

Title: A Political Analysis of Literature

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Description:

This lesson is designed for an Advance World History classes that has completed a unit on Egypt, and to explore literature as social criticism in a Literature class.

This project can take up to 2 weeks to complete, although it may take longer depending on how much discussion is necessary. The larger all school book club discussion can occur at a later date.

Although the novel is appropriate for grades 9-12, the lesson is designed for 10th grade because it builds on their curriculum.

Each class has 20 students

Rationale

For students to read the novel *The Day the Leader was Killed* by Naguib Mahfouz, so that they could participate in the all school independent book group, *Discussion and Dessert*, I realized they would need considerable background information. Collaboration with a World History teacher provided an avenue for the necessary research for students to appreciate the novel as social criticism and as a reflection of modern Egyptian urban society. Mahfouz's novel was chosen for its literary merit, but also because it is rich for discussion of history and literature of place; it addresses how the recent political history of Egypt has influenced Egyptian society.

In all classes, in order to encourage participation and a rich discussion, basic background information on the author and the politics referred to in the novel will be provided so that students can better understand the conflicts of the characters in the context of the history/politics of the setting. Some students will connect the conflicts in the novel to the research and study they did previously in history class. As a cross-curricular unit, students in history and literature classes can collaborate by sharing their research to analyze the novel on a political level.

Objectives:

Students in the World History class will read and analyze from a political perspective, *The Day the Leader was Killed* by Naguib Mahfouz.

All Students will be able to recognize Mahfouz's use of the story as an articulation of Egyptian politics and society.

Student will be able to discuss what we can learn through the novel about the political and economic events in Egypt leading up to the assassination of Sadat.

Students will be able to discuss how the behaviors and beliefs of the major characters define a society.

Students will be able to discuss how the expectations of the society influence the individuals.

Students will do research and create a time line on political events in Egypt from the 1870's to 1981.

Students will create the questions to lead the all school discussion

Materials:

Students will have access to the library and computers for independent and group research.

Each student has a copy of the novel, *The Day the Leader was Killed*.

Teachers may print and distribute attached handouts that provide background information to get students started.

Teachers can print the attached article or guide students to web site.

General Plan-

Assign the independent reading for *The Day the Leader was Killed*. Students will use the research to analyze the novel from a historical and literary perspective.

Research background on Mahfouz is provided for Literature and World History students although some students may be appointed to do more research.

World History students will research historical background to support novel: focus on geopolitical events from 1870's to 1981. Students may choose from list of topics that they will share with larger group.

Students will work in class to create a timeline.

Students in the Literature class will work with the World History students in order to analyze and discuss the novel from a political and literary perspective. Then all students will be provided with question stems to create inquiry based questions that identify themes and conflicts in the novel. These discussion questions may be used to guide reading for students who have not done research.

A group discussion of the novel will help them to create the questions needed to facilitate the larger book club discussion of *The Day the Leader was Killed*.

Read the article on marriage in present day Egypt as an excellent reflection of a major conflict in the novel.

Procedures & Activities

Assign the novel.

Identify conflicts in novel for each character. Students will refer to research to recognize how the issues illustrate the current political situation in Egypt.

Read and discuss the article, "Stifled, Egypt's Young Turn to Islamic Fervor" by Michael Slackman. (Handout #3) www.nytimes.com/2008/02/17 This excellent article validates and supports a major issue in the novel.

Students in the World History class will research the expectations (socialism, equality) from the Nassir years.

In order to identify and discuss Mahfouz's major themes in the novel, the students will research:

Imperialism

Colonialism and its continued impact

Modernity

Post revolution disappointments,

Issues of gender- role and voice of women

Economics

Religious faith/Islam

Family ties (see Handout #3 Slackman article)

Cultural response to current political situation

United States economic and political involvement in Egypt

-Students may extend research to the success and failures of Sadat's policies. In order to address the themes listed above, students will divide the research work into the categories of social/cultural policies, economics and political policies. They will share student to student and then share with the larger groups. Chart.

-In AP Literature class, students will research Naguib Mahfouz to identify and focus on his role as a political writer.

As a cross-curricular activity, students in the World History class can share their research with the Literature class in order to discuss the novel as social criticism.

Possible Culminating Projects:

-Research Reports- World History classes/ AP Literature

-After doing the research students will devise a historical background summary to support the reading for all students.

-Devise general reading and research based questions to facilitate the analysis and discussion of the novel.

-Writing Critical Analysis- Literature classes (research will support- student may team with a student from World History class.)

-All research, and the reading analyzing and summarizing of the novel will culminate when students facilitate the all school independent book group discussion, *Discussion and Dessert*.

Optional Writing Assignments

#1: Informative or persuasive essay/prompt:

Elwan made many choices in the novel. Discuss. (Could use the same prompt for Randa) Do you agree or disagree with his decisions/actions? Although some might feel that Elwan is ultimately responsible for his own actions throughout the novel (ending the engagement, his actions at the end, his response to it) can it be argued that he was driven to his actions by another force? Who is responsible for the situations he finds himself in that led to his actions at the end. What argument is Mahfouz making in the novel? Do you agree or disagree? Support.

#2 Critical Analysis AP Literature class

After studying Mahfouz's novel as an articulation of Egyptian society during the Sadat Era, assess his effectiveness as a political writer. How does his use of setting dialogue and characterization add to your understanding of the conflicts and issues?

#3 evaluate the impact of the conflict of modern development vs. tradition on Mahfouz's characterizations of Muhtashimi Zayed, Elwan and Randa. Consider how these forces create their conflicts and how they resolve the conflicts.

#4 World History Critical Analysis Writing Objective.

Assess Mahfouz's use of the novel as an articulation of Egyptian society during the Sadat Era. Consider analyzing the negative sociopolitical consequences of modernization. Discuss the history as you have studied it, and compare to what you view as Mahfouz's interpretation. Consider the shattered expectations of the October War of 1967, the infitah, the June War of 1973, and the Egyptian and Israeli peace negotiations.

Handout #1

Naguib Mahfouz

Winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1988

Born Dec. 11, 1911 to a middle-class Muslim family in Cairo.

Against his father's will, he rejected medicine and chose to study philosophy to pursue his interest in rediscovering and redefining the truths, which in the past he had found in religion.

In 1936, he decided that literature would be his field and abandoned his study of philosophy.

Darwin's theory of evolution deeply influenced Mahfouz's thinking and made him abandon traditional beliefs. The concept of evolution became the center of his understanding of history, society, and civilization.

In 1939 entered the government bureaucracy where he was employed for the next 35 years. He was a civil servant at the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and then worked as a director of the Foundation for Support of the Cinema.

1994- 82 yr. old Mahfouz survived a terrorist attack (stabbed several times in the neck) by Islamic religious fanatics who had targeted him for criticisms of their fundamentalist ideologies.

Mahfouz was a socially committed Egyptian novelist, essayist, and short story writer who explored the problems of traditional and modern Egyptian society. His concerns are thinly veiled.

Nasser's rule brought about progress in Egypt and enhanced Egypt's standing abroad as an island of stability in a turbulent Middle East. Mahfouz stopped writing for about five years after the revolution: "When the old social order disappeared, I lost my desire to criticize it." (Mahfouz, 1963)

Handout #2

Brief History/ background for novel

-Egypt controlled by Ottoman Turks since 1517

-Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798- beginning of Westernization

-British occupation of Egypt since 1883 /establishment of a British protectorate in 1914. A popular uprising in 1919 challenged British rule. Nominal independence was granted to Egypt in 1922 and a constitutional monarchy was established.

-The Free Officers Revolution of 1952, a movement of military conspirators, the Free Officers, led by Col. Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918-1970) toppled the monarchy in a coup in July 1952 and established Nasser as the first native Egyptian to rule the country in over 2,000 years. Nasser nationalized the Suez

Canal, attempted to unite the Arab countries, and waged war with Israel in 1956 and 1967. Nasser's rule brought about progress at home and enhanced Egypt's standing abroad as an island of stability in a turbulent Middle East.

-Nasser was succeeded by Anwar el-Sadat (president of Egypt from 1970-1981) who also had to deal with a war with Israel (1973).

*With Sadat, the expectations of socialism and equality established by Nassir were not met leading to much frustration from the people. (Death of ideology-major conflict in the novel)

*Sadat maintained a brutal dictatorship

The social upheaval of the Open-Door Policy initiated by Sadat has resulted in economic policies aimed at boosting foreign investment with a larger private sector and market mechanism. This policy, designed to reverse Nasser's Arab socialist system, has created deep despair, frustration and anxiety in middle class Cairo. People living on fixed salaries are suffering with alarming inflation. On the other extreme, the Infitah mafia is making huge profits unimpeded by ethical or moral considerations. Middle class families are living in panic watching their world disintegrate. A whole way of life with its traditions and values is falling apart making way for a merciless new materialism of survival of the fittest. President Anwar al-Sadat implemented the Infitah, an open-door economic policy that would expedite the country forward to modernization. This policy is draining the wealth of the majority and removing hope from the dreams of the young.

The novel evokes the assassination of Sadat on October 6, 1981. Sadat was saluting troops at the annual military parade when a team of assassins began firing weapons and throwing grenades into the reviewing stand. Sadat, along with 20 others was instantly killed in the deadly attack. The underlying cause of the fatal massacre traced back to the Camp David Accords between Israel and Egypt in 1979, which led to a negotiated peace between the two countries in the following year. The historic agreement brought peace to Egypt but no prosperity. The economy still slumped with no trace of a turn-around.

Handout #3

[Stifled, Egypt's Young Turn to Islamic Fervor - New York Times](#)

Feb 17, 2008 ... By **MICHAEL SLACKMAN**. Published: February 17, 2008.

www.nytimes.com/2008/02/17/world/middleeast/17youth.html

Questions that can be used for guided discussion:

Where in the novel do you find Mahfouz addressing gender issues by revealing the challenges faced by Randa? How is she caught between contemporary ideals and traditionalism? Discuss.

Name some reasons why Elwan and Randa cannot marry. Do you agree with their concerns? How would you handle the situation?

Why do you think Elwan gives Randa her freedom? Do you agree with his decision? Discuss. What sort of freedom does she get? In what ways could she obtain greater freedom?

What does it mean to sell out? Who sells him/herself in the novel? (See pp. 59, 68, 73, 79, 87.) Discuss. If you don't agree with their actions, discuss other options for the characters.

In what ways can you connect the two deaths of Anwar Allam and Anwar Sadat? In what ways can you connect the politician and the personal? (Connect with the thoughts on death on pp. 77, 96, and 103.)

Who or what do you think is responsible for the tragedies of Elwan, Anwar Allam, and Anwar Sadat? (Consider politics, restrictions and expectations of society, personal choice)

Discuss Mahfouz's use of the story as an articulation of Egyptian society during the Sadat era. (Pages: 12, 25, 94, 96 & 53-57 Elwan's summary of their problem-unable to marry)

How are the issues similar to struggle within our country?

Which character most articulates the social consequences of modernization in Egypt? Where? How? Do you think he/she reflects Mahfouz's personal beliefs?

Elwan made many choices in the novel...Discuss.

Do you agree or disagree with his decisions/actions?

Randa makes many choices in the novel. List/Discuss Do you agree or disagree with her decision/ actions?

Consider:

-Her attitude toward waiting to marry Elwan:

p. 14 "I have great faith in God, yet we keep believing that everything will remain the same forever." How does she deal with this contradiction?
"Love is constant."

-Her attitude when Elwan breaks the engagement.

See p. 45 "I was angry with Elwan. He proved to be weaker than I had imagined...I can even see himself getting into bad ways...I should be congratulating myself on my freedom.... From now on, I can weigh matters rationally with a mind unfettered by the whims of the heart..."...

-Her decision to marry Anwar?

Consider P59 - Her rationale for dating him: "There should be both money and respectability. ...He's acceptable and not physically repulsive."
At the wedding she wore, "the inevitable mask of joy."

p. 86 Why is she exceedingly angry with Elwan?

-Her decision to divorce?

*Her decision to support Elwan at the end?

Discuss grandfather's role in the novel

- His political beliefs.hope? P53 This country will one day reach the shore safely.
- His role in suggesting Elwan break the engagement
- Attitudes on death
- Attitude at end...discuss the irony of his comment, "How courageous Randa turned out to be; going to court to defend...with decency and dignity...Years will go by and he will leave prison having mastered some skill or other. He will then be in a better position to meet the challenges of life and to realize his hopes. I do not think I shall see him again. But he will find my room vacant and will be able to have it and get married to his sweetheart."
- P.17- her thoughts on love
- P.19 in response to mother's pressures, "I'm not a slave girl on sale at the market."
- P32 Anwar's comment about the female doctor who gives up her career to marry. "...better a housewife than a doctor who's a spinster."
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Find example of **irony** in the novel. Consider the idea of freedom. Who is really free?

- Grandfather's attitude at end...discuss the irony of his comment, "Years will go by and he will leave prison having mastered some skill or other. He will then be in a better position to meet the challenges of life and to realize his hopes. I do not think I shall see him again. But he will find my room vacant and will be able to have it and get married to his sweetheart."

-Elwan's parents comments when the engagement is broken: "He's free now and can freely make his own choice...don't forget he is the one who made the decision."

p. 42 Elwan while breaking the engagement: "I'm free and no one has any power over me."

- Elwan gives Randa her freedom? What sort of freedom does she get? In what ways could she obtain greater freedom?

-Name some reasons why Elwan and Randa cannot marry. Do you agree with their concerns? How would you handle the situation?

*P. 12 Elwan's summary of the reasons for their problems

*Bottom of 16 her rationale and concerns....

*Discuss her father's comment on p. 47, "If he were really and truly sincere, he wouldn't have ever given you up." Do you agree?

He continues, "Since we have freed ourselves from love, let us place our faith in reason." Agree? Is this what she does in marrying Anwar?

Consider her response to him. "Father is sarcastic and suspicious of people. He digs behind every good deed until he finds a nasty interpretation."

* Do you see her divorce as a turning point; an opportunity to just run off with Elwan? Remember their conversation at the Pyramid Restaurant? Why don't they just run off?

Condensed Questions for Formal Discussion:

-Elwan made many choices in the novel...Discuss.

Do you agree or disagree with his decisions/actions?

Although some might feel that Elwan is ultimately responsible for his own actions throughout the novel (ending the engagement, his actions at the end, his response to it)...can it be argued that he was driven to his actions by another force?

Who is responsible for the situations he finds himself in that led to his actions at the end. What argument is Mahfouz making in the novel? Do you agree or disagree? Support.

-Randa makes many choices in the novel. Discuss
List/Analyze/Agree/Disagree Support...

-Where in the novel do you find Mahfouz addressing gender issues by revealing the challenges faced by Randa? How is she caught between contemporary ideals and traditionalism? Discuss.

How is Anwar's attitude towards women a representation of women's struggles in Egyptian society?

--Name some reasons why Elwan and Randa cannot marry? Do you agree with their concerns? How would you handle the situation?

-Why do you think Elwan gives Randa her freedom? Do you agree with his decision? Discuss. What sort of freedom does she get? In what ways could she obtain greater freedom?

-What does it mean to sell out? Who sells him/herself in the novel? (See pp. 59, 68, 73, 79, 87.) Discuss. If you don't agree with their actions, discuss what other options the characters had.

-In what ways can you connect the two deaths of Anwar Allam and Anwar Sadat? In what ways can you connect the politician and the personal? (Connect with the thoughts on death on pp. 77, 96, and 103.)

Sources:

Mahfouz Homepage

<http://www.lemmus.demon.co.uk/mahfouz.htm>

Mahfouz, Naguib *The Day the Leader Was Killed*. 1985 Anchor Books;
translation, The American University in Cairo Press, Egypt, 1997

More Notes and Questions on Mahfouz/s *The Day the Leader was Killed*

<Http://faculty.gvsu.edu/websterm/leader.htm>

Stifled, **Egypt's Young Turn** to Islamic Fervor - New York Times Feb 17, 2008

.By **MICHAEL SLACKMAN**. Published: February 17, 2008

www.nytimes.com/2008/02/17/world/middleeast/17youth.html

The complete review's Review

<http://www.complete-review.com/reviews/mahfouz/daylwask/htm#summaries>

PA Standards

- 1.1.11.A** Locate various texts, media and traditional resources for assigned and independent projects before reading.
 - 1.1.11.B** Analyze the structure of informational materials explaining how authors used these to achieve their purposes.
 - 1.1.11.D** Identify, describe, evaluate and synthesize the essential ideas in a text. Assess those reading strategies that were most effective in learning from a variety of texts.
 - 1.1.11.G** Demonstrate, after reading, understanding and interpretation of both fiction and nonfiction text, including public documents.
 - 1.5.11.B** Write using well-developed content appropriate for the topic.
 - 1.6.11.A** Listen to others.
 - 1.6.11.D** Contribute to discussions.
 - 1.6.11.E** Participate in small and large group discussions and presentations.
 - 1.8.11.A** Select and refine a topic for research.
 - 1.8.11.B** Locate information using appropriate sources and strategies.
 - 1.8.11.C** Organize, summarize, and present the main ideas from research.
 - 1.1.11.G** Demonstrate, after reading, understanding and interpretation of both fiction and nonfiction text, including public documents.
 - 1.111.H** Demonstrate fluency and comprehension in reading.
- 1.1.10.A, 1.2.10.B, 1.5.10.C, 1.8.10.C Research
- 10.A.2.6.1 Identify and/or describe the author's intended purpose of text
- 10.B.1.2.1 Interpret, compare, describe, analyze and evaluate the relationships within fiction and literary nonfiction.
- R10.A.2.3.1 Make inferences and/or draw conclusions based on information from text.

New York Times

Stifled, Egypt's Young Turn to Islamic Fervor

By MICHAEL SLACKMAN

Published: February 17, 2008

CAIRO — The concrete steps leading from Ahmed Muhammad Sayyid's first-floor apartment sag in the middle, worn down over time, like Mr. Sayyid himself. Once, Mr. Sayyid had a decent job and a chance to marry. But his fiancée's family canceled the engagement because after two years, he could not raise enough money to buy an apartment and furniture.

Mr. Sayyid spun into depression and lost nearly 40 pounds. For months, he sat at home and focused on one thing: reading the Koran. Now, at 28, with a diploma in tourism, he is living with his mother and working as a driver for less than \$100 a month. With each of life's disappointments and indignities, Mr. Sayyid has drawn religion closer.

Here in Egypt and across the Middle East, many young people are being forced to put off marriage, the gateway to independence, sexual activity and societal respect. Stymied by the government's failure to provide adequate schooling and thwarted by an economy without jobs to match their abilities or aspirations, they are stuck in limbo between youth and adulthood.

"I can't get a job, I have no money, I can't get married, what can I say?" Mr. Sayyid said one day after becoming so overwhelmed that he refused to go to work, or to go home, and spent the day hiding at a friend's apartment.

In their frustration, the young are turning to religion for solace and purpose, pulling their parents and their governments along with them.

With 60 percent of the region's population under the age of 25, this youthful religious fervor has enormous implications for the Middle East. More than ever, Islam has become the cornerstone of identity, replacing other, failed ideologies: Arabism, socialism, nationalism.

The wave of religious identification has forced governments that are increasingly seen as corrupt or inept to seek their own public redemption through religion. In Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Morocco and Algeria, leaders who once headed secular states or played down religion have struggled to reposition themselves as the guardians of Islamic values. More and more parents are sending their children to religious schools, and some countries have infused more religious content into their state educational systems.

More young people are observing stricter separation between boys and girls, sociologists say, fueling sexual frustrations. The focus on Islam is also further alienating young people from the West and aggravating political grievances already stoked by Western foreign policies. The religious fervor among the young is swelling support for Islam to play a greater role in political life. That in turn has increased political repression, because many governments in the region see Islamic political movements as a threat to their own rule.

While there are few statistics tracking religious observance among the young, there is near-universal agreement that young people are propelling an Islamic revival, one that has been years in the making but is intensifying as the youth bulge in the population is peaking.

In Egypt, where the people have always been religious and conservative, young people are now far more observant and strict in their interpretation of their faith. A generation ago, for example, few young women covered their heads, and few Egyptian men made it a practice to go to the mosque for the five daily prayers. Now the hijab, a scarf that covers the hair and neck, is nearly universal, and mosques are filled throughout the day with young men, and often their fathers.

In 1986, there was one mosque for every 6,031 Egyptians, according to government statistics. By 2005, there was one mosque for every 745 people — and the population has nearly doubled.

Egypt has historically fought a harsh battle against religious extremism. But at the same time, its leaders have tried to use religion for their own political gains. The government of President Hosni Mubarak — whose wife, Suzanne, remains unveiled — has put more preachers on state television. Its courts have issued what amount to religious decrees, and Mr. Mubarak has infused his own speeches with more religious references.

“The whole country is taken by an extreme conservative attitude,” said Mohamed Sayed Said, deputy director of the government-financed Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies in Cairo. “The government cannot escape it and cannot loosen it.”

Anger and Shame

Depression and despair tormented dozens of men and women in their 20s interviewed across Egypt, from urban men like Mr. Sayyid to frustrated village residents like Walid Faragallah, who once hoped education would guarantee him social mobility. Their stifled dreams stoke anger toward the government.

“Nobody cares about the people,” Mr. Sayyid said, slapping his hands against the air, echoing sentiment repeated in many interviews with young people across Egypt.

“Nobody cares. What is holding me back is the system. Find a general with children and he will have an apartment for each of them. My government is only close to those close to the government.”

Mr. Sayyid, like an increasing number of Egyptians, would like Islam to play a greater role in political life. He and many others said that the very government that claimed to elevate and emphasize their faith was insincere and hypocritical.

“Yes, I do think that Islam is the solution,” Mr. Sayyid said, quoting from the slogan of the Muslim Brotherhood, a banned but tolerated organization in Egypt that calls for imposing Shariah, or Islamic law, and wants a religious committee to oversee all matters of state. “These people, the Islamists, they would be better than the fake curtain, the illusion, in front of us now.”

Mr. Sayyid’s resigned demeanor masks an angry streak. He said he and his friends would sometimes enter a restaurant, order food, then refuse to pay. They threaten

to break up the place if the police are called, intimidating the owners. He explains this as if to prove he is a victim. He tells these stories with anger, and shame, then explains that his prayers are intended as a way to offset his sins.

“Yeah, like thugs,” he said of himself and his friends. “When we were younger, we watched the older guys do this, and then we took over. We inherited it.”

Mr. Sayyid, however, is no Islamic radical, combing militant Web sites and preaching jihad.

He could walk unnoticed in the West. He has a gap-toothed smile, rounded shoulders and a head of black hair that often shines from gel. He likes to wear jeans, and sandals with white socks. He often has a touch of a goatee, and a light shadow of calloused skin — barely noticeable — runs from his hairline to the middle of his forehead. The shadow is his prayer mark, or zebibah, which he has earned from pressing his head into the ground each time he bows in prayer.

Like most religious young people, Mr. Sayyid is not an extremist. But with religious conservatism becoming the norm — the starting point — it is easier for extremists to entice young people over the line. There is simply a larger pool to recruit from and a shorter distance to go, especially when coupled with widespread hopelessness.

“There are lots of psychological repercussions and rejection from society,” said Hamdi Taha, a professor of communications at Al Azhar University who runs a government-aligned charity that stages mass weddings for older low-income couples. “This is actually one of the things that could lead one to terrorism. They despair. They think maybe they get nothing in this world, but they will get something in the other life.”

Obstacles to Marriage

In Egypt and in other countries, like Saudi Arabia, governments help finance mass weddings, because they are concerned about the destabilizing effect of so many men and women who can not afford to marry.

The mass weddings are hugely festive, with couples, many in their late 30s and 40s, allowed to invite dozens of family members and friends. Last year, Mr. Taha said, he had about 6,000 applications for help — and managed to aid 2,300 men and women. In Idku, a small city not far from Alexandria on Egypt’s north coast, Mr. Taha’s charity staged a wedding for more than 65 couples; 200 others received help but decided not to take part in the collective wedding late last year.

The couples were ferried to an open-air stadium in 75 cars donated by local people. They were greeted by a standing-room-only, roaring crowd, flashing neon lights, traditional music, the local governor and a television celebrity who served as the master of ceremonies for the event.

“They are encouraging the youth to settle down and preventing them for doing anything wrong,” said Mona Adam, 26, as she watched her younger sister, Omnia, marry. “Any young man or woman aspires to have a home and a family.”

Across the Middle East, marriage is not only the key to adulthood but also a religious obligation, which only adds to the pressure — and the guilt.

“Marriage and forming a family in Arab Muslim countries is a must,” said Azza Korayem, a sociologist with the National Center for Social and Criminal Studies. “Those who don’t get married, whether they are men or women, become sort of isolated.”

Marriage also plays an important financial role for families and the community. Often the only savings families acquire over a lifetime is the money for their children to marry, and handing it over amounts to an intergenerational transfer of wealth. But marriage is so expensive now, the system is collapsing in many communities. Diane Singerman, a professor at American University, said that a 1999 survey found that marriage in Egypt cost about \$6,000, 11 times annual household expenditures per capita. Five years later, a study found the price had jumped 25 percent more. In other words, a groom and his father in the poorest segment of society had to save their total income for eight years to afford a wedding, she reported.

The result is delayed marriages across the region. A generation ago, 63 percent of Middle Eastern men in their mid- to late 20s were married, according to recent study by the Wolfensohn Center for Development at the Brookings Institution and the Dubai School of Government. That figure has dropped to nearly 50 percent across the region, among the lowest rates of marriage in the developing world, the report said. In Iran, for example, 38 percent of the 25- to 29-year-old men are not married, one of the largest pools of unattached males in Iranian history. In Egypt, the average age at which men now marry is 31.

And so, instead of marrying, people wait and seek outlets for their frustrations. Mr. Sayyid lives with his mother, Sabah, who is 45, and who divorced shortly after he was born. He now spends most of his time behind the wheel of a Volkswagen Golf, listening to the Koran. At home, the radio is always on, always broadcasting the Koran. Two books are on a small white night table beside Mr. Sayyid’s bed, a large Koran and a small Koran.

As a young woman, Sabah, whose family did not want her last name used, never covered herself when she walked the streets of Sayeda Zeinab, the teeming, densely populated neighborhood known for its kebab and sweets. But now, she makes a pilgrimage each year to Mecca, wears loose fitting Islamic clothing that hides her figure, and she fasts twice a week.

“We pull each other,” said Sabah, who cannot read or write and so has learned about Islamic ideas from her son. She said that her son taught her that the Prophet Muhammad said that even if you could not read, looking at the Koran was like reading it.

So she does just that and flips the pages, admiring the artistry of Arabic script.

Dashed Expectations

Mr. Sayyid’s path to stalemate began years ago, in school.

Like most Egyptians educated in public schools, his course of study was determined entirely by grades on standardized tests. He was not a serious student, often skipping school, but scored well enough to go on to an academy, something between

high school and a university. He was put in a five-year program to study tourism and hotel operations.

His diploma qualified him for little but unemployment. Education experts say that while Egypt has lifted many citizens out of illiteracy, its education system does not prepare young people for work in the modern world. Nor, according to a recent Population Council report issued in Cairo, does its economy provide enough well-paying jobs to allow many young people to afford marriage.

Egypt's education system was originally devised to produce government workers under a compact with society forged in the heady early days of President Gamal Abdel Nasser's administration in the late 1950s and '60s.

Every graduate was guaranteed a government job, and peasant families for the first time were offered the prospect of social mobility through education. Now children of illiterate peasant farmers have degrees in engineering, law or business. The dream of mobility survives, but there are not enough government jobs for the floods of graduates. And many are not qualified for the private sector jobs that do exist, government and business officials said, because of their poor schooling. Business students often never touch a computer, for example.

On average, it takes several years for graduates to find their first job, in part because they would rather remain unemployed than work in a blue-collar factory position. It is considered a blow to family honor for a college graduate to take a blue-collar job, leaving large numbers of young people with nothing to do.

"O.K., he's a college graduate," said Muhammad el-Seweedy, who runs a government council that has tried with television commercials to persuade college graduates to take factory jobs and has provided training to help improve their skills. "It's done. Now forget it. This is a reality."

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Generation Faithful

Stifled, Egypt's Young Turn to Islamic Fervor

By [MICHAEL SLACKMAN](#)

CAIRO — The concrete steps leading from Ahmed Muhammad Sayyid's first-floor apartment sag in the middle, worn down over time, like Mr. Sayyid himself. Once, Mr. Sayyid had a decent job and a chance to marry. But his fiancée's family canceled the engagement because after two years, he could not raise enough money to buy an apartment and furniture.

Mr. Sayyid spun into depression and lost nearly 40 pounds. For months, he sat at home and focused on one thing: reading the Koran. Now, at 28, with a diploma in tourism, he is living with his mother and working as a driver for less than \$100 a month. With each of life's disappointments and indignities, Mr. Sayyid has drawn religion closer.

Here in Egypt and across the Middle East, many young people are being forced to put off marriage, the gateway to independence, sexual activity and societal respect. Stymied by the government's failure to provide adequate schooling and thwarted by an economy without jobs to match their abilities or aspirations, they are stuck in limbo between youth and adulthood.

"I can't get a job, I have no money, I can't get married, what can I say?" Mr. Sayyid said one day after becoming so overwhelmed that he refused to go to work, or to go home, and spent the day hiding at a friend's apartment.

In their frustration, the young are turning to religion for solace and purpose, pulling their parents and their governments along with them.

With 60 percent of the region's population under the age of 25, this youthful religious fervor has enormous implications for the Middle East. More than ever, Islam has become the cornerstone of identity, replacing other, failed ideologies: Arabism, socialism, nationalism.

The wave of religious identification has forced governments that are increasingly seen as corrupt or inept to seek their own public redemption through religion. In Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Morocco and Algeria, leaders who once headed secular states or played down religion have struggled to reposition themselves as the guardians of Islamic values. More and more parents are sending their children to religious schools, and some countries have infused more religious content into their state educational systems.

More young people are observing stricter separation between boys and girls, sociologists say, fueling sexual frustrations. The focus on Islam is also further alienating young people from the West and aggravating political grievances already stoked by Western foreign policies. The religious fervor among the young is swelling support for Islam to play a greater role in political

life. That in turn has increased political repression, because many governments in the region see Islamic political movements as a threat to their own rule.

While there are few statistics tracking religious observance among the young, there is near-universal agreement that young people are propelling an Islamic revival, one that has been years in the making but is intensifying as the youth bulge in the population is peaking.

In Egypt, where the people have always been religious and conservative, young people are now far more observant and strict in their interpretation of their faith. A generation ago, for example, few young women covered their heads, and few Egyptian men made it a practice to go to the mosque for the five daily prayers. Now the hijab, a scarf that covers the hair and neck, is nearly universal, and mosques are filled throughout the day with young men, and often their fathers.

In 1986, there was one mosque for every 6,031 Egyptians, according to government statistics. By 2005, there was one mosque for every 745 people — and the population has nearly doubled.

Egypt has historically fought a harsh battle against religious extremism. But at the same time, its leaders have tried to use religion for their own political gains. The government of President [Hosni Mubarak](#) — whose wife, Suzanne, remains unveiled — has put more preachers on state television. Its courts have issued what amount to religious decrees, and Mr. Mubarak has infused his own speeches with more religious references.

“The whole country is taken by an extreme conservative attitude,” said Mohamed Sayed Said, deputy director of the government-financed Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies in Cairo. “The government cannot escape it and cannot loosen it.”

Anger and Shame

Depression and despair tormented dozens of men and women in their 20s interviewed across Egypt, from urban men like Mr. Sayyid to frustrated village residents like Walid Faragallah, who once hoped education would guarantee him social mobility. Their stifled dreams stoke anger toward the government.

“Nobody cares about the people,” Mr. Sayyid said, slapping his hands against the air, echoing sentiment repeated in many interviews with young people across Egypt. “Nobody cares. What is holding me back is the system. Find a general with children and he will have an apartment for each of them. My government is only close to those close to the government.”

Mr. Sayyid, like an increasing number of Egyptians, would like Islam to play a greater role in political life. He and many others said that the very government that claimed to elevate and emphasize their faith was insincere and hypocritical.

“Yes, I do think that Islam is the solution,” Mr. Sayyid said, quoting from the slogan of the Muslim Brotherhood, a banned but tolerated organization in Egypt that calls for imposing Shariah, or Islamic law, and wants a religious committee to oversee all matters of state. “These people, the Islamists, they would be better than the fake curtain, the illusion, in front of us now.”

Mr. Sayyid's resigned demeanor masks an angry streak. He said he and his friends would sometimes enter a restaurant, order food, then refuse to pay. They threaten to break up the place if the police are called, intimidating the owners. He explains this as if to prove he is a victim. He tells these stories with anger, and shame, then explains that his prayers are intended as a way to offset his sins.

"Yeah, like thugs," he said of himself and his friends. "When we were younger, we watched the older guys do this, and then we took over. We inherited it."

Mr. Sayyid, however, is no Islamic radical, combing militant Web sites and preaching jihad.

He could walk unnoticed in the West. He has a gap-toothed smile, rounded shoulders and a head of black hair that often shines from gel. He likes to wear jeans, and sandals with white socks. He often has a touch of a goatee, and a light shadow of calloused skin — barely noticeable — runs from his hairline to the middle of his forehead. The shadow is his prayer mark, or zebibah, which he has earned from pressing his head into the ground each time he bows in prayer.

Like most religious young people, Mr. Sayyid is not an extremist. But with religious conservatism becoming the norm — the starting point — it is easier for extremists to entice young people over the line. There is simply a larger pool to recruit from and a shorter distance to go, especially when coupled with widespread hopelessness.

"There are lots of psychological repercussions and rejection from society," said Hamdi Taha, a professor of communications at Al Azhar University who runs a government-aligned charity that stages mass weddings for older low-income couples. "This is actually one of the things that could lead one to terrorism. They despair. They think maybe they get nothing in this world, but they will get something in the other life."

Obstacles to Marriage

In Egypt and in other countries, like Saudi Arabia, governments help finance mass weddings, because they are concerned about the destabilizing effect of so many men and women who can not afford to marry.

The mass weddings are hugely festive, with couples, many in their late 30s and 40s, allowed to invite dozens of family members and friends. Last year, Mr. Taha said, he had about 6,000 applications for help — and managed to aid 2,300 men and women. In Idku, a small city not far from Alexandria on Egypt's north coast, Mr. Taha's charity staged a wedding for more than 65 couples; 200 others received help but decided not to take part in the collective wedding late last year.

The couples were ferried to an open-air stadium in 75 cars donated by local people. They were greeted by a standing-room-only, roaring crowd, flashing neon lights, traditional music, the local governor and a television celebrity who served as the master of ceremonies for the event.

“They are encouraging the youth to settle down and preventing them from doing anything wrong,” said Mona Adam, 26, as she watched her younger sister, Omnia, marry. “Any young man or woman aspires to have a home and a family.”

Across the Middle East, marriage is not only the key to adulthood but also a religious obligation, which only adds to the pressure — and the guilt.

“Marriage and forming a family in Arab Muslim countries is a must,” said Azza Korayem, a sociologist with the National Center for Social and Criminal Studies. “Those who don’t get married, whether they are men or women, become sort of isolated.”

Marriage also plays an important financial role for families and the community. Often the only savings families acquire over a lifetime is the money for their children to marry, and handing it over amounts to an intergenerational transfer of wealth.

But marriage is so expensive now, the system is collapsing in many communities. Diane Singerman, a professor at American University, said that a 1999 survey found that marriage in Egypt cost about \$6,000, 11 times annual household expenditures per capita. Five years later, a study found the price had jumped 25 percent more. In other words, a groom and his father in the poorest segment of society had to save their total income for eight years to afford a wedding, she reported.

The result is delayed marriages across the region. A generation ago, 63 percent of Middle Eastern men in their mid- to late 20s were married, according to recent study by the Wolfensohn Center for Development at the [Brookings Institution](#) and the Dubai School of Government. That figure has dropped to nearly 50 percent across the region, among the lowest rates of marriage in the developing world, the report said. In Iran, for example, 38 percent of the 25- to 29-year-old men are not married, one of the largest pools of unattached males in Iranian history. In Egypt, the average age at which men now marry is 31.

And so, instead of marrying, people wait and seek outlets for their frustrations.

Mr. Sayyid lives with his mother, Sabah, who is 45, and who divorced shortly after he was born. He now spends most of his time behind the wheel of a Volkswagen Golf, listening to the Koran. At home, the radio is always on, always broadcasting the Koran. Two books are on a small white night table beside Mr. Sayyid’s bed, a large Koran and a small Koran.

As a young woman, Sabah, whose family did not want her last name used, never covered herself when she walked the streets of Sayeda Zeinab, the teeming, densely populated neighborhood known for its kebab and sweets. But now, she makes a pilgrimage each year to Mecca, wears loose fitting Islamic clothing that hides her figure, and she fasts twice a week.

“We pull each other,” said Sabah, who cannot read or write and so has learned about Islamic ideas from her son. She said that her son taught her that the Prophet Muhammad said that even if you could not read, looking at the Koran was like reading it.

So she does just that and flips the pages, admiring the artistry of Arabic script.

Dashed Expectations

Mr. Sayyid's path to stalemate began years ago, in school.

Like most Egyptians educated in public schools, his course of study was determined entirely by grades on standardized tests. He was not a serious student, often skipping school, but scored well enough to go on to an academy, something between high school and a university. He was put in a five-year program to study tourism and hotel operations.

His diploma qualified him for little but unemployment. Education experts say that while Egypt has lifted many citizens out of illiteracy, its education system does not prepare young people for work in the modern world. Nor, according to a recent Population Council report issued in Cairo, does its economy provide enough well-paying jobs to allow many young people to afford marriage.

Egypt's education system was originally devised to produce government workers under a compact with society forged in the heady early days of President Gamal Abdel Nasser's administration in the late 1950s and '60s.

Every graduate was guaranteed a government job, and peasant families for the first time were offered the prospect of social mobility through education. Now children of illiterate peasant farmers have degrees in engineering, law or business. The dream of mobility survives, but there are not enough government jobs for the floods of graduates. And many are not qualified for the private sector jobs that do exist, government and business officials said, because of their poor schooling. Business students often never touch a computer, for example.

On average, it takes several years for graduates to find their first job, in part because they would rather remain unemployed than work in a blue-collar factory position. It is considered a blow to family honor for a college graduate to take a blue-collar job, leaving large numbers of young people with nothing to do.

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Mona el-Naggar contributed reporting.