminated widely at times when the few state schools and institutions could not satisfy the nation’s rising demands in this field.

Finally, there existed the religious education carried out by Al-Azhar, to which the author devoted a substantial part of his work. The religious status of this institution and the great allegiance of people towards it protects it from the supervision of civil authorities. The nature of this educational institution, the conservative attitude of its leadership and their application of medieval practices, bring about a situation whereas Al-Azhar educates pupils and students in a specific manner, contradictory to what is done by secular education. Thereby, two divergent visions of events and issues arise.

⁴⁰ Ibid., Chapter XII.

⁴¹ Ramaḍān Muḥammad Ramaḍān al-Ġāriyya, *Al-Ittiḡāh al-islāmī fī adab Ṭaha Ḥusayn* (The Islamic Orientation in the Literature of Ṭaha Ḥusayn), University of ‘Ayn Šams 1995/1996, p. 208.

⁴² *Musaqbal...*, op. cit., pp. 12–13.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 81.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 82.

Al-Azhar desires against all rules to impose its will upon public life in the name of faith. This higher educational institution attempts to monopolise scientific and practical life (*al-'ilmiyya wa-al-'amaliyya*): the state introduces new branches of higher studies, then Al-Azhar introduces the same; the state defines higher academic degrees, Al-Azhar does the same. Subsequently, it directs to the state categorical demands; for, since it has the same institutions and academic degrees, its graduates should then have the same governmental posts. Otherwise, it claims that the state inflicts damage upon religious hierarchy and faith. The result is the establishment of a dual educational system. "Nowhere outside Egypt is it attempted to achieve such absurd demands"⁴⁵.

He did not intend to radically curtail the rights of Al-Azhar, but merely to adjust them to requirements of the "proper democratic system, so that Al-Azhar would not become a state within a state [...]"⁴⁶. He postulates then the formation of the educational profile there in compliance with the determinants of the country's endeavour for national unity, and also the requirements of consolidating democracy and independence⁴⁷.

To the demand of Al-Azhar to secure its sole responsibility for teaching the Arabic language, Ṭaha Ḥusayn replies: "Those who hold the opinion that only Al-Azhar can be trustworthy in caring for Arabic language, they uphold a naive view. It is not Al-Azhar that introduced the sciences of Arabic. Rather Al-Azhar is an incident in the sciences of Arabic"⁴⁸. It is true that Al-Azhar preserved these studies for centuries, but it did not develop them nor added anything new. Thereby, it is prepared to monopolise supervision upon teaching the Arabic language; it cannot match the requirements of modern life⁴⁹. Hence, this institution cannot be assigned with the task of teaching the Arabic language, nor preparing teachers for the subject. The state has to do that, and the state has to prepare for its performance.

The central place of the general access to education in the thought of Ṭaha Ḥusayn is connected with the consideration that for him freedom could not coexist with ignorance, while education makes the individual conscious about his or her rights and duties. Freedom depends on the possession of so-defined consciousness, however, democracy has to ensure freedom. A further conclusive idea: only a free individual could possess the consciousness of affinity to the wide national community (*umma*), having Egypt as its geographical boundariess⁵⁰.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 44.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 95.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 94.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 291.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 293.

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 101–106.