

Language as a medium:

The Power of Vernacular Sarcastic Poetry along with Folklore Music in the Socio-political Context: The Case of Negm Poetry and Negm-Imam Songs in Post-1967 Egypt.

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Abstract

Language is the essential medium of human communication, and it takes various forms, from music to computer code, each of which is suited to specific purposes. This paper explores the realm of vernacular language, infused with sarcasm, within the contexts of poetry and folk music. Specifically, we explore its transformative role within the socio-political landscape of post-1967 Egypt, shedding light on its dynamic impact on the political and social structure of the time.

Our research places particular emphasis on the works of Ahmad Fouad Negm and his collaborative partnership with Sheikh Imam. Through their unique lens, this paper explores the profound significance of vernacular poetry as a powerful tool for articulating the everyday struggles and sentiments of the underprivileged class. Their compositions served as a means of resistance to Egypt's ruling class and provided a powerful voice for those marginalized within society. This study highlights the enduring importance of vernacular sarcastic poetry in addressing socio-political issues and advocating for the underprivileged in post-1967 Egypt's socio-political landscape.

Keywords: Language, Communication, Vernacular poetry, Sarcasm, Socio-political, Egypt post 1967, Ahmad Fouad Negm, Shaikh Imam.

A. Introduction

In everyday life, language serves as our main tool for interacting with other humans and, more recently, with computers, primarily to communicate thoughts, ideas, concepts, and emotions. However, in the field of sociolinguistics, this view is considered too simplistic. Sociolinguistics takes a broader view of language as more than a tool for communicating thoughts. Instead, it examines language activity from a multifaceted perspective, taking into account various dimensions such as the identity of the speakers, the audience (listeners), the context of communication (topics), the linguistic codes employed, and the overarching purpose of the conversation. In this way, language functions are analyzed and appreciated from different angles, providing a richer understanding of its intricate role in human interaction (Rabia, 4).

In the context of this paper, the speaker is primarily embodied by Negm, occasionally complemented by Imam's musical accompaniment. The audience, on the other hand, is composed of both the common people of the Egyptian street and the ruling class. The overarching context refers to the socio-political milieu and everyday challenges of post-1967 Egypt. The analysis will delve into Negm's linguistic choices, extracting the common sense framework of traditional proverbs and placing them in a social or political context, most often using both satire and humor to illustrate reality and convey his message.

Language plays a central role in human existence. It functions as a fundamental tool facilitating communication between individuals. This communication is based on the specific selection of spoken words and the construction of coherent sentences by the speaker, each spoken with a specific intention that not necessarily should be conscious. These spoken words and structured sentences, empowered by the speaker's intent, serve as practical instruments that guide and influence the actions

of the listening observer. Those activities, however, are initiated by the listener in response to the expressions conveyed. These expressions may manifest in various forms, including commands, directions, demands, or persuasive and seductive appeals, all communicated by the speaker to prompt corresponding actions from the listener. In essence, language operates as a dynamic conduit for meaningful interactions, stimulating a spectrum of responses and activities from the listener, who will understand the state of the speaker when the last not only expresses emotion but also shows them (Rabia, 4).

This is applied in different fields of our life, such as economy and politics, religion and culture. In the term of expressing a culture, language is the main tool to allow groups to define their culture and communicate their traditions and values related to the group identity with other cultures. Society is an essential part of preserving a language. because in society there are people. And people need to communicate. The need to communicate arises and becomes stronger when one has someone to talk to. This principle finds application across various domains of human existence, encompassing spheres such as economics, politics, religion, and culture. Notably, in the context of cultural expression, language assumes a central role as the primary instrument through which societal groups define their cultural attributes and effectively convey their customs, values, and the collective identity inherent to their specific cultural milieu. Consequently, the preservation and vitality of a language are intrinsically linked to the society in which it thrives, for it is within the societal framework that individuals interact and engage in communicative acts. The imperative for communication is inherently intertwined with human nature and is particularly pronounced when individuals seek to engage with others who provide a receptive audience for their expressions and narratives. Languages can set boundaries between different nations and social groups. Even within a single country, language can separate people into different classes, with some being more privileged than others. These differences can be seen in both spoken and written language. (Sirbu, 405).

Ahmad Fouad Negm used the language of the less fortunate in society, the vernacular, which was different from the language of the privileged. In his poems, he humorously and critically discussed important socio-political issues. By using this unique language, he aimed to create a shared understanding of the struggles faced by the poor in Egypt. This approach helped him express their concerns and shed light on their experiences, uniting them in their shared reality without speaking to them rather speaking directly to the privileged and government class. Negm's unique use of vernacular Egyptian language added a relatable and humorous quality to his work, enabling a strong connection with his audience. Furthermore, his poems often served as a platform for addressing political matters. Therefore, our study aims to explore how Negm's language, the historical backdrop in which he wrote, his satirical humor, and his political commentaries collectively shaped the distinctiveness of his poetic style.

The 20th century marked a period in which traditional art and literature witnessed a resurgence and assumed a prominent role in the social, political, and artistic domains, both globally and within Egypt. However, this form of artistic expression encountered resistance and was generally disparaged by the privileged elite, who considered it unworthy. Numerous scholars contend that this resurgence of traditional heritage reflects a culture of resistance and serves as a catalyst for confronting the ruling class. Prominent author Yousef Idrees elucidates the inception of traditional literature as rooted in the concept of resistance. He underscores the absence of two distinct cultures but rather delineates a binary division between the people and the ruling class. The Egyptian ruling class, as Idrees asserts, has historically lacked a distinctive culture, philosophy, specific ideology, or defined objectives. In contrast, the broader populace has consistently maintained a culture that is continuous and comprehensive. Consequently, public culture is considered holistic, while the culture of the ruling class is characterized as derivative and unstable, susceptible to change depending on the prevailing political authority. (Mostafa,129).

B. Who is Ahmad Fouad Negm?

Negm is a unique character, he was not a person who is looking to be loved and accepted by everyone. He states in the start of his book *El-Fagumi* that he will say what he saw, everything from A to Z and he continues by talking to the reader and telling them if you like it, then buy it but if you do not like it, do not buy it someone else will do. Negm is going to tell the truth if the costs were losing part of his audience but he is sure that others will hear what he has to say, because simply he is telling the truth and he is sure that the truth is clear for others as well and because he also wants to send a clear message for those who support the corruption and inequality (Issa, 11).

Ahmad Fouad Negm was born on 22.05.1929 in a small village north of Cairo in Gouvernement Asch-Scharqiyya, Egypt. His mother was a housewife, she got married to his father at the age of thirteen. His father worked in the police and then left to work for the ministry of finance. They had seventeen kids, Ahmad Fouad Negm was the last to be born to his brothers and sisters, from which only 5 of them remain alive and one of them went missing. Negm was not a normal child in any terms of normality, he was born with a twin sister that did not survive and was born dead. His mother accused him of killing his sister, while both in her uterus before coming to the world (Issa, 13-16). From the early stages of his life, Negm confronted numerous challenges. However, his unwavering mother, his primary wellspring of inspiration, indirectly motivated him to surmount these hurdles. Despite having married at a young age and initially facing the difficulties this entailed, Negm's mother refused to succumb to her circumstances. She managed to transform her husband, encouraging him to spend more time at home and assume greater

responsibilities for their family. This was no simple feat, especially for a thirteen-year-old girl who found herself far from her own family, suddenly tasked with numerous responsibilities, particularly when her father was occasionally absent due to work, and later distanced himself from the family, visiting only on weekends. Negm was for an unknown reason the child that did not get punished by his mother as his other siblings and as he says this has influenced the idiot inside him. And when his siblings asked why he does not also get punished, the mother would answer because he is a crazy psycho. Negm could not agree more with her and he describes himself as an idiot when he was a teen and he says that he never thought about tomorrow “god brings, god takes, and god compensates” he says (Issa, 26).

Negm experienced the death of his Father when he was still 6 years old and saw him lying dead in bed and his mother crying devastated on the ground. It was shocking because it came suddenly without any warnings before. The father died and did not leave his children anything. His mother started to sell everything they have to bring food to the children and to protect them from sickness she even ended up selling her golden teeth to provide the family with necessary needs After the death of his father the plans of the family changed radically and he had to work from an early age to make money and support his family (Issa, 93). Growing up without a father, Negm had to exhibit exceptional strength and self-reliance. In his society, children who lacked a father and were solely raised by their mothers were often referred to by their mothers' names among their peers and friends. This situation was not one Negm wanted to accept, prompting him to adopt a more assertive and even potentially intimidating demeanor. He believed that using force, if necessary, would help him avoid being labeled by his mother's name and instead command respect and recognition among his peers (Issa, 68). At the age of seven, Negm entered an orphanage with the aspiration of joining the musical group, specifically the string section. However, his initial request to become a part of this group was denied. Instead, he was assigned to work in a shoe workshop but was subsequently expelled from there. He later transitioned to the sewing workshop,

where he remained until his departure in 1945. This marked the end of his ten-year stay at the orphanage, and he was just 17 years old at the time (Issa, 99-101). He Moved to Cairo the big city at the age of 18 (Issa, 109) there he was driven to problems and as he describes and the problems were driven to him. He always felt sorry because of that but still managed to come over. He was an optimistic man and he always thought if I am here by my choice I have to move forward and deal with whatever (Issa, 113-122). There he worked for the british colonial barrack in the printer made him learn reading and writing, which he was deprived of as a kind. This is a significant event in his life, because it made him start writing the thing that made him as powerful as he became. At the age of 30, Negm found himself in prison after being accused of assisting a work colleague in committing fraud and forgery. This three-year prison sentence had a profound impact on his life, fundamentally altering his character and demeanor, making him a much more composed individual. In prison he won a literature competition, which motivated him to write more and ended up writing the “pictures of the prison life”, which got published while he was in prison and made his words be an icon for revolution and resistance. (Issa, 147-149).

C. Ahmed Fouad Negm and Sheikh Imam political song

Ahmed Fouad Negm achieved global recognition with his writings in the Arabic language. His work was characterized by its use of the Egyptian dialect and his distinctive style, after the war of 1967, the loss of the egyptian and arabic militaries against Israel, his poetry became more political. Along with the music of Sheikh Imam and his outstanding performances, they targeted the Egyptian government and policy makers. Negm and Imam created a problem for the governments in Egypt so they were always put in prison because of what they said with fabricated charges, they did not give up while in prison, they wrote, produced and performed music. Together, Negm-Imam, they forged an undefeatable political artistic unity that left an indelible mark not only on Egyptian history but also on the broader landscape of Arabic political songs and the social reality that one could not find in

the media. Even today, when discussing political songs, the Negm-Imam duo remains an essential part of the conversation. Both hailing from humble backgrounds, Negm and Imam spoke the language of the underprivileged. Through their artistry, they managed to touch the hearts and resonate with the emotions of countless Arabic individuals in their reality who yearned for freedom and liberty and had enough from corruption. He was not normal as he describes himself in the first chapter of his Book "Al Fagumi", where he describes himself as one of the people and not special, this what mad people like him and till today respect him and repeat his words till today. His songs are being reproduced and covered and remixed till today over and over again. Sheikh Imam's musical context and theme was influenced from Saied Darwish music. Saied Darwash has made a change in the musical scene in Egypt, he was first to employ music to express the daily problems of people and reflect reality. Before him the rise of a singer was determined by how good he or she looks and how good his or her voice is. Said Darawsh changed that to make the singer rise despite the norms with how good the context is. He was very active after the 1919 revolution where he wrote and sung to embark change and provoke people to go to the street and demonstrate. So Sheikh Imam went the same path and dedicated his music to the people and to deal and address socio-political issues. He did not want people to sing his songs only in the streets but also in the factories, theaters and universities. (Mostafa, 147-148). Sheikh Imam is also the first Arabic singer to be imprisoned because of a song, in which he criticized the president Jamal Abdel Nasser after the loss of 1967 against Israel.

D. Techniques used by Negm to write and deliver his messages:

Language is a tool that might be used through speaking and writing. In many cultures and countries there is either a slight or a big difference between the written and the spoken. Negm used the spoken language to write his poetry, the vernacular poetry, which is understandable for the underprivileged. Negm's use of language was brilliant. His genius employment of language in expressing political and social issues using humor and vernacular poetry was a distinctive imprint of him.

a. Humor

The most important technique Negm used was the sense of humor in his writing. Humor and sarcasm played a significant role in Negm's writing, and he adeptly utilized these elements to critique and convey his ideas. They constituted integral components of his poems, endearing him to his audience even when using sharp and pointed language.

Researchers divided humor according to the subject it addresses into three sections, political, social, and entertainment humor. Besides the main three classes of humor we have black humor, which is the humor used to criticize social and political issues and also characters that engage directly with the reality of the public. This kind of humor has an invisible sharp and tragic meaning in it and visible ironic denotations. Negm has always used dark humor in his poetry. Through humor he aimed to increase the public awareness and prompt for justice and equality and to call for the overthrow of tyrant regimes, also its a literature experiment, in which Negm represented the hard reality Egyptians were living in a sarcastic way and highlighted very important problems that Egypt went through at that time like the war and the foreign intervention and the penetration of the zionist occupation and many other reasons (Zainivand et al, 48-49).

Ahmad Fouad Negm, renowned for his acerbic wit and humor, employed sarcasm not as a mere vehicle for amusement and levity, but as a potent instrument through which he articulated his profound political and social convictions. In this endeavor, he achieved remarkable success. During Negm's era, Egypt grappled with the stifling yoke of foreign occupation and a pervasive sense of injustice. The Egyptian society was ensnared in the throes of multifarious crises and conflicts, with overarching control exercised by formidable entities such as the British colonial empire.

Negm's sarcastic humor was distinguished by its profound intelligence and subtlety. At times, it exhibited elements of symbolism and enigma. An illustrative work in this regard is his poem, "THE FOREST," in which he metaphorically likened Egypt to a forest. The poem resounds with verses like "Ham Ham Ham, the dogs of the forest are wolves / went on tearing people apart / went on eating people / as the cattle are eaten / in a wink... eating / Ham Ham Ham / a forest, in which the meat is eaten / a forest, in which the blood is drunk." This allegorical composition vividly conveys Negm's pessimistic perspective, wherein he portrays the dogs as wolves, symbolizing the strong preying upon their own kind. It underscores the prevailing imbalance of power and the relentless subjugation of the weaker segments of society. Negm's adept use of symbolism within his humor demonstrates his capacity to address profound socio-political issues through satire and wit.

Indeed, when Negm likened the dogs to wolves in his poem "THE FOREST," he was not merely employing metaphor and allegory for aesthetic effect. Instead, he was delivering a pointed critique of the Arab regimes of his time. These regimes, entrusted with the responsibility of safeguarding and protecting their citizenry, were symbolically represented as the dogs that had, in fact, metamorphosed into wolves, creatures known for their predatory and aggressive nature. This transformation serves as a powerful metaphor for the betrayal of trust and the abandonment of their duty to their people. Negm's words conveyed a stark warning to the populace. By illustrating the government as a wolf, he sought to awaken the citizenry to the potential danger lurking in their midst. His message was clear: the government, instead of being a protector akin to dogs tending to livestock, had devolved into a ferocious predator, tearing apart its own people and causing harm. Through this metaphorical portrayal, Negm urged the public to be vigilant and cognizant of the government's actions and intentions, and to recognize the threat it posed to their well-being and interests (Zainivand et al, 55-56).

In this manner, Negm's use of symbolism in storytelling within his humor transcended mere satire; it functioned as a clarion call for societal awareness and

action in response to the failings of the political establishments, thereby underscoring his deep commitment to social and political commentary.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Arab world witnessed a disheartening state of living conditions characterized by widespread adversity. In Egypt, the administration under President Anwar Sadat implemented economic policies that proved to be ineffective, leading to mounting public discontent. In an effort to placate this growing unrest and alleviate general sentiment, the government ostensibly expanded the freedom of speech. Paradoxically, these ostensible measures further exacerbated the already dire socio-economic landscape, resulting in a profound societal schism.

This division became glaringly apparent, demarcating the population into two distinct classes: one consisting of individuals with considerable financial resources, and the other comprising those who struggled to afford even basic sustenance. The economic disparity was such that a significant portion of the population found itself unable to procure essential food items. In response to this prevailing socio-economic distress, Ahmad Fouad Negm composed a thought-provoking poem.

Negm's poem, titled "About the beans and meat," serves as a poignant commentary on the economic and financial situation in Egypt during that period. Through the allegorical representation of beans and meat, the poem articulates the harsh realities of Egyptian life at the time. It underscores the palpable suffering endured by Egyptians, many of whom could scarcely afford even the most fundamental dietary staples, including beans.

The poem's irony lies in the portrayal of the Egyptian government as "doctor Muhsin," who encourages the populace to consume beans while discouraging meat consumption. This metaphor encapsulates the profound financial schism, with meat symbolizing an expensive luxury and beans being promoted as a cost-effective

dietary option. The government's attempt to persuade its citizens that meat is detrimental to their health underscores the depth of the financial crisis and the hardship experienced by the average Egyptian. This rhetorical device highlights the government's apparent lack of empathy and understanding, as it purports to dispense health advice while a significant portion of the population struggles to afford even the most basic nutritional necessities (Zainivand et al, 58-59).

In the aftermath of the Arabs' defeat in the 1967 Six-Day War against Israel, which led to the Israeli occupation of Sinai, a part of Egypt, Ahmad Fouad Negm composed a satirical poem. In this poem, he ironically addressed the Egyptian people, characterizing them as a "protected" nation by their leaders, albeit with a tone of criticism. He emphasized the availability of essential provisions like beans and food, as well as the accessibility of wheat, he wrote:

O people of protected Egypt / beset by thieves / plenty of beans and food are available/ and wheat is accessible/ not a million of us have perished, nor has the entire universe/ Life is not guaranteed /for the ages rest in God's hands/ And, thankfully, we have seemingly forgotten the loss in Sinai / in Sinai, where our entire population seemed to vanish/ for us, it is sufficient that we are the revolutionaries, as our ability and power reside solely in God / Egypt is an ancient deceiver/ What matters to us is that our masters live happily / so long as the people can fill their bellies with beans/ engage in the composition of poetry / extols both the revolutionaries and even the malevolent ones /

Negm then a sharp turn, describing the loss of lives and territory without a million souls or the entire universe having been sacrificed and ironically underscored the precarious nature of life, emphasizing that human destiny is in the hands of God and the death of Egyptians in Sinai was not the responsibility of the Egyptian leaders. He humorously remarked that they had seemingly forgotten the loss of Sinai, a territory of historical significance. Instead, he pointed to the people's status as "revolutionaries," indicating a sense of powerlessness and reliance on divine

intervention, which was perhaps an implicit critique of both the Egyptian government and other Arab authorities involved in the war. (Zainivand et al, 58-60).

b. Music and Satire

Ahmad Fouad Negm's artistic approach extended to addressing significant socio-political themes in Egypt, exemplified by his satirical poem "Ha Ha Cow." This composition emerged in the aftermath of Gamal Abdel Nasser's resignation, a moment marked by large-scale public protests imploring him to reconsider his decision and resume the presidency. Notably, "Ha Ha Cow" was Negm's first poetic offering following the conclusion of the 1967 war, and it garnered considerable recognition among the populace. This poem vividly underscores the profound influence of traditional Egyptian culture on both Negm and Sheikh Imam.

In "Ha Ha Cow," Negm ingeniously reimagined a popular folk song commonly sung by rural farmers, originally depicting the ceaseless, purposeless wandering of a blinded cow within the confines of a farm. Negm appropriated this imagery, adroitly infusing it with his own words to convey the agony and suffering experienced by the cow, symbolizing Egypt. The suffering was attributed to the country's defeat at the hands of Israel and the United States. In spite of the cow's inability to overpower the formidable American bull, it did not yield to despair but rather tenaciously resisted.

Sheikh Imam's musical contribution to this composition introduced the "Sabaa" scale, a traditional musical scale characterized by its melancholic and emotionally resonant qualities. This choice of scale offered a poignant and somber musical backdrop. Furthermore, Imam employed the "zar" rhythm, a rhythmic pattern readily accessible to listeners and easily followed. This musical adaptation found resonance with the public, prompting widespread participation as people joined in singing the song collectively. The composition "Ha Ha Cow" stands as a notable example of Negm's proficiency in leveraging vernacular language and traditional motifs, while simultaneously imbuing them with a carefully constructed political context. In tandem, Sheikh Imam demonstrated his ability to reimagine traditional

music, endowing each song with a unique character. This collaborative effort not only showcased the dexterity of both Negm and Imam in their respective artistic domains but also underlined the profound impact of Egypt's cultural heritage on their artistic expressions. (Mostafa, 133-134).

Negm-Imam song has always taken this framework, where Negm took a popular sketch as well as popular sentences which were used in people's daily life and folklore parties and weddings or new-born celebrations, which is shared by everyone in the society and transformed it with his words and put it into a political contemporary theme criticizing the ruling class the socio-political situation with humor and acerbic words. A great example is the "Al Bely Bam Bam" poem. In this poem Negm took a very well known traditional story in which the main character "Al Hawi" is a fraud. He tries to make the people around him believe that he has super powers to move and transform stuff and he articulates some sickness and its symptoms to the people and pretends to have the absolute cure for those. At the end it turns out that he is only trying to sell them his product which has nothing to do. Negm took the general frame of this picture and put it in a political theme. He represented "Al Hawi" to be the president of Egypt and then gave an important political statement in which the superpower of the president in cheating on people is revealed. Those strong words were combined with Sheikh Imam melodies making this statement with Imam's performance a significant influence on the public. (Mostafa, 142-144).

Conclusion:

For an artist to effectively convey the everyday tribulations of the populace, it is imperative that they immerse themselves in the lived experiences of the people and assimilate into their milieu. This immersion enables the artist to authentically comprehend and empathize with the myriad issues and hardships encountered by the community. The vernacular poem, in particular, shares a profound connection with the realm of popular culture. It serves as a reflection of the daily struggles and challenges faced by individuals in their quotidian existence. By employing a shared

language and narrative that resonates with the collective experiences of the people, vernacular poetry forges a bond that allows individuals to relate to the content on a deeply personal level. This resonance, in turn, facilitates memorization and recitation, rendering the poems more accessible and amenable to oral transmission, as compared to traditional written poetry. This is the way Negm was writing. He used language inspired from Egyptian folklore and daily life problems and put them into a socio-political frame in which he criticized the government and the desperate reality of Egyptians at that time. Vernacular poetry is very strong in the socio-political aspect in a country because it reaches a big number of people and reflects their reality. Ahmad Fouad Negm was very clever in using vernacular poetry with a sense of humor to criticize the socio-political life in Egypt and address the ruling class by name putting himself in danger but also the ruling class because he was not alone there were a lot of people in the streets behind him.

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