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# Conceptions of Modern Egyptian Childhood During the Period of the “Liberal Experiment” in Egypt, 1922–1952: A Comparative Study of Taha Hussein’s, “An Egyptian Childhood,” and Sayyid Qutb’s, “A Child from the Village”

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CONCEPTIONS OF MODERN EGYPTIAN CHILDHOOD  
DURING THE PERIOD OF THE 'LIBERAL EXPERIMENT' IN  
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HUSSEIN'S '*AN EGYPTIAN CHILDHOOD*', AND SAYID  
QUTB'S '*A CHILD FROM THE VILLAGE*'

by

NORA ELGABALAWY

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Middle Eastern Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2019

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Middle Eastern Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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## ABSTRACT

Conceptions of Modern Egyptian Childhood During the Period of the  
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Nora Elgabalawy

Advisor: Samira Haj

Counter to French social historian Philippe Aries' argument, the concept of an Egyptian childhood has its own traceable history, separate from the modern Western European concept of childhood. As shown, with the presence of language on childhood, in a number of pre-modern Arabic/Islamic literature, notions of childhood had a rich history outside of modern Western Europe. But, depictions of an Egyptian childhood in modern Egyptian literature, specifically two childhood autobiographies/memoirs, Taha Hussein's *An Egyptian Childhood* and Sayyid Qutb's *A Child from the Village*, do not emerge seamlessly from these early pre-modern depictions of childhood. Both Hussein and Qutb wrote their childhood autobiographies/memoirs, at a time in Egypt, known as the 'liberal experiment' from 1922-1952. During this period, a variety of literature around Egyptian childhood had emerged, as well as, literature on the Egyptian child's development. This paper traces how normalized discourse on Egyptian childhood had emerged during the period of the 'liberal experiment', and shows the impact of modernity and nation-building on reforming this normalized language on the child. Then, through a comparison of Hussein's childhood autobiography and Qutb's childhood memoir, this paper will show how both authors translated this normalized discourse on Egyptian childhood, within their own generational and socio-cultural experiences, and their placement within the 'liberal experiment', leading them to interpret two differing conceptions of what an Egyptian childhood looks like.

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## INTRODUCTION

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*“To the author of al-Ayyām, Doctor Taha Hussayn Bey:  
These, dear sir, are “days” like your “days,” lived by a village child, some are similar to your days and some are different.  
The difference reflects the difference between one generation and another, one village and another, one life and another,  
indeed the difference between one nature and another, between one attitude and another. But they are, when all is said and  
done, also “days.” “*  
- Sayyid Qutb, *A Child from the Village* (2004)

Nestled in a sleepy French town, locked away from the negative press and disparagement by his fellow countrymen, Taha Hussein poured his thoughts down on paper (Attar, 14). The year was 1926, and Hussein, regarded as a ‘man of letters’ in Egypt, had just written and published his first book titled, *Pre-Islamic Poetry*. The book ignited mass controversy and backlash in Egypt, when it was published, and led to charges of heresy against Hussein (Attar, 14; Hourani, 327). Rattled by the reactions of his fellow countrymen, Hussein left Egypt, briefly, for the safety of French shores, his French wife and daughter in tow. Away from the censors, Hussein penned an account of his childhood, in just nine days, growing up in the outskirts of urban life, in the Egyptian village of Maghagha (Attar, 14). Written as the first part, of the three-part autobiography, *Al-Ayyam* (The Days), Hussein’s account of his childhood, was compiled and published in book form in 1927. The book was titled, *An Egyptian Childhood* (ibid, 14). Remarkably, despite the implications of heresy against him, the publishing of *An Egyptian Childhood*, would become Hussein’s redemption in Egyptian society (Hussein, Introduction). Hussein’s account of his enduring childhood, portrayed a quintessential story of an ‘Egyptian childhood’, of that time. As a child raised in a village, prior to the effects of modernization and steeped in ‘backward’ traditions, Hussein portrayed a challenging childhood. The outmoded conventions of village life, compounded with going blind at a young age, presented an impediment on Hussein’s early development. A

tough stage in his life, Hussein had to transcend his hopeless upbringing, to become a prominent modern critical thinker, later on, in his adult life (Qutb, xxii). Eventually, Hussein published the rest of his autobiography, *Al-Ayyam*, and would later write and publish various books, but *An Egyptian Childhood*, would still be regarded in Egypt, as well as abroad, as Hussein's greatest work (Hussein, introduction). And yet, despite the success of *An Egyptian Childhood*, Hussein's portrayal of his childhood would not resonate with all Egyptians.

In 1946, around twenty years later, after *An Egyptian Childhood* was published, Sayyid Qutb penned his own childhood memoir (Qutb, xviii). Qutb, like Hussein, was also regarded then, as a 'man of letters' in Egypt. He was well-versed on the state of literature in Egypt and wrote extensively, from poetry, prose, to other forms of literature (Qutb, xvii).<sup>1</sup> However, at that moment in Egypt's history, Qutb came to occupy a polarized space relative to Hussein. Egypt had just entered an indeterminate period, with its nominal independence from Britain in 1922 (Qutb, xvi-xvii). During this period, many Egyptians attempted to build and cultivate an independent, modern Egypt, separate from its colonial moldings, towards something essentially 'Egyptian' (Morrison, "Nation-Building and Childhood in Early Twentieth Century Egypt", 87). But multiple queries emerged around the question, of what it meant to be Egyptian and what should the trajectory of the modern Egyptian nation look like? Within this indeterminate point in Egypt's history, Hussein personified arguments to adapt modernizing European modes and concepts in Egypt. Whereas, Qutb argued that the nation should look inward, towards indigenous influences to modernize (Qutb, xxiii). Both Hussein and Qutb, as 'men of letters', represented the literary and cultural arms of their differing viewpoints. As both literary thinkers, they employed their viewpoints through their literature, at a moment when modern Egyptian literature burgeoned into a domain, where varying

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<sup>1</sup> This paper, analyzes Sayyid Qutb, prior to joining the Muslim Brotherhood in 1948, and before he published his more known, Islamic-based literature.

discourse and debate around the nation occurred. Qutb who was familiar with Hussein's writings and his autobiography, produced an account of his own childhood, in response (Qutb, xxiii). He titled his memoir, *A Child from the Village*. By writing an anecdote of his own childhood, Qutb postured his childhood memoir, to debate and express differences with Hussein's childhood. In effect, Qutb presented his own childhood, his own 'days', as an alternative experience to Hussein's 'quintessential' Egyptian childhood (Qutb, xxi-xxiii). Qutb's own experience of childhood, he writes, are mediated by what he notes as differences in socio-cultural, as well as, generational experiences, from Hussein's own upbringing (Qutb, dedication).

An interesting note that may be taken for granted when analyzing both childhood autobiographies/memoirs, is the normalized way in which both authors discuss their own childhoods. Both authors, express a growing concern for what an Egyptian childhood looked like, and their concern was not isolated. In the period of writing their autobiographies, Hussein in 1927 and Qutb in 1946, there was a proliferation of scholarly literature in and around childhood in Egypt from 1922 to 1952, known as the era of the 'liberal experiment'. However, at the time, the normalization of literary discourse around childhood in Egypt did not emerge organically, within Egypt's history (Morrison, *Childhood, Modernity, and Nation building in Egypt*, 14-15; Marsot, 97). What I want to understand, is what was the normative discourse around 'childhood', during this period of the 'liberal experiment' in Egypt? What were the norms surrounding 'childhood' in modern Egypt, and how did these norms emerge? Can the presence and surge of literature on 'childhood' during this period, be a result of cultural imperialism and the imposition of a western concept of 'childhood'? Or does Egypt, which had begun to modernize prior to its colonial occupation, have a greater array of historical influence in which, the concept of Egyptian childhood emerged, separate from Western influence? And lastly, I want to understand how both Taha Hussein and Sayyid Qutb, who wrote their respective childhood autobiographies within this period,

through their own unique experiences and differences, re-translated these norms, and re-produced their own meanings of Egyptian childhood?

In this paper, I will trace the history of this concept of an ‘Egyptian childhood’ and how childhood care and development became part of this normative discourse. I will show how language on childhood had existed prior to interaction with modern influences, as shown in pre-modern Arabic/Islamic literature. I will then show that the language and discourse on childhood in Egypt did change, with the modernization of the country and with the process of nation-building. This new language of childhood development became synonymous with the development of the new nation, but what the nation looked like became an issue of contention, and as such the perception of an Egyptian childhood, was as well. Through my comparative analysis of Hussein’s *An Egyptian Childhood*, with Qutb’s *A Child from the Village*, I will show how childhood was a concept that was constantly being re-translated through different experiences in Egypt, within the spectrum of the ‘liberal experiment’. Discourse on Egyptian childhood was not static in Egypt, but a concept that was constantly being reconfigured and reformulated depending on the varied backgrounds, be it generational or cultural. In the case of Hussein, he was a generation older than Qutb, and he represented the beginning of the ‘liberal experiment’ in Egypt. He argued for liberal humanism in Egypt, and believed that the modern Egyptian nation should break from its past, and free itself from backward Eastern traditions, to shape itself in the shadow of Europe, towards the West. In his childhood autobiography, he contends that outdated modes of ‘tradition’ were restricting the development of the Egyptian child. Hussein believed that the child should be freed from the fetters of ‘tradition’, so that he can develop free thought and reason, to become a fully-formed, rational national subject, placed within the progressivist history and trajectory of the nation. Qutb, on the other hand, was a part of a budding second-generation of *effendiyya*, alongside the growth of nationalism, whom emerged at a time when the ‘liberal experiment’ proved to be a

failure with rising nationalist populist sentiments. Qutb was frustrated by the liberal thinkers, on what he saw as the complete emulation of the West in modeling the Egyptian nation. He, as many others during his time, believed that Egypt should look to its already rich history, representing the East, to build a modernized Egyptian nation. Unlike Hussein, Qutb through his childhood memoir, argued that the child cannot remove himself from his rural upbringing, and he cannot cast off his rural beliefs and habits. He believed that developing the child's mind, through secular education was important, but he also emphasized the importance of moral cultivation for the child, harmonizing 'traditional' Islamic education, to not only form civic virtues, but moral virtues as well.

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## INTRODUCTION TO CHILDHOOD STUDIES AND METHODOLOGY

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### ***Philippe Aries and the Development of Childhood Studies***

In order to discuss the concept of childhood in Egypt, as it had appeared during the 'liberal experiment', I will need to first discuss the development of childhood studies as a discipline. The discipline of childhood studies seeks to understand 'childhood' as a concept, with its own traceable history and language, separate from adulthood. Studying the history of 'childhood' as a concept, was method first popularized by French social historian, Philippe Aries (Morrison, *Childhood, Modernity, and Nation building in Egypt*, 22). In his book, *Centuries of Childhood*, published in 1960, Aries demonstrated how shifts in *mentalities*, unconscious perceptions, around the 'child' and 'childhood', occurred over a period of time, with the onslaught of new modern ideas in 15<sup>th</sup>-century Western Europe (Aries, 335). Aries examined various cultural sources, from art, literature,

to religious iconography, drawing back to the Middle Ages, to examine how childhood appeared in Western Europe. Aries concluded that ‘childhood’, as an important, delicate and primary developmental stage in life, was not a natural phenomenon, but was only discovered in the 15<sup>th</sup>-century, with the advent of new, modern-scientific ideas that began among a few men of reason. These men of reason saw the delicate nature of the ‘child’, and the importance of ‘childhood’, as a formative stage of development, for forming the modern individual (Aries, 335). Aries argued, it wasn’t until these men of authority, began to re-shape institutions, like the family and education, to center around the ‘child’, that the notion of ‘childhood’, began to enter mainstream discourse in 17<sup>th</sup>-century Western Europe (Aries, 315).

Despite Aries’ groundbreaking study, several scholars have re-examined childhood in Europe, and have dismissed Aries’ study as a whole. Aries’ argument that the notion of childhood did not exist prior to the modern period, has been disproved by many scholars. Critics also found that Aries’ study denies the organic language on childhood outside of modern Western Europe. In spite of these criticisms of Aries’ work, the relevancy of his methods and arguments, spurred further interrogation of tracing the history of the concept of childhood, specifically outside of Western Europe (Morrison, *Childhood, Modernity, and Nation building in Egypt*, 22-23). As I will discuss in the next section, Aries’ Eurocentric study has recently been re-interrogated, mostly by post-colonial scholars (Morrison, *Childhood, Modernity, and Nation building in Egypt*, 30-31). Specifically, pertaining to my thesis, I will briefly highlight a few post-colonial scholarships that emerged within the history of Modern Middle East, which trace the history of the concept of childhood within a pre-modern Arab/Islamic past.

### ***Tracing the History of Childhood Through Pre-Modern Islamic/Arabic Literature***

The use of studying literature, and other literary sources to ascertain perceptions of childhood, was a method used by Aries, to trace and understand changing perceptions of children among the lay masses (Aries, 19 & 49). Recent Middle Eastern scholarship has attempted to trace the history of the concept of childhood, within Modern Middle East history, by employing Aries' method of tracing depictions of children, and childhood through literature. By looking at pre-modern Islamic and Arabic literature, these authors found that pre-modern Islamic and Arab civilizations did possess their own meaning, language, and history on childhood, sans the influence of Western modernity (Morrison, *Childhood, Modernity, and Nation building in Egypt*, 30-31).

One Middle Eastern scholar who employed this method was historian Avner Giladi. Giladi traced the presence of depictions and language on 'childhood', in Medieval Islamic Literature. Giladi published, *Concepts of Childhood and Attitudes Towards Children in Medieval Islam*, in 1992, in response to Aries. In his book, Giladi found an abundance of language on childhood within pre-modern Arab/Islamic texts, which showed an awareness of the distinctions between the child 'Self', and the adult 'Self' (Giladi, 151-152). Essentially, Giladi argued that the notion of childhood in pre-modern times existed outside of modern Western European, contrary to Aries' view.

Like Giladi, Modern Middle East historian Heidi Morrison responds to Aries with her award-winning dissertation, *Childhood, Modernity, and Nation-Building in Egypt, 1890-1939*. In her dissertation, Morrison uses a similar method to Aries, tracing depictions of childhood through literature, specifically autobiographies, in Modern Egypt. She argues that a distinct language and view on childhood had existed for Egyptians to pull from, prior to the influence of modernity, counter to what Aries argues (Morrison, ix). Despite Morrison's rebuke of Aries' main argument, she does take seriously Aries' overarching query, that focuses on the transformative effect that

modernity has on shaping perceptions and depictions of childhood in Modern Egypt. Like Aries, who analyzed the impact of new ideas on changing *mentalities* on childhood overtime, Morrison demonstrates, that despite the presence of the notion of childhood in Egypt prior to modernization, the notion of childhood was re-examined and redefined in Egypt, as the country began to modernize and build the nation in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Morrison, *Childhood, Modernity, and Nation-Building in Egypt*, 3-4).

### ***Autobiography and the Concept of a Modern Egyptian Childhood***

Equivalent to Morrison and Aries, I want to understand how changes with the modernizing period affected the notion of childhood in Modern Egypt. I specifically want to build on Morrison's use of autobiographies and memoirs as a method for studying the concept of childhood in Modern Egypt (Morrison, *Childhood, Modernity, and Nation-Building in Egypt*, 13). 'Autobiography' is not only a prevalent medium that arises in childhood studies it also has a long history within pre-modern Arab/Islamic civilizations (Brustad, 36-37). The change in the 'genre' itself in Modern Egypt reflects an ongoing shift in society where literature alongside other spaces in Modern Egypt, had to be re-examined and re-valued given the changing modern times. Childhood autobiographies/memoirs emerged among other varied modern literature in Egypt at a time when nationalist discourse wanted to re-define and re-build the nation (Morrison, *Childhood, Modernity, and Nation-Building in Egypt*, 17-18). Many literary thinkers retold their childhood experiences as a means to share their differing ordeals of modernization (ibid, 17-18). Morrison uses these autobiographies/memoirs as a source and focuses on the testimony of the author through the mind of the child. By focusing on the mind of the child, Morrison tries to uplift a silent source within historical literature, the child's voice, which prior historical Middle Eastern literature touch on the

experiences and perceptions of the child, but rarely consider the child's point of view (Morrison, *Childhood, Modernity, and Nation-Building in Egypt*, 29-30).

Distinctive from Morrison's use of childhood autobiographies and memoirs, I will not be focusing on the author's viewpoint of his childhood, through the mind of the child. Instead I will focus on how the 'adult' author, within the time of producing his own autobiography, chose to reproduce an account of his childhood, specifically at a time when literature was used as a tool to communicate and debate Egypt's future. I will highlight that these authors conceptualized their own childhood, through a teleological approach within their autobiographies, in order to convey their views and opinions on the trajectory of the nation. Specifically, I want to look at two childhood autobiographies, Taha Hussein's *An Egyptian Childhood* and Sayyid Qutb's *A Child from the Village*. Both Hussein and Qutb were 'men of letters' in Egypt, who used various forms of literature, to debate differing views on the nation and childhood in Egypt. Both authors, came from different backgrounds and generations, and represented polarizing sides of a debate around Egypt's future, and in effect, the Egyptian child's future. I want to compare how these differences impacted Qutb and Hussein's own interpretations of their childhoods, within the time of writing their autobiographies/memoirs. In order to compare both Hussein and Qutb's interpretations, we must first trace how the discourse around childhood became normalized, and how it emerged within the 'liberal experiment' in Modern Egypt.

In Egypt, similar to what Morrison argues, the modernizing project had a great impact on the changing discourse around childhood (Morrison, *Childhood, Modernity, and Nation building in Egypt*, ix). Language on childhood, and an awareness of the child in pre-modern Arabic/Islamic literature, shows that there was a prior history on childhood, to pull from (Morrison, *Childhood, Modernity, and Nation building in Egypt*, 10-11). But with the modernizing project in Egypt, it necessitated the re-examining and revamping of prior concepts, like childhood, within a new modern lens. Thus, the child would be imbued with new meaning, within a new modern context, more specifically around the modern notion of the nation (Morrison, *Childhood, Modernity, and Nation building in Egypt*, 115). But, to understand the impact of modernity, and the nation, on the discourse around childhood in Egypt, we must first understand how modern concepts, like the nation, filtered into and were translated in Egypt, becoming a part of normalized discourse.

### ***Modernizing Egypt***

Egypt began to modernize following the ousting of Napoleon's army in 1801. By then, Egypt had been a separate province under the Ottoman Empire, ruled by warring Mamluk factions. But, the French invasion in 1798, had left a political vacuum in Egypt, and opened up the province to the threat of outside European forces ("The Colonial Origins of Egyptian Nationalism", 108). In 1805, an Albanian general named Muhammad Ali, seized control of the province and became viceroy of Egypt. Under Ali's rule, the Ottomans maintained control over Egypt, but gave Ali extensive independence to rule the region (Cuno, 79).

As viceroy, Ali went about an extensive restructure of Egypt, implementing modern economic and administrative reforms. He centralized taxation, implemented reforms and increased state control in agriculture, created cotton as a cash-crop, and industrialized the economy (Cuno, 84-85). But, the cornerstone of Ali's industrial modernizing project was his modern army (Fahmy,

12-13). With the surplus from his economic reforms, he re-invested into building a new, modern army. The native Egyptian *fellaheen* (Peasantry), who were left impoverished by Ali's agricultural and land reforms, were conscripted into this new army (Cuno, 85; Fahmy). According to author Khaled Fahmy, in his book, *All the Pashas Men*, Ali needed to transform these *fellaheen* into effective and disciplined soldiers. This required the re-ordering of spaces where the *fellaheen*, could be worked upon, their bodies and minds, targeted for discipline (Fahmy, 80-81 & 97). Thus, old institutions had to be re-structured, and secularized, like education and the family, etc, and new institutions created to support the creation and discipline of this new modern military (Marsot, 56-57). But the creation and restructuring of institutions towards disciplining the army, required new information and the need for experts to head these institutions (Marsot, 56). Ali sent abroad groups of dignitaries and students on educational missions to Europe, to learn and bring back modern concepts and technologies (Cuno, 82). The men sent abroad, were transformed by what they saw, the seemingly advanced European civilization in comparison to their own decaying civilization. They returned to Egypt, attempting to translate what they saw, but also conflicted. This confliction spurred an internal crisis among those sent abroad, they began to wrestle and debate, through literature, the need for modernizing Egypt. This would mark the beginning of the period of *Al-Nahda*, the literary renaissance in Egypt (Tageldin, 110-111; Hourani, 67-69).

### ***Al-Nahda and Translating Modernity***

The period of *Al-Nahda* in Egypt, according to historian Albert Hourani, began with the literary thinker Rifa'a al-Tahtawi (Hourani, 67-69). In 1826, Tahtawi was one of the first men to be sent abroad by Ali to Paris, where he studied Liberal arts and sciences, as well as, the French language and translation (Hourani, 69; Jacob, 73). Upon his return to Egypt in 1831, he like many others saw with new eyes a decaying civilization, and argued for the need to modernize various

segments of Egyptian society (Hourani, 71). But Tahtawi, and other literary intellectuals that followed him, were conflicted by bringing in modern concepts from Europe, as many of them did not want to mimic Europe. Thus, when they argued for modernizing Egypt, they did not do so to imitate Western Europe, instead they took into account the specific historical and cultural conditions of Egypt, reviving and renewing old concepts and ideas (Tageldin, 110-111; Hourani, 67-69). Modern concepts and institutions like modern education and the nuclear family, were filtered, translated and debated, within the context of Egypt's particular history (Morrison, *Childhood, Modernity, and Nation building in Egypt*, 114-115 & 116-117).

Tahtawi was later exiled after his return to Egypt, but later he was brought back by Ali's successor, Ismail Pasha, who commissioned him to write *al-Murshid al-Amin lil-Banat wa al-Banin* (the trusted guide for girls and boys) in 1872 (Jacob, 73). In *al-Murshid al-Amin*, Tahtawi promulgates for modern secular education in Egypt, teaching children math and sciences, as well as philosophy and reason, so that children can develop their minds. But he argues this through an Islamic understanding, that by developing the mind and learning reason, one can better understand their religion (Morrison, 118-119). Tahtawi believed, as many others did, that "Egyptian identity derives itself from its Islamic past and that western liberal ideas can be found in Islamic beliefs and practices" (Morrison, 14). He was able to institutionalize these ideas of modern education, when he joined the Department of Schools, under Ismail Pasha's rule (Hourani, 72).

Ismail Pasha, the grandson of Muhammad Ali, later succeeded his grandfather as ruler of Egypt in 1863 (Marsot, 80). Like his grandfather, Ismail wanted to restructure and modernize parts of the province, but unlike Ali's reforms which were targeted towards the economy and the army, Ismail had sought to reform and modernize the entire country. In Omnia El Shakry's book, *The Great Social Laboratory*, she writes "Khedive Ismail was building upon the institutional innovations of the Ottoman viceroy Muhammad Ali (the proverbial 'founder of modern Egypt'),

and establishing many of Egypt's first major cultural and literary institutions, such as the National library, Dar al-Ullum teachers college, and the national opera; Egypt's journalistic culture was also blossoming" (El Shakry, *The Great Social Laboratory*, 26). Under Ismail, many literary thinkers, like Tahtawi, joined new institutions or spearheaded the restructuring of old institutions, like the family and education, towards modernization (Hourani, 72; Mitchell, 101-102 & 108). By institutionalizing reforms and restructuring institutions, they could better access and ensure the material and moral improvement of the whole Egyptian population, who still remained backwards with outdated habits and traditions. They wanted to create modern productive and moral subjects to help resurrect a decaying civilization, towards its civilizational and cultural primacy (Morrison, *Childhood, Modernity, and Nation-building in Egypt*, 114-115; Mitchell, 102). But Ismail's reforms would prove costly, and as a result, Egypt became financially controlled by both Britain and France. From then on Egypt would remain under European control and influence (Marsot, 82). Despite this, the effect of Ismail's reforms and the literary intellectual elite, set in motion a modernization project, that trickled into the countryside, creating the basis for a new social class to emerge, the *effendiyya*. The *effendiyya* would later argue the notion of an existing Egyptian nation, and would spear head Egypt's nationalist movement in 1919 (El-Shakry, *The Great Social Laboratory*, 94-95).

### ***Literary Discourse on the Nation***

In late 19<sup>th</sup>-century 'Egypt', the nation as a territorial entity had not existed yet, but the notion of the nation was on the minds of many early Egyptian thinkers and reformers. The idea of the nation emerged out of the burgeoning literary space in Egypt, known as *Al-Nahda* (Morrison, *Childhood, Modernity, and Nation-building in Egypt*, 114-115; "The Colonial Origins of Egyptian Nationalism", 123-124). Historian Albert Hourani, in his book, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*,

argued that Tahtawi, one of the earlier scholars of *Al-Nahda*, was the first to “articulate the idea of the Egyptian nation” (Hourani, 68-69). Subsequent literary reformers in the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century solidified the idea of a national entity, with origins separate from an Ottoman and European past (Morrison, *Childhood, Modernity, and Nation-building in Egypt*, 114-115). These literary reformers began to discuss the ideal nation, through debates around the ideal family and education, which focused on creating a ‘new’ self-regulating national subject.

The family, as component, had existed prior to modernizing reforms in a more extended arrangement, in Egypt; however, its re-formulation was necessitated, following the modernizing military and agrarian reforms, enacted by Muhammad Ali. With these reforms, the traditional family unit suffered, and became destabilized. Judith Tucker in her article, *Decline of the Family Economy in Mid-Nineteenth Century Egypt*, writes, “conscriptio made inroads on tradition structures. The military family was a nuclear family; the man, wife and children were removed from their village community, and more importantly from their extended which had formed their social and economic environment” (Tucker, 262). So, the re-organization of the family emerged out of the new realities from modernizing reforms in the military. But according to Talal Asad’s book, *Formations of the Secular*, the formal association of the nuclear family unit with the terms, *a’ila* and *usra*, didn’t emerge until the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century, following growing discourse on the ‘ideal family’ around the nation (Asad, 232-233). Asad references scholar Qasim Amin, who discusses the ideal notions of the family as a vital institution for forming the nation, through his argument of women’s liberation (Asad, 233). In his book, *The Liberation of Women*, published in 1899, Amin expresses concern for women’s liberation in Egypt, as he believed women were central to their family, and thus, responsible for nurturing future generations of the nation, and thus needed to be educated and liberated from backward ‘traditions’ (Amin, 72). Amin normalizes the notion, of the ‘ideal family’, as a mutual loving family, consisting of a loving and nurturing wife, with her

husband and children. Asad notes how the polygamous family units by then had become stigmatized, as increasing “conflict, hatred, and misery” within the household (Asad, 233-234).

Author Timothy Mitchell, in his book, *Colonising Egypt*, discusses a similar impact of modernizing reforms in Egypt, on the institution of education. Mitchell argues that the term associated with education in the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century, *tarbiya*, had no previous association with education. He shows this through Tahtawi’s employment of another word in his famous account, *Takhlis al-Ibriz*. Mitchell writes that when Tahtawi encounters the institutions of learning in Paris, he adapts the word, *tartib*, which had been associated with ‘organization and manufacturing’, and the word *tarbiya*, was relegated to describing ‘to breed or to produce’ (Mitchell, 88). The word *tarbiya*, meaning education, only began to appear in the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century, with the development of civil education, and the rising discourses around education, as something that needed to be acquired through discipline (Mitchell, 88-89). According to Mitchell, this new system of education, *tarbiya*, would become segregated from prior forms of learning, which had been viewed as traditional, stagnate, and chaotic (Mitchell, 85-86). He writes, “the new civilian education was to be entirely separate from the military project, just as it was to be separate from the life and the learning of the mosque; its purpose of discipline and improvement of every individual” (Mitchell, 88). Through the ‘new’ distinct institution of *tarbiya*, the individual could be better accessed and shaped by the state, molding them into the self-regulating subject, disciplined towards the newly emerging ‘nation’ (Mitchell, 102 & 108). Similar to the re-organization of institutions, like the family, education became a space in which the state attempted to reform the individual, adopting new language on the individual, as a national subject.

By late 19<sup>th</sup>-century, the presence of language on child rearing and development, in disciplining the new modern subject, had become normalized discourse among literary debates around the modern family and education (Morrison, *Childhood, Modernity, and Nation-building in Egypt*, 114-115 & 118). The child was treated, within modern literature, as an individual, with their own unique needs. But, according to Historian Heidi Morrison, in her dissertation *Childhood, Modernity, and Nation-building in Egypt*, with the emergence of the nationalist movement, future nationalist literary thinkers in the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century, gave new meaning and language on childhood. The new modern Egyptian child, would be inextricable linked to the new Egyptian nation, as both the source and bearer of the nation (Morrison, *Childhood, Modernity, and Nation-building in Egypt*, xi).

### ***Early Discourse on Childhood***

Morrison's dissertation, shows that references to the child, and their stage of development, childhood, was present during the early beginnings of *Al-Nahda*. Starting with Tahtawi, many mid to late 19<sup>th</sup>-century modern literary thinkers, discussed the importance of child rearing and development, when referring to debates about modernizing institutions like education and the family. Literary debates fixated on the creation of 'new' modern forms of subjectivity, through the re-organization of spaces and the creation of 'new' modern institutions, like the family and education. The individual became couched in new modern language, imbued with new meaning and new purpose towards the welfare of their greater 'territorial community', the emerging notion of the nation (Morrison, *Childhood, Modernity, and Nation-building in Egypt*, 114-116 & 118). In

the book, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, Albert Hourani summarizes Tahtawi's thoughts on the purpose of education, as expressed in his book, *al-Murshid al-Amin*. *al-Murshid al-Amin* was published during Tahtawi's time as a principal figure within the ministry of education (Hourani, 78; Mitchell, 89). Hourani writes, that Tahtawi viewed the purpose of education as a means to "form a personality, not simply to transmit a body of knowledge; it should inculcate the importance of bodily health, of the family and its duties, of friendship and above all patriotism – *hubb al-watan*, the love of country; the main motive which leads men to try to build up a civilized community" (Hourani, 78). Implicit in Hourani's description, is the foundational idea, that Tahtawi believed that these notions of duties and devotion to a greater 'territorial community', were not natural but had to be formed and inculcated within the individual. Tahtawi would argue, that for these virtues to be realized, man who is born knowing nothing, must acquire this sense of belonging, through a disciplinary process of learning, over a period of time (Mitchell, 88). From this notion of an individual born not knowing anything, and the re-ordering of social-spaces, that sought to embed and habituate new notions of an individual's sense of belonging and devotion to a 'territorial community', comes the 'new' interest and emphasis on childhood (Morrison, *Childhood, Modernity, and Nation-building in Egypt*, 114 & 138). A new emerging social class, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, known as the *effendiyya*, sought to redeem the idea of an Egyptian nation, through the child (Jacob, 47-49). As a formative stage, for the future national subject, childhood became the participle in which the nation's origins can be revived and renewed, through target discipline (Morrison, *Childhood, Modernity, and Nation-building in Egypt*, 138).

### ***The Effendiyya and the Nationalist Movement***

In 1882, when the British took control of Egypt, they did so in response to growing anti-colonial antagonisms and unrest, among various groups and social classes in Egypt (Marsot, 87-

88). Despite, the colonial occupation, the British did not directly rule the Egyptian population, instead they delegated administrative power, to a class of Egyptians, known as the *effendiyya* (Jacob, 47-49). The *effendiyya*, represented a newly emerging modern social class, at the time, who benefitted from Ismail's education reforms, and whom represented a new literary elite, different from prior intellectual and ruling elites (Jacob, 46-47). By placing the *effendiyya* in positions of power, the British believed they could disguise their colonial power, with native born Egyptians, who saw themselves as culturally European, and would on behalf of the British, take on the task of civilizing and Europeanizing the population (Jacob, 47-49). However, the *effendiyya* saw themselves in conflict with the British. The British sought to uplift the population, specifically the *fellaheen* (the peasantry), but they would not bother to educate them, as they found them backwards and incapable of civilizing. As a form of resisting British colonial rule, the *effendiyya*, valorized the *fellaheen*, arguing that the *fellaheen*, and the countryside, were both the source of the nation's true origins, as well as, arguing their placement within the progress of an independent, Egyptian nation (ibid, 47-49).

With growing anti-colonial antagonisms, among the *fellaheen*, due to increased British control and economic hardships brought on by World War I, nationalist sentiments grew, and apexed to the nationalist Wafdist revolution in 1919 (Marsot, 94-96). The Wafdist movement consisted of those from the *effendiyya* class, most notable was Saad al-Zaghlul, who grew up from the rural countryside (El-Shakry, *The Great Social Laboratory*, 92-93). Zaghlul's background, and the Wafdist movement differed from other, more elitist groups, which made the Wafdist revolution popular among the *fellaheen*, with many considering it a 'peasant revolution' (ibid, 92-93). The Wafdist called for Egypt's independence, and eventually Britain relented, following mass revolt and protest, granting Egypt nominal independence, as a constitutional monarchy in 1922 (Marsot, 96-97). Egypt's independence from Britain was not total, but many nationalist thinkers

began to celebrate a new beginning for the Egyptian nation. This marked the beginning of the ‘liberal experiment’, which saw an attempt to build a new Egyptian nation, based on Western Liberalism, as promulgated by the Wafdist party (Marsot, 96-97). But soon they realized they had inherited a nation, in which a majority of the population, had still remained locked in old customs and backward habits (El Shakry, *The Great Social Laboratory*, 92-93 & 95-96). Liberal thinkers of the Wafdist rule, attempted a liberal nationalizing project, bringing into the fold those not yet touched by rational government, the *fellaheen*, the lower urban classes, and women, into the linear progression of the newly independent Egyptian nation (Marsot, 96-97; Morrison “Nation-Building and Childhood in Early Twentieth Century Egypt”, 82). This required greater access and control over those on the periphery of government, to inculcate civic virtues, liberal values and a sense of national identity. Steeped in new nationalist language, the child re-emerged as central to this nationalizing project (Morrison “Nation-Building and Childhood in Early Twentieth Century Egypt”, 82).

### ***‘Liberal Experiment’ and Nationalist Literature on Egyptian Childhood***

In her chapter, *Nation-Building and Childhood in Early Twentieth Century Egypt*, Heidi Morrison argues that the new ‘Egyptian’ child became the source of building an independent, Egyptian nation-state, as a means, to break from Egypt’s Ottoman past, and become independent of European rule, as well (Morrison, “Nation-Building and Childhood in Early Twentieth Century Egypt”, 74). A clean slate, the body and mind of the child could be re-molded, his identity redefined, and in-turn so could the future of the Egyptian nation. Thus, the language on the child, became synonymous with language on the nation, and the nation’s trajectory. But to re-define the future citizens of the nation, and to create a common vocabulary around the new Egyptian child, required the accumulation of social knowledge around childhood, alongside other institutions

surrounding the child, so that the state could better access and intervene, in the everyday lives of children. (Morrison, “Nation-Building and Childhood in Early Twentieth Century Egypt”, 77-78). Morrison writes, “The intrusion of outside experts in the rearing of children was essential for creating a nation. Foucault posits that society imposes through such institutions as the school a normalized type of behavior that children internalize. These institutions are in turn ‘architects of childhood.’ With the intervention of the state in the lives of children, reformers sought to create informed, skilled and loyal future citizens.” (Morrison, “Nation-Building and Childhood in Early Twentieth Century Egypt”, 77-78). Modern Education, was one institution, alongside other institutions, like the family, which were constantly studied, inspected, surveyed and restructured around the delicate needs of the child, disciplining habits and civic virtues, towards benefitting and producing towards the nation. This emerges out of a greater social engineering project, according to Omnia El Shakry, in her book *The Great Social Laboratory*. The need for social knowledge, around the child, and the institutions surrounding them, emerged out of a greater social-scientific shift in Egypt in the 1920s to 1940s, which many nationalist elites sought to study and understand Egyptian society. Many social science disciplines emerged at this time, like psychology, sociology, population studies, etc, and new nationalist literature, as a result emerged within and around these disciplines (El Shakry, *The Great Social Laboratory*, 6-8 & 14). Situated within this new nationalist social-scientific literature, is the creation of a new genre in Egypt, children’s literature. In the 1930’s, nationalist children’s literature emerged, created and directed towards the child, including children’s stories, children’s magazines, etc, to better serve, access and foster development of the child, as well to inculcate ties to a national community (Morrison, *Childhood, Modernity, and Nation-building in Egypt*, 15-16).

Morrison argues that in the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century, the Egyptian child became the primary subject within a growing nationalist literature around childhood, from novels to the production of

autobiographies, solely focused one's own childhood (Morrison, *Childhood, Modernity, and Nation-building in Egypt*, 15-17). Many of these childhood autobiographies were set in the rural countryside, recounting childhood experiences growing up in village life. These autobiographies in general, emerged out of a great number of nationalist literature set in the rural countryside, echoing a national fascination and romanticism with the countryside, which Omnia El Shakry calls the 'rural renaissance.' The romanticism with village life and the peasantry can be traced back to late 19<sup>th</sup> century, as a result of nationalist resistance to British colonial policy in the countryside, adopting similar language on the peasantry, as the British. El Shakry argues, "the peasantry was central focus of nationalist writings, which led to the collective creation of a 'myth of the *fellahin*'... valorized as the embodiment of Egypt's heritage, the *fellahin* were portrayed... as the 'true sons of Egypt' – the essence or origin of the nation" (El Shakry, *The Great Social Laboratory*, 101-102). They saw the peasantry as both the origins of the nation as well as the bodies in which the nation could be remade. To prove the British wrong, these nationalist thinkers and reformists adopted positivist language on the educability of the peasantry, specifically the peasant child, as hope for the nation. Literature of children in general and autobiographies of village childhood in particular, became a way to discuss children as foundational to the trajectory of Egypt as a modern free nation (El Shakry, *The Great Social Laboratory*, 101-102).

However, among this emerging normalized discourse around Egyptian childhood, was a variety of interpretations of childhood. The period of the 'liberal experiment', yielded a variety of generations and experiences which in turn impacted debate around the origins and trajectory of the nation, and in effect views on Egyptian childhood. Thus, nationalist literature on Egyptian childhood not only served to valorize children as the source of the nation's origins and progress, but also to debate other depictions of what an Egyptian childhood looked like (Morrison, *Childhood, Modernity, and Nation-building in Egypt*, 16-17). Here we can locate both Taha

Hussein and Sayyid Qutb's childhood autobiographies/memoirs. Hussein wrote *An Egyptian Childhood* at the beginning of the 'liberal experiment', as one of the cultural figures of the Wafdist liberal party and a proponent of Europeanization. While Qutb wrote *A Child from the Village* following the failures of the 'liberal experiment', and arguments for alternatives to Wafd liberalism. Both authors translated the normalized discourse on Egyptian childhood, retranslating their own childhoods to express their differing viewpoints.

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## EGYPTIAN CHILDHOOD IN THE LIBERAL AGE

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### *A. TAHA HUSSEIN, 'AN EGYPTIAN CHILDHOOD' AND THE BEGINNING OF THE LIBERAL EXPERIMENT*

#### ***Brief Background***

Taha Hussein was born in the fall of 1889, in the village of Maghagha in Upper Egypt (Attar, 14). Egypt had just come under British occupation, following the 'Urabi revolt in 1882 and growing antagonisms against European influence in Egypt (Marsot, 72). Also, as I stated earlier, many of the modernizing administrative reforms associated with Ismail's reign, had already been extended beyond Cairo, to parts of the countryside (Mitchell, 75-77). Despite the presence of modernizing institutions and growing anti-colonial and nationalist sentiments among the educated elite, by 1889 none of these factors manifested within Hussein's village. Based on Hussein's depiction within his autobiography, during the time of his upbringing, the village of Maghagha remained steeped in 'tradition' and was isolated from any outside influences. The only intrusions of modernity in the village were Hussein's interactions with an inspector who studied at al-Azhar,

wore a tarbush, and spoke French (Hussein, 59). Another intrusion was when a cholera outbreak occurred in his village and he noted the intervention of the Public Health Department (Hussein, 66). Overall, Hussein's autobiography represents a 'traditional' upbringing for most of the peasantry of his time. He depicts his household as being 'backwards', untouched by modernity and his family consisted of an extended polygamist household. His father had more than one wife, and Hussein was the "seventh of the thirteen children of his father, and the fifth out of the eleven of his father's second wife" (Qutb, 7-8). Hussein also described his family as relatively poor and lower class, however, his father was able to pay for his son's schooling, as he was a security guard at a local sugar factory (Attar, 16). Growing up within these circumstances, and given his blindness, Hussein received his education via the 'traditional' *kuttab*, which stressed reciting the *Quran*, as well as, "the religious sciences such as theology, jurisprudence, and related areas such as grammar and rhetoric" (Cuno, 81; Morrison, *Childhood, Modernity, and Nation-building in Egypt*, 215). In 1902 at the age of 12, Hussein's father arranged for him to study at the prestigious al-Azhar University in Cairo to become an *Ulema*, one who is well-versed and interprets the *Quran* and other legal religious texts (Attar, 17). After several years attending al-Azhar, Hussein later attended the Egyptian University, a modern secular institution of higher learning founded in 1908 (Attar, 17; Hourani, 326). While at the university, Hussein was sent abroad to study in Paris at the Sorbonne where he graduated with a doctorate in philosophy. He later returned to a transforming Egypt in 1919, to take up the head position in the Arabic department at Egyptian University (El Shakry, *The Great Social Laboratory*, 16). It wasn't until the backlash from the publishing of his first book that Hussein produced his autobiography (Attar, 14). Fit for its time, *An Egyptian Childhood* recalls Hussein's childhood, growing up in his village, through a teleological approach, filtered through his life experiences and influences as an adult.

## *Influences*

Published in 1927, *An Egyptian Childhood*, was written during the early years of the ‘liberal experiment’. By then Hussein had already formed his ideas around the future of the Egyptian nation (Marsot, 96-97; Hussein, introduction). Like many intellectuals of his time when Hussein arrived to al-Azhar, he encountered an already reformed institution under the leadership of reformist scholar Muhammad ‘Abduh (Attar, 17). Hussein speaks about his encounters with ‘Abduh towards the end of *An Egyptian Childhood*, not referring to him by name, but speaks about him with admiration by marking ‘Abduh’s influence on his development as a critical modern thinker (Hussein, 74). Historian Samira Haj, in her book, *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition*, argues that ‘Abduh, working within the given time, sought to revive and reconfigure forms of thinking within Islam in the face of an imposing power and dismantling rhetoric around religion by European authorities (Haj, 89-90). ‘Abduh sought to implement reforms at al-Azhar, that would revive parts that had been neglected within Islam, like liberal arts and sciences, which he believed would be useful given the new realities in Egypt at the time (Hourani, 139-140). ‘Abduh’s influence on his disciples, like Hussein, would be the precedent he set which provided an alternative orthodoxy for young Egyptians that opened them to interpret for themselves what constituted tradition, and how they can adapt it within new changing realities. Hussein, and many other students like him, who were directly influenced by Muhammad ‘Abduh’s reforming ideas would build-on these ideas as the architects, reformers and thinkers of the Liberal Age in Egypt (Hourani, 159-160). ‘Abduh’s influence on Hussein was tantamount, but the greater influence on Hussein at al-Azhar, was his mentor Sheikh Husayn al-Marsafy (Husayn, introduction). Hussein greatly admired al-Marsafy, whom like Hussein was also blind. In the second-part of *Al-Ayyam*, titled *Stream of Days*, which covers Hussein’s time at al-Azhar, Hussein writes about his

interactions with al-Marsafy. Hussein recounts an interaction with al-Marsafy attending one of his lectures with two of his fellow classmates, Hussein writes,

The three friends [including Hussein] felt cramped in the Azhar, and this Sheikh and his teachings only intensified the feeling. They longed to break out and be free, and when Sheikh Marsafy taught, their chains seemed to vanish into thin air. I know of nothing in the world which can exert so strong an influence for freedom especially on the young, as literature, and above all literature as Sheikh Marsafy taught (stream of days, xix).

Hussein describes a burgeoning literary environment in Egypt with al-Marsafy as one of its leading literary intellectuals (Husayn, xix). In his book, *Introduction to Arabic Literature*, Author Roger Allen, professor of Arabic literature, writes that at the time of Hussein's schooling at al-Azhar, the state of Arabic literature drew intense public debate, triggered by the growing market and interest in translated European works (Allen, 37). Allen argues that this growing interest in the importance of 'new' cultural realities among the Egyptian intellectuals was a result of "the spread of popular education, the advent of printing and the emergence of mass press," and most importantly, by the creation of a "reading public of growing numbers and of a new social background" (Allen, 37). Allen confers that the state of Arabic literature became the space to reassess and re-evaluate the 'needs of modern life' (Allen, 37). In the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, there was an emerging literary movement in Egypt known as the neo-classical movement which sought to revive classical works following similar literary structures, grammar, and syntax, when creating new modern poetry and literature. Al-Marsafy was a part of this literary movement and class of literary elite, whom were associated with Classic Arabic literature (Allen, 46). Al-Marsafy's influence on Hussein, inspired Hussein's interest in classical Arabic literature and his development as a 'man of letters' in Egypt (Husayn, xviii). Overall, Hussein's Islamic education and his tutelage under 'Abduh and al-Marsafy, shaped his interest in literature, greatly. However, overtime Hussein became increasingly attracted to liberal humanism following his exposure to European positivist thought and French orientalist thinkers, in particular.

Hussein's exposure to Orientalist thinkers, and liberal thought began with his studies at the Egyptian University, following his time at al-Azhar. According to Omnia El Shakry, the university was established to target younger generations of the *effendiyya* class coming from the countryside (El Shakry, *The Great Social Laboratory*, 15; Attar, 17-18). From 1908 to 1925, the university dispatched selected students on several educational missions to study abroad in Europe (El Shakry, *The Great Social Laboratory*, 15). Hussein was one of the earliest Egyptians to be sent abroad. He left Egypt in 1915, right after the beginning of World War I, to first study at the University of Montpellier then at the Sorbonne, in Paris. While studying in France, at the Sorbonne, Hussein was seduced by the ideas of August Comte, Georg Simmel, and Emile Durkheim (Hourani, 328). French thought did not just seduce his mind, he also fell in love with a French woman whom he later married and brought back to Egypt (Hourani, 326). Upon his return to Egypt in 1919 he began his teaching career at the Egyptian University, where many of Hussein's fellow nationalist thinkers found him too embracing of French and European culture (Attar, 20-21). Hussein believed through his interactions with Orientalist thinkers that Egypt's history lied within Europe, as the inheritors of the once great Ancient Egyptian civilization (El Shakry, *The Great Social Laboratory*, 66). El Shakry's book, *The Great Social Laboratory*, demonstrates the contrary beliefs of Hussein and other nationalist thinkers of his time who sought to define an independent, Egyptian nation but did so by utilizing European/Western modes and concepts, such as positivism and liberalism (El Shakry, *The Great Social Laboratory*, 65-66; Morrison, *Childhood, Modernity, and Nation-building in Egypt*, 14). Of course, many of these intelligentsia varied in their beliefs, for example, Hussein differed in that he was 'blinded' by the seeming view that Europe and Egypt had a shared history and similarities (El Shakry, *The Great Social Laboratory*, 13). That Western Europe had borrowed from Ancient Egypt in order to build on its civilization, had become a discussion among some Egyptian intelligentsia, who saw modern Egypt's origins emerging from Ancient Egypt

(*Childhood, Modernity, and Nation-building in Egypt*, 14). Hussein, like others, believed that by borrowing Western/European concepts Egypt would be reclaiming its own history. Like many others, Hussein believed that Egypt under Ottoman rule had been rendered immobile and stagnate and that the chance of reclaiming concepts that were once their own, and embedded within early Greek and Roman history, could make Egypt a thriving, modern civilization again (El Shakry, *The Great Social Laboratory*, 66). This was echoed in his later publication, *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, where he argued for the importance of not only education for all Egyptians, but that Latin and Greek, should be a part of that curriculum, as well (Hourani, 337).

Upon his return from France in 1919, the nationalist revolt, led by his fellow peers and liberal nationalists, Saad Zaghlul and Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid was underway (Hourani, 338-339). At the time Hussein attempted to make his own impact while leading figure at the Egyptian University, by exercising his influence on the cultural environment in Egypt (Hourani, 325-326). Rather than participate in the political outbursts within his country Hussein, a humanist, opted instead to write on classical Arabic literature and Arabic language (Hourani, 338-339). In particular, he advocated for the use of Cartesian logic on Islamic texts and Arabic literature in general. By applying positivist approaches to analyze literature and language in Egypt, Hussein sought to revive Egyptian culture which to him represented the cornerstone of a great civilization (El Shakry, *The Great Social Laboratory*, 66). He saw his goal as one of freeing Egyptian culture and its humanities from Islamic tradition, as was demonstrated in his controversial book, *Pre-Islamic Poetry*, which led to his self-exile to Europe and the writing of his childhood autobiography, *An Egyptian Childhood* (Hourani, 327).

### *An Egyptian Childhood*

Written from his French retreat, away from the Egyptian press, *An Egyptian Childhood* was originally published in the magazine *al-Hilal*, in 1926, and later published in a book-form in 1927 (Attar, 14). Written within a span of nine days, Hussein dedicated his autobiography to his daughter, conveying to her the world of difference between his childhood and hers. In his retelling of his childhood, Hussein references himself by means of third-person, using words like ‘our friend’ or ‘the lad’ (Hussein, 76-77; Attar, 15). The use of third-person, was a mode of writing that was distinctly used in Pre-modern Arabic autobiographies, especially when referencing one’s childhood (Brustad, 44). But the use of third-person also serves to separate the author as an adult from his childhood self, thus, distancing the author from his past. But the author’s voice, remains present, through the child’s voice, as Hussein weaves a narrative style account of his childhood (El Shakry, *The Great Social Laboratory*, 101-102). He formats a semi-fictional autobiography, arranged chronologically from his early days in the village up to his move to Cairo, a format that had not existed in pre-modern Arabic autobiographies before. According to the book, *Interpreting the Self: Autobiography in the Arabic Literary Tradition*, edited by Dwight Reynolds Kristen Brustad, the mixing of fiction and autobiography is completely attributed to western influences, and has little to do with the pre-modern Arabic literary tradition (Brustad, 246). Moreover, Hussein’s use of a chronological linear structure is also an emulation of European style of writing, as the following quote from Brustad clearly states:

the act of reconstructing the past from the author’s present is not a chronological or linear process ... but rather with many mental leaps forward and backward in time. Chronological linearity as an instrument of coherence and authority is fundamentally tied to massive cultural shifts in European renaissance and enlightenment (Brustad, 246).

While partially influenced by earlier Arab/Islamic forms of writing, the overall structure of Hussein’s autobiography is primarily a positivist linear chronology of his childhood, a style of writing that is predominantly European (El Shakry, *The Great Social Laboratory*, 101-102; Qutb,

xxii-xxiii). The social setting for this positivist illustration of Hussein's childhood autobiography begins in what he recalls as a 'traditional village' setting, the village of his childhood upbringing.

In *An Egyptian Childhood*, the reader is physically transported to Hussein's village through his powerful eloquent images. To the unassuming reader Hussein's graphic memory may let slip the author's reality; that of which at the age of three Hussein was completely blind. Yet, later on as an adult he was able to convey his village with vivid and colorful imagery (Hussein, 1-2). Even though the account of how Hussein loses his sight is portrayed towards the end of the book, there are multiple references throughout his autobiography that note the effect his blindness had on him (Hussein, 63). Hussein's blindness not only serves to convey his real experiences, the shame and sorrow he experienced, but it also drove the greater narrative of his autobiography. His blindness drives the overarching theme of the book that Hussein as a child experienced much grief, that which was attached to outdated customs and backward traditions. It is through the grief brought on by his blindness, that Hussein came to critique old traditional forms of life as bankrupt and harmful to the development and growth of the child.

Hussein penned his painful childhood memories during his self-exile in France, following claims of apostasy against him by the Egyptian press for his earlier work, *Pre-Islamic Poetry* (Hussein, introduction). His autobiography served to critique those who had criticized his use of applying Cartesian logic to analyze the linguistic origins of the *Quran* (Attar, 14). As an "Enlightened man", Hussein believed that by holding onto outdated traditions, Egypt would remain stagnant and would have no opportunity to progress and catch up with Europe. Hussein, committed to the revival of Egypt's culture and the humanities, argued that Egypt must break away from its Islamic past and strip itself of the restraints and chains of non-rational forms of thinking that limit free thought and reason (Qutb, xxii). In Hussein's depiction of his childhood growing up blind in a village not yet touched by modernity and 'steeped' in tradition, he was ultimately appealing to the

Egyptian public by using his childhood experiences to critique the limitations and stunting power of old customs and beliefs on the growth and progress of children, and by extension, the nation.

By the time, Hussein wrote *An Egyptian Childhood*, the discourse on modern childhood in Egypt had already been normalized. The focus of this discourse was on how to modernize the institutions that have the greatest impact on child development, that is, the family and public education (Morrison, "Nation-Building and Childhood in Early Twentieth Century Egypt", 82-83). This is apparent in Hussein's autobiography which centers on the "failed" expectations of his family and his education. As a blind child, Hussein felt isolated and neglected by his family, he mostly blames his parents and especially his mother for his neglect and lack of care. He describes a dinner scene where he is made to feel ashamed and guilty for making a mess eating his food in front of his family due to his blindness. Since that night he made a decision to eat alone, a habit that would carry on all through his adulthood (Hussein, 10). As he relates in his autobiography, eating alone made him feel isolated from and unwelcome by the rest of his family. He also recounts the neglect, as a whole, he felt under his family. In his autobiography, Hussein details a large, extended polygamist family. His father had married two wives, and Hussein was the seventh child of thirteen children (Hussein, 7-8). The notion of the 'nuclear family' may have not entered Hussein's mind then, but by the time Hussein wrote his autobiography, the 'new' modern notion of the nuclear family, as significant to childhood care and development, was an accepted norm among the intellectual urban elite. Therefore, it was normal for Hussein to depict his childhood relationship with his parents as one of mismanagement, neglect, and rigid expectations. To Hussein, they represented the illiterate, uneducated, and backward beliefs of rural, lower class Egypt. Hussein depicted his mother as being unaffectionate compared to his father towards the end of the autobiography, and when he leaves for Cairo, he feels no emotions for his mother (Hussein, 73).

Whereas, Hussein depicted his mother as lacking affection, he portrayed his father as overbearing and disapproving. His blindness, Hussein maintained, limited his choices and abilities in the eyes of his father. His father gave him no choice but to become a *Faqih*, a person within the village who recited the *Quran* (Hussein, 8). The *Fuqaha* in Hussein's village were held in high respect, given their knowledge of the *Quran*, and yet, Hussein felt dismay being limited in this direction (Hussein, 42-43). Hussein's dismay at becoming a *Faqih*, shows the hindsight he had when writing his memoir, since as a learned scholar of the enlightenment, he felt that training as a *Faqih* was degrading to his mind. Hussein struggled to retain the *Quran* while attending the *kuttab*. He tricked the adults around him, his *Faqih*, as well as, his father into believing he had memorized the *Quran* (Hussein, 17-18 & 27). It wasn't until his father began to test his retention that Hussein felt ashamed. In one scene in the book, Hussein is berated by his father for not memorizing a certain verse in the *Quran*. Filled with disappointment towards his self, Hussein went to the area of the house where his mom cuts the meat, and slices his neck with the meat cleaver (Hussein, 29). This instance of self-harm represented the culmination of his self-loathing. When his mother finds him, she initially panics, but then she resumes her chores, as he lies in the corner, depicting Hussein's feeling of neglect, and absence of affection from his mom (ibid, 29). This is the moment where he begins to interiorize these feeling of being inadequate, incapable of learning, and he developed an inferiority complex due to his blindness, by blaming himself. This scene also, represents a later shift for Hussein, away from blaming himself for his inability to retain the *Quran*, towards outward blame on those responsible for his learning. The *Faqih*, his teacher, had shown little to no attention to Hussein during his lessons. When Hussein's father later confronts the *Faqih* about his son's schooling, Hussein is shocked to hear the *Faqih* lied about their lessons to his father, stating that he had dedicated his whole time to teaching Hussein. This blatant lie by a man who was a leading religious figure and who held great authority in the village, had proven to

Hussein to be fraudulent, and his authority withered away in Hussein's eyes (Hussein, 30-31). Like the doctor who caused him to lose his sight, like his mother who neglected him and his father for his old and limited expectations of his son, the *Faqih*, revered within tradition, was also conveyed as corrupt, unprincipled, and outdated.

Hussein is also critical of Sufism, in his autobiography, describes their widely spread practices as superstitious and nonsensical. He relates the way the peasantry practiced Sufism as akin to eating and drinking, something that sustains the body but does nothing to stimulate the mind, especially that of a child. Hussein blamed Sufism for producing sustained ignorance and backwardness among the rural population (Hussein, 49). He describes the mysticism associated with the practice to magic, as clearly indicated in the following quote:

Our Friend [Hussein] had...concerned himself with two things in particular, and they were Magic and Sufism... Does not the Sufi assure himself and other people that he can penetrate the veil of the unknown, tell what happened in the past, and foretell the future, as well as overstep the limits of natural laws? Moreover, he produces many kinds of supernatural wonders and miracles.

And what is a magician? Does he not assure himself of his power to obtain information about the unknown, and does he not exceed the limits of natural laws also? Does he not also claim connection with the world of spirits?... Yes... The only difference you will find between a magician and a Sufi is that the latter is on the side of the angels and the former on the side of the devils (Hussein, 50).

It is clear that this argument would have hardly preoccupied Hussein's mind as a child for as he himself admits in his memoirs, that he too in his childhood had devoured the books associated with these Sufi practices and superstitions (Hussein, 44-46). It is obvious that Hussein's skepticism and doubt about religion and Sufism in particular, is a product of his later experiences as an adult which are largely attributed to his exposure to and fascination with European Enlightenment thought. One cannot help but recognize that Hussein's mode of thought in his autobiography was ultimately not that different from his first published book, *Pre-Islamic Poetry*.

Overall, Hussein shows through the depictions of his childhood, how tradition had crippled him, both figuratively and literally. Had modern science existed during his childhood, maybe then he wouldn't have been blinded, and maybe he could have been able to experience much more. Yet, 'blindness' serves Hussein, for he uses it as a tool to depict the figurative harm that non-modern, non-rational customs and beliefs had on his childhood. Hussein uses this depiction, to echo his thoughts at the time of writing his autobiography. Influenced by his liberal humanist perspective, Hussein believed that for Egypt to develop as a culture and as a nation, it must break from its past and free itself from the fetters of useless traditions, and only then can Egypt progress and become equal to Europe. According to Hussein, central to this project of modernization is the Egyptian child, with their psychological and mental cultivation, and development founded on a rational and secular modern system similar to that of Europe (El Shakry, *The Great Social Laboratory*, 65-66; Morrison, "Nation-Building and Childhood in Early Twentieth Century Egypt", 86-87). The child, as the precursor to the individual, emerges thus free from the definition of the collective, to a humanist definition. Hussein through his conception of his own childhood stresses the importance of reason and logic for the child in developing his mind and forming them into modern critical thinkers. This idea is echoed later on in his book, *The Future of Culture in Egypt* (El Shakry, *The Great Social Laboratory*, 65-66). The child in Hussein's autobiography, as Hussein himself did, will ultimately be able to detach himself from his environment and become the critic of his own surroundings and his own past. While mourning the restrictions preventing him from his potential as a human, he nonetheless struggled to emerge out of his grief to become one of the most notable modern literary thinkers in Egypt.

*B. SAYYID QUTB, 'A CHILD FROM THE VILLAGE' AND THE FAILURES TOWARDS THE END OF THE LIBERAL EXPERIMENT*

### ***Brief Background***

Sayyid Qutb was born in the fall of 1906, seventeen years after Hussein was born, in the village of Musha, in Upper Egypt (Qutb, xiv). By the time Qutb was born his village had already undergone change, as is evident in Qutb's memoir. By 1906, much stronger forms of resistance to British colonial rule in Egypt, began to manifest itself in the countryside. By the time Qutb begins his memoir in 1912, nationalism was on every Egyptians mind (Qutb, xv). A generation or two apart, it's obvious from Qutb's childhood autobiography that many of the modernizing features, like education and health, were already normalized in his village. Qutb's village in 1912, for example, had alongside the traditional *kuttab*, a modern school to which Qutb owed his modern education (Qutb, xvi). Moreover, as he states in his autobiography, his family seemed to have benefitted directly from the land reforms introduced in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, for his father became a small landowner with a prominent standing in his village (Calvert, 111). Similar to Hussein, Qutb's household was not yet impacted by the institutionalization of the nuclear family. He had an extended family, his father had married twice, his mother being the second wife. But relative to Hussein, Qutb's family was much smaller, with three sisters and one brother (ibid, 111). So, it appears that language that had emerged around the 'ideal family', had somewhat penetrated his family life. Qutb constantly harped the spread of nationalist fervor in the countryside and how it was an essential part of his village life. He described a nationalist committee being set-up in his village with his father being a prominent member. Politically active in the nationalist movement from an early age, Qutb was clearly a supporter of the nationalist leader Saad Zaghlul, whose social roots, came from the countryside (Qutb, xvi-xvii). In 1921, at fifteen, Qutb alongside other students from the countryside mostly comprised of children of the more privileged class of *effendiyya*, moved to Cairo, an outcome of modernizing effects of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Egypt (Calvert, 112; El Shakry,

“Youth As Peril And Promise”, 593-594). As expected, while in Cairo, Qutb joined the Wafd Party, the leading nationalist party that was led by Saad Zaghlul and his cohorts of nationalists (Qutb, xvii). He first attended the Dar al-Ullum preparatory school then later from 1929-1933 he attended the prestigious teacher’s training college, Dar al-Ullum (Qutb, xvii & 23). After graduation, Qutb was hired as a teacher at the Ministry of Education during which he became attracted and involved in the writing of literature as well as poetry (Qutb, xvii). It was a decade or so later that Qutb began to write his own childhood memoir as an engagement with and a response to Hussein’s.

### ***Influences***

*A Child from the Village* was published in 1946, marking the end of World War II and the disillusionment with the ‘liberal experiment’ in particular (Qutb, xviii). Whereas Hussein’s critical influential years, began with his time at al-Azhar, and ended in France; Qutb’s intellectual developments originated in his village. Unlike Hussein, who was expected to follow the ‘traditional’ path of an Azaharite, Qutb’s time opened up more opportunities and offered various choices. He was tutored under the new secular educational system that was introduced to the countryside in the later part of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup>-centuries (Qutb, xv-xvi). Qutb’s modern school was built around 1912. Still not yet mandatory, national secular education existed side by side with the *kuttab*, which continued to be the preferential form of education among the public (ibid, xv-xvi). In fact, Qutb’s father, according to his memoir, initially wanted him to attend the *kuttab*; it was his mother, who came from an affluent urban family from Cairo, who prevailed in the end, sending Qutb to the ‘national school’. Although he did spend one day at the *kuttab* per his father’s request, but immediately after, he returned to the national school (ibid, xv-xvi). The national schools were a big part of the modernizing process and the formation of ‘new’ modern

subjects, to create a new *effendiyya* class coming from the rural countryside. The national schools in the village were constantly surveyed and new teachers were trained in Cairo and then sent to these schools (Morrison, "Nation-Building and Childhood in Early Twentieth Century Egypt", 78-79). In Qutb's memoir, he expresses an admiration for the *effendis*, which he describes akin to 'worship' and he discusses a desire as a child to become an *effendiyya*, which when he refers to the term, had already become associated with modernity (Qutb, 23-24).

In Cairo, Qutb as a 'man of letters', became attracted to the literary works of Abbas al-Aqqad (Qutb, xvii). His intellectual encounters with al-Aqqad marked a shift in Qutb's intellectual development. Al-Aqqad, a journalist at the time and a 'man of letters' was also well-known for his public literary exchanges and contestation with Taha Hussein, over the nature of literature and culture (ibid, xvii). According to John Calvert and William Shepard, the English translators of Qutb's memoir, Qutb in the 1930's wrote several articles "defending Al-Aqqad" and others "commenting on Taha Hussein's, *The Future of Culture in Egypt*" (Qutb, xviii). Al-Aqqad while of the same generation as Hussein was critical of him for embracing neo-classicism formulaic and positivist rationalism. Qutb became a follower of Abbas al-Aqqad, along with many of the disappointed youths of that fractured time, critical of literary nationalists and liberals including Taha Hussein (Qutb, xviii). It was during that unstable inter-war period of the 1930's, Marsot points out, where Egypt had experienced a number of economic depressions that hit the countryside the hardest, thus increasing the gap between an urban ruling elite and middle and lower rural classes (Marsot, 86-87). In *Youth as Peril and Promise*, Omnia El Shakry describes how "between 1925 and 1950... the number of university students (excluding al-Azhar) rose from 2,000 to 30,000. The flooding of schools and universities in this inter-revolutionary period was coupled with increased political activism and ideological factionalism" (El Shakry, "Youth As Peril And Promise", 593). Their political activism focused primarily on the failure of the Wafdist nationalist

party, and their failure to carry through their liberal project and fulfill the aspiration of the people. Instead, they saw the Wafdist government as an extension of British rule, compliant with and fulfilling British interests (El Shakry, “Youth As Peril And Promise”, 593-594). Dissatisfied they began to look elsewhere for solutions to their problems by exploring alternatives critical of western liberalism including Socialism, Marxism, and Islamism, and Romanticism, and for many of these youths al-Aqqad became a guiding figure (ibid, 593-594). Author Shaden Tageldin in her book, *Disarming Words*, writes that al-Aqqad, unlike Hussein, while accepting similarities in human nature recognized at the same time differences of histories and human experiences. Al-Aqqad, was well aware of the power imbalance created by the translation of European texts and their impact on Egypt (Tageldin, 287-288). As a disillusioned thinker, Qutb, like his mentor al-Aqqad, began to be increasingly aware of the limitations of Western liberal thought and its efficacy on Egyptian culture and politics.

Like al-Aqqad, Qutb argues for ‘partial differences’, when he engaged Hussein’s book, *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, in 1936. As translators’ John Calvert and William Shepard note, while Qutb agrees “with Taha Hussein’s basic presumptions and many of his specific proposals [he] rejects his contention that the Egyptian mentality is close to that of the West and asserts the importance in retaining and renewing Egyptian and Arab culture” (Qutb, xviii). Obviously, Qutb does not denounce modernity or the powerful influence of the West, he nonetheless is more realistic and pragmatic, for he recognizes that Egypt is different from Europe and has no shared history with Europe. Nor did he believe that Egypt could fully seamlessly adapt Western modes and concepts. Qutb, ultimately believed that Egypt, should modernize but that did not necessarily mean becoming fully westernized, as he demonstrates in his memoir (Qutb, xvii & xxx).

### *A Child from the Village*

*A Child from the Village*, published in 1946, was written as a direct response to Hussein's *An Egyptian Childhood* (Qutb, xviii). In fact, Qutb dedicates the first page completely to Hussein:

“To the author of al-Ayyām, Doctor Taha Husayn Bey: These, dear sir, are “days” like your “days,” lived by a village child, some are similar to your days and some are different. The difference reflects the difference between one generation and another, one village and another, one life and another, indeed the difference between one nature and another, between one attitude and another. But they are, when all is said and done, also ‘days’” (Qutb, dedication).

To engage Hussein's own childhood autobiography Qutb employed a similar genre by producing his own memoir to showcase his childhood side by side with Hussein's. Also, similar to *An Egyptian Childhood*, Qutb wrote his memoir in third-person format (Qutb, xxi-xxii). This once again was not only a format already present in pre-modern Arabic autobiographies, but it also served the reader as a means to differentiate the adult author, from his childhood self (Brustad, 44). One key difference between their autobiographies/memoirs, was that Qutb did not format his childhood memories through a chronological narrative. Instead, he conveyed fragmented pictures of his childhood while at the same time, correlated these stories with anthropological descriptions of village life including their daily traditional practices (Qutb, xxii). In his detailed descriptions of his upbringing, Qutb directs his memoir for city dwellers, at a time where the peasantry held a privileged position in nationalist literature; valorized as the sources of the nation. For those living in Cairo, Qutb wanted to provide a realistic account of the realities that the *fellaheen* of Egypt faced in the countryside. In other words, through his ethnographic style he sought to intervene Hussein's depiction of village life as backwards (Qutb, xi-xxii). Qutb depicts his memoir as a ‘literary museum’ and his childhood memories as real “artifacts” leaving it to the viewer and the reader to decipher the good and the bad of village life (Qutb, xi). By the time *A Child from the Village* was published, the market was already flooded with literature romanticizing village life, mostly in the form of autobiographies of childhood, which as a genre of writing had no prior

history in pre-modern Arabic autobiography (Qutb, xxii-xxiii; El Shakry, *The Great Social Laboratory*, 101-102). This phenomenon emerged in the 1930's following rising nationalist interest in modernizing the agricultural sector and the rural population, the defining feature of the Egyptian nation (El Shakry, *The Great Social Laboratory*, 101-102). As shown in Qutb's title, *A Child from the Village*, the initial starting point for the child, is the village. Qutb's choice of his title is clearly to engage and debate, on Hussein's autobiography. In *An Egyptian Childhood*, the child suspends himself from his initial origins, from his imagined ties, his national ties; *A Child from the Village* attempts to locate the child's origins back within the village. By doing so, Qutb, unlike Hussein, embraces his past and considered it to be fundamental for the growth and development of Egypt. Hussein's title also becomes interesting in relation to Qutb's, because the sentiment of nationhood and belonging to a national community does not enter the mind of the child in Hussein's depiction. Egypt only enters the autobiography through the adult, but according to Hussein the child shows no awareness of a broader community beyond his village. As, Tageldin argues with Hussein's previous work, though Egypt is absent in the mind of the child the author attempts to place the child within the nation by disconnecting him from his 'traditional' place, and placing him within a futuristic and teleological progressivist narrative of the nation, one which was more connected to Europe than its own African Arab past (Tageldin, 282). Qutb on the other hand, growing up under the Wafdist movement and their liberal nationalist project for Egypt, views himself as an essential part of his *watan*, or homeland (Qutb, xxix-xxx). The Egyptian nation, thus in Qutb's context is already a set reality and his love for his *watan* (*hub al-watan*) is closely connected to his childhood. His village, on the other hand, represents an identification with the Islamic culture and values that were passed on to him from one generation to another. Qutb depicts Islamic tradition through customs and unshaken beliefs, within his village. Despite casting away some of these beliefs in his adult life, he could not extrapolate the from his 'soul', just like he cannot break from his rural past

(Qutb, xxvi). Differently than Hussein, Qutb, maintains a connection with Egypt's proverbial past, and 'tradition', which tied the *fellahin* together, prior to the supra-connection of the nation (Qutb, xxviii-xxix).

*A Child from the Village*, emphasizes, despite having the similar setting of a child raised in an Egyptian village, the changes between Qutb's time and Hussein's. Indeed, there are pivotal changes between Qutb's childhood and Hussein's but these changes are reflected more so in the attitudes of the authors, in the time of writing, than in their childhoods. Qutb fits in within the frame of his time, growing up a part of the new *effendiyya* class, impacted by the country's modernization and the wave of nationalist sentiment. Writing towards the end of the liberal phase, he as many others, were frustrated by the ongoing socio-economic and political hardships within the country (El Shakry, "Youth As Peril And Promise", 593-594). His memoir was published during a time of disillusionment with the Wafdist liberal project, and at a time when Egypt was looking for an alternative, to liberal humanism, validated by Hussein and his generation. For Qutb, this alternative had already existed, embedded in Egypt's intimate past and, located in the village (Qutb, xxix-xxx). This difference is communicated via Qutb's early years of schooling which became pivotal to his later intellectual development.

As stated earlier, Qutb shows enthusiasm for the new national school that he attended, especially after his brief encounter at the traditional *kuttab*. This is how Qutb describes differences between the old system and the new system of education: he writes,

he [Qutb] was accustomed to being greeted each morning by the neat clean building, with its rooms whitewashed and its courtyard spread with sand. He was used to sitting in the school chairs with their receptacles for books, implements, notepads, and his fine writing slate. In the *kuttab*, by contrast, there were no seats with book receptacles, nor bells, classrooms, books, inkwells, chairs... our child's soul was filled with repugnance at everything that surrounded him. He felt bitter, abject loneliness. When he returned to his house he was determined that he would never go back to that filthy place, no matter how much he might be threatened or reproached (Qutb, 19-20).

The next day, Qutb skipped the *kuttab* and went back to his modern school relaying to his peers the horrors he saw at the *kuttab*. The headmaster in turn was able to persuade Qutb's father, to let Qutb return to the national school. The day after his return, Qutb writes, "the school became for him a holy place like a *mihrab* for prayer. Everything and everyone associated with it rose several degrees in his eyes. He went out of his way to become the school's missionary in its struggle against the *kuttab*" (Qutb, 20-21). This story presents an important theme in Qutb's memoir, the importance of images. In Timothy Mitchell's book, *Colonizing Egypt*, appearance became an important factor when reforming spaces of learning, with the modernizing of Egypt. Many places of learning, like al-Azhar, were not separated from the mosque, and there was no definitive space specifically created for schooling. When Muhammad Ali sent students to London to learn under the Lancaster method, the Lancaster method stressed the appearance of physical space. When the scholars returned from London, they were enlisted by Ismail to reform prior learning institutions where they only saw disorder. When they saw al-Azhar they associated it with chaos and spurned the need for individualized and orderly spaces for learning (Mitchell, 68-69 & 101). In Qutb's example, appearance had been something deduced comparatively, however, by the time *A Child from the Village* would be published, according to Mitchell, there would already be a normalization of a specific kind of order. Although Qutb championed the campaign against the *kuttab* system of education he, nonetheless, insisted on the need and necessity to learn the Quran and Islamic knowledge but in an environment, other than that of the *kuttab* (Qutb, 20-21). Qutb, who memorized the Quran at ten, wanted to show that one could incorporate their Islamic learning alongside a more modern education (Ibid, 20-21). By stressing his 'religious' education alongside his more secular schooling, Qutb shows that the child, as the precursor to the national subject, could form himself through both forms of knowledge, the religious and the secular.

Another important theme in Qutb's memoir which he chooses to engage Hussein with are

the '*afarit*, creature-like spirits, which pervaded the minds of those in the village (Qutb, xxvi). Qutb references the '*afarit* more than Hussein, dedicating a whole chapter to them. For Qutb, they seemed to represent a mix of childhood naivete and imagination, alongside the held superstitions of adult villagers. Qutb relates his fear of these spirits as a child and how much he was haunted by the images of these '*afarit* as rabbits, lurking in certain alleyways and abandoned buildings (Qutb, 61-62). He also recalls the story of one of the headmasters who in response to these superstitions, asked Qutb, as well as, other children to join him in an 'experiment' (Qutb, 70-71). The headmaster then walked with them to the alley, waited until dark, to see for themselves if their superstitions were correct or not. When Qutb and the children saw the rabbits they were immediately fearful, despite the headmaster reassurances that these rabbits were not bad spirits. When the children did not relent the headmaster took one of the rabbits to school the next day, and because the rabbit did not change in front of their eyes, the experiment for Qutb proved successful. Qutb continued to conduct some 'experiments' of his own as a way to convince himself of the '*afarit* fallacy (Qutb, 72-73). At the end of this chapter, Qutb notes that it was only after he left the village to move to Cairo that, "the myth of the '*afarit* became a source of amusement and jest" but deep down the myth of the '*afarit* still lived on in his mind (Qutb. 77).

The account of the '*afarit* for Qutb, reveals the 'irrational' superstitions and the enduring nature of these creatures had on the child and even later among the fully developed adult. Even after the 'experiment' that led him to deduce these superstitions and fears were irrational, Qutb as an adult could not, no matter how modernized and developed he became, and no matter his age, extrapolate these 'imagined' creatures from his mind (Qutb, xxvi-xxvii). This chapter directly reflects his sentiments that he expresses in his rebuttal to Hussein's, *Future of Culture in Egypt* (Qutb, xviii). The use of the term 'experiment' shows his high regard for social-scientific approaches, logic, and modern rationality, and yet Qutb nonetheless cannot detach himself from his

earlier experiences, through which he defines himself, psychologically and intellectually. What he is trying to say is that it would be impossible for the self to break completely away from his environment, historical and well as social, both in its rational and non-rational forms.

Another theme which, Qutb uses to debate Hussein, is around Hussein's negative portrayal of those within his village. Qutb attempts to provide another picture by, showing how much his village distrusted those who came from outside, especially those who imposed their power and disparities on the unassuming villagers. Qutb's critique of Western liberalism, exists in his critique of those public officials and the economic disparities created within his village. While Qutb rarely vilifies people within his village, he holds contempt for many of the officials in the village especially the official doctor, the legal officer, and the *umda* (the head official of the village). Qutb portrays his village steeped in sorrow due to the impossible hardships brought on by the government (Qutb, xxxi). One hardship Qutb hones in on is economic hardships. Qutb's family represented "the sort of family that was able to participate in and profit from the modernization of the country... Qutb's father and mother both came from established and well-respected families in their village" (Qutb, xvi). His father owned land, and in one chapter he even describes the miserable conditions of foreign workers on his father's land. Qutb depicts, these foreigners living under extreme poverty, to the point that he himself was shocked one day when he saw them eating molokhia, a special Egyptian dish, without meat. He later found out that they could barely afford to buy meat except occasionally. Qutb ruminates on the great injustice of leaving these men who "create the wealth of the Nile Valley" to live below subsistent levels, while he lives off the benefits from their work (Qutb, 122-124). The issue of social justice and welfare, gained a lot of traction, in the 1930's and 1940's, following a number of economic depressions and a deepening gap between the ruling elite and the poor masses, that were mostly living in the countryside. Issues of social justice would remain foundational to Qutb's future beliefs and of his deep disenchantment with the

liberal project of the Wafd (Qutb, xxx-xxx). Qutb connected the stemming of economic injustice, corruption, and materialism, to the moral vacuum created by the uncritical adoption of Western Liberalism. He expands on this argument further in a later work, titled *Social Justice in Islam* (Qutb, xviii- xix & xxx-xxx). In it, Qutb proposes that there is already a belief-system existing in Egypt, one that is organic to the nation. Later in his life he joined the Muslim Brotherhood, and became its literary arm arguing for a system of governance based on Islam, with its clear notion of social justice founded on the cultivation of modern moral subjects (Qutb, xviii-xx).

Overall, through his memoir, Qutb depicted a childhood where the child is both tied to his historical past and traditions, as well as, his upbringing within new modern realities. Whereas Hussein sees tradition and superstitions as impediments to the child that must be discarded, Qutb tries to harmonize it with his ‘new’ modern reality, bridging his past with his present, as the ‘new’ national subject. This derivation of dual-origins between his modern upbringing, along with what he believed to be the nation’s true social and cultural origins, located in aspects of village life, is enframed in Qutb’s narrative of his childhood. Thus, through his childhood autobiography, Qutb does not wholly differentiate his childhood from Hussein’s, but like his mentor al-Aqqad, he wanted to engage with Hussein on the ‘partial differences’ between their childhoods (Tageldin, 283-284; Qutb, xviii). He does so, not by devaluing his modern upbringing nor the modern institutions that came with it, including national education, the family structure, Egyptian nationhood, and so on. Nonetheless, Qutb wanted to provide a different facet of an Egyptian childhood in which the child is unable to dislocate himself from his provincial community, looking to his rural influences, which includes Islamic beliefs and practices that connect Egypt with the Arab world. And as the translators of *A Child from the Village*, Calvert and Shepard also point out to the distinct spiritual sensibility that he brings out in his work:

“Qutb touches on a theme found throughout the body of his writings, namely, that

Egyptians such as himself are possessed of inherent spiritual sensibility that distinguished them from the essentially materialistic outlook of the West. As Qutb was coming to appreciate around the time he wrote his autobiography, this spiritual outlook, manifested vulgarly in village beliefs, was perfectly expressed in adherence to the divinely ordained principles of the Quran” (Qutb, xxvii).

Thus, not only was the child unable to break himself from his community and past but there was an inherent ‘spiritual sensibility’ in which Qutb found absent in the West, thus the child could not completely become westernized. The child could not negate his dual upbringing, and could not deny their modern upbringing, nor could the child be fully liberated from their traditions. Instead, Qutb attempted to harmonize both traditions, within the child, by advocating childhood as a special stage of development and, a crucial period for the development of the mind, as well as the moral cultivation of a modern Egyptian moral subject.

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## CONCLUSION

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In his book, *Centuries of Childhood*, scholar Philippe Aries traces the history of the notion of childhood. He concluded that childhood, as a concept, was discovered in modern Western Europe. Recent scholarship has debunked Aries argument, providing references to pre-modern depictions of the child, existing within and outside Europe. Despite this, Aries has inspired further scholarship, which trace the history of childhood, within various contexts. Historian Heidi Morrison, is one of these scholars who interrogates Aries’ work, tracing the history of childhood in Modern Egypt. Morrison argues, that counter to Aries, there was a rich heritage of depictions of childhood, in Egypt, prior to modernity. But Morrison, like Aries, argues that childhood was embedded with new meaning, with the advent of modernity, more specifically the process of nation-building in the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Egypt. As anti-colonial sentiments grew, Egyptian

nationalist thinkers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup>-centuries, employed language on a distinct national entity, one that had become suffused in anti-colonial rhetoric. But for the defined nation to be realized, these intellects employed modernizing technology to inculcate the sense of national unity among the masses. To create a ‘new’ national identity, it required the disruption of older principles, forms and structures, and replacing them with new ones. Under these new forms, the child became the ideal source for this change. Thus, among the mind of nationalists, the notion of childhood was enframed in ‘new’ language, the Egyptian child, formulating him/her as the bearer of this ‘new’ national Egyptian identity. In the age of the ‘liberal experiment’ in Egypt, this ‘new’ notion of Egyptian childhood had become normalized through the restructuring of the family and educational institutions. But the application of this ‘new’ modern notion of childhood, was more complex and varied. The ‘liberal experiment’, represented a spectrum of various thoughts and influences from which various literature and autobiographies emerged on the subject of childhood. Since language on the child was intertwined with language on the nation, different authors used literary depictions on childhood to argue their own views on the nation’s trajectory. Not only were accounts of childhood employed, to argue on the future of the nation, but they also served to reformulate and retranslate pre-existing notions of a modern Egyptian childhood. Two childhood autobiographies that emerged during this time, were written by Taha Hussein and Sayyid Qutb. Both men represent very different trajectories in political thought. Hussein believed that for the nation to succeed Egypt must model herself after Europe, while Qutb was an advocate of preserving Islamic tradition and history. They also straddled different generations, representing different upbringings, as well as, different shifts in thoughts regarding what an Egyptian childhood looked like.

Taha Hussein was born before the onset of modernity in his village. His encounter with modern reforms comes later in his life, as an *effendiyya*. Hussein caught up in the beginning waves

of liberalist thought and influenced by French enlightenment and positivism represents a thinker, who believed that Egypt and Europe had shared origins. He accordingly placed Egypt's history within a greater universal, progressivist history by arguing for a complete break with the past and against holding on to what he considered dead and gone traditions. He considered that Egypt's progression towards the future is best served by its connection to the West and Europe, then to the East and Africa. Hussein relates his [adult] beliefs through the retelling of his childhood. In *An Egyptian Childhood*, Hussein represented through his blindness, how old outdated customs and habits, had blinded him both physically and metaphorically. His emphasis on his social isolation and the abuses he faced due to his blindness, allowed Hussein to convey the backwardness of his community and surroundings. The child, depicted as a suffering soul, unable to develop his mind, is hampered by the weight of traditions, which included his extended family household, his uneducated parents, his rote education at the *kuttab*, as well as, the incompetent ophthalmologist who blinded him. Hussein used his account to argue for the child, just like the nation, to be freed from the fetters of tradition, and from his rural surroundings, towards a great belonging. By dislocating the child from his surroundings, Hussein as a child can derive his origins and history not from the village or his community, or from backward stagnate traditions, but beyond, which at the time, in Hussein's case was the nation, which stemmed its origins from Europe and western liberal humanism.

Sayyid Qutb, a by-product of the modernizing project, represented the second-generation *effendiya* class, which emerged from the rural countryside. Later on, Qutb and others like him, became inculcated with nationalist sentiments and the need to modernize Egypt, as part and parcel of liberating the nation from British colonialism. Qutb, influenced by Abbas al-Aqqad and highly aware of the socio-economic realities of the 1930's and 1940's, became disillusioned with the failures of the Wafdist party and its 'liberal experiment'. Like other opposition groups during this

period, Qutb became a critic of Western liberalism, and looked elsewhere for alternatives. Qutb was not entirely against the project of modernity, but was against the westernization of Egypt. He believed that the Egyptian nation, could be built, based off of renewing and reforming, concepts and ideas within Egypt's history and traditions, which included Islam. Qutb was able to convey these ideas within his childhood memoir, as a response to Hussein. Different to Hussein, Qutb depicted a childhood that had already been touched by modernity, and nationalism. He went to a modern secular school, his father was a part of the nationalist party in his village, his family unit was relatively small compared to Hussein, and Qutb's family benefitted off of modern land reforms under Ali. But, at the same time, Qutb is reminded of those popular imaginations, religious superstitions and held mysticism within his village, which appear in his memoir as the *'afarit* and the spirits, which take hold the mind of the villagers as well as the mind of the child. Though, as an adult Qutb had dismissed these nonsensical superstitions, as naïve imaginations, he still could not extrapolate himself from those lingering superstitions, which he believed inhabited his soul. He portrayed the child as wanting to harmonize both his religious and secular education, which remains important to him, through the importance of not only developing the mind, but moral cultivation, as well. Socio-economic injustice within the child's village, is another big theme, in which the author argues through his childhood. Those figures of the state, who come into Qutb's village and mistreat the villagers, as well as the economic injustices, though Qutb's family benefits off these injustices, to Qutb they all represented the moral bankruptcy of the West, in comparison to the moral hierarchy of the East. Ultimately, Qutb argues that the Egyptian nation cannot cast off its past so easily, to become like the West, just as he argues that the child cannot delink himself from his Eastern upbringing.

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