

The Manifestation of Melancholy through Guilt in Bahaa Taher's *Sunset Oasis*

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Abstract: During the life span, human beings experience different kinds of emotions that oscillate from positive to negative and from mild to severe ones . Human emotions are vital not only for the reason that positive ones help their owners to be the best versions of themselves but actually because the opposite is catastrophic. The domination of negative emotions over people can lead to serious psychological and physical problems that can sometimes, unfortunately cause death. This article outlines the life of Mahmoud , the protagonist of Bahaa Taher's *Sunset Oasis*, who suffers from a painful feeling of guilt that dominates all facets of his life. The exploration of Mahmoud's psychological situation will be made possible using the studies of Sigmund Freud. Guilt in this article is argued to be a self-destructing feelings linked directly to Melancholia and which without treatment can lead to death.

Keywords: Bahaa Taher, guilt, melancholia, death, *Sunset Oasis*.

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Introduction:

Guilt and melancholia are two powerful emotions that can shape our experience of the world in profound ways. Both are complex and multifaceted phenomena that have been the subject of extensive theoretical and clinical investigation in different fields such as psychoanalysis, psychology, and philosophy. Guilt involves a sense of responsibility or culpability for some real or imagined transgression, while melancholia involves a profound sense of loss, sadness, and despair. In this essay, I will explore the relationship between guilt and melancholia, examining how these two emotions intersect, overlap, and influence each other.

Drawing on the work of key theorists such as Sigmund Freud, Julia Kristeva, and others, I will argue that guilt and melancholia are intimately connected, and that a deeper understanding of this connection can shed light on a range of psychological, cultural, and political phenomena. Through an exploration of key theoretical concepts, clinical examples, and cultural artifacts, I will show how guilt and melancholia can help us to better understand the human condition, and how they can provide a means for transformation and growth.

Sunset Oasis by Bahaa Taher is a captivating novel that delves into the complex emotions of guilt and melancholia. Set in the beautiful Siwa Oasis in Egypt, the novel follows the story of Mahmoud Abd El Zahir, an Egyptian police officer who is sent on a mission to quell a rebellion in the oasis. As he delves deeper into the heart of the oasis, Mahmoud begins to uncover secrets and dark pasts that haunt the residents of the oasis. The guilt and melancholia that permeate the novel are palpable, as the characters struggle with the weight of their past actions and the consequences that they must face.

Through vivid descriptions and intricate character development, Taher masterfully captures the essence of human emotion and delivers a powerful story that will leave readers captivated until the very end. This article will discuss the following hypotheses:

١. How does the feeling of guilt shape the characters and their actions throughout the novel?
٢. Does guilt lead the protagonist to Melancholia?

Mahmoud's feelings of guilt and remorse in "The Sunset Oasis" are complex psychological phenomena that are deeply intertwined with his personal and social identity.

I. Whispers of Betrayal: Mahmoud's Burden of Guilt

Mahmoud is a civil servant who is sent to a remote oasis in the Western Desert of Egypt during the British colonial period. As the novel progresses, Mahmoud becomes highly critical of the British authorities and increasingly conflicted about the role that he is playing in the colonial administration. After participating in the revolution launched by Ahmed Urabi against the British colonization, that was ultimately suppressed and called 'Hoga' (which in Arabic means an unwise maneuver), Mahmoud was punished by being sent to a desert in Siwa. Yet to escape execution as his fellows who admitted participating in the revolution out of a protest against the colonization, Mahmoud, on the other hand expressed his 'guilt' in taking part of what he called 'Hoga'. Yet the real guilt that Mahmoud carries with him throughout the whole novel is actually to have said so. According to Freud:

Guilt is a distressing and uncomfortable feeling. It is the result of a conflict between the ego and the superego, between what one wants to do and what one believes is right. Guilt is a signal to the individual that they have transgressed against their own moral code. It can serve as a motivator for moral behavior, but it can also lead to psychological distress and even mental illness if not properly managed. (1933, P. 77)

Indeed, what is mentioned in the previous quotation is precisely what Mahmoud is undergoing. There is a deep clash within him between his super ego that wishes him to admit his object to the British colonization and to fight for it and his ego that strives at protecting him.

Mahmoud Along his Friend Tal'at took part in the revolution of Urabi that kept getting back to his memory every now and then:

I can see myself with Tal'at on the top of a rise, rom afar what is happening to one of the forts. Tal'at says in a choking voice, 'It's slaughter, not war,' and I reply, 'You're right.' We see the British ships shelling the fort as though carrying out a leisurely review, with three large ships in a geometric formation pointing their guns at the fort and then shelling it very precisely, and then the fort responding - those who remain alive inside it, that is, responding - by firing their ancient cannon. (Taher, ٢٠١٧, p. ٣٥)

He also adds:

Tal'at started letting out short laughs, like exclamations, as he looked towards me and said, 'Did you hear? Let's be off, Mahmoud. Back to the station! Or to our houses! Are we to disobey the orders of His Excellency the governor? Or those of Our Master the Khedive? Or of Our Lord Admiral Seymour? Back to our houses!' He went on laughing his strange laugh and gesticulating with the hand in which he was holding the revolver and the tribesman sensed danger and started to retreat in the direction of his men, who had fortified themselves behind the walls, but Tal'at yelled, pointing his revolver at him, 'Wait! Wait! Take this for yourself! And this for Our Master the Khedive! And this ...' and he couldn't name the one he wanted the third bullet for because of the volley of fire directed at him by the followers of the chief, who ran to join his men. I threw Tal'at to the ground and flattened myself next to him. I managed to hit the tribesman and he

fell to the ground and went on crawling to get to the others, and a bullet hit me in the top of my left arm, at the shoulder. (Taher, ٢٠١٧, p. ٣٦)

Yet Mahmoud cannot but to see himself as a despicable traitor. When asked by the investigators about whether he participated in Urabi's revolution, his ego pushed him to deny:

In what way am I better than Tal'at? Why do I deliberately not think of the moment of ignominy and betrayal? It was two short answers I gave during the commission's interrogation, which I constantly push aside in my memory but which continue to lurk inside me like embers.

Question: 'Did you support Ahmad Urabi and his followers?'

Answer: 'On the contrary, I was one of those who most bitterly condemned the actions of those miscreants.'

Question: 'What do you know of the activities of His Excellency Umar Basha Lutfi, Governor of Alexandria, during the civil strife of ١١ June?'

Answer: 'I know that His Excellency ordered the police companies to suppress the civil strife but that those assisting the mutineers failed to carry out his orders. I misunderstood what the Bedouin said, however, because of my ignorance of their dialect.'

It was Captain Saeed who suggested these answers to me. He himself never underwent investigation. His caution, which made him always remain silent and move carefully, even when helping the revolutionaries, protected him. He was always advising me in those days to keep my mouth shut. (٢٠١٧, p. ١١٠)

And this is exactly what Mahmoud had done. He kept his mouth shut. Not only when investigated about Urabi's revolution but also when ordered to collect taxes from the poor people of the oasis where he was sent (٢٠١٧, p. ٧).

Because of the occupation, Mahmoud feels alienated in his own country and believes he is powerless to oppose it. His refusal to participate in the revolution caused him to feel ashamed for the rest of his life. Mahmoud regards himself as little and insignificant, and he despises his cowardice to the point of desiring death. Yet despite his inner turmoil between his yearning for death and his love for life, he always chooses to obey rather than rebel against orders. Even if he attempts to change them, his efforts are timid and ineffective.

Forming a bond with Katherine through marriage is one of the protagonist's attempts to protest against his reality and sense of guilt. Katherine is an Irish girl who fled to England after learning of her husband's infidelity. She traveled to Egypt to pursue her ambition of studying archaeology and uncovering Alexander the Great's tomb. Despite Katherine's initial declaration of hating the English, Mahmoud couldn't help but see her as a European occupier and invader. Consequently, he always avoided answering her crucial question about whether he loved her or not.

II. The Collaboration with the oppressor

In fact, the hero is full of contradictions, rather, may even exhibit alignment with the occupier. According to the American writer Arthur Miller: "A man is not an orange. You can't eat the fruit and throw the peel away." Thus, one cannot simply benefit from an oppressive regime or occupier without bearing the consequences or moral responsibility for their actions. Ever further, in his book *Social backwardness: An introduction to the psychology of the oppressed individual* the writer Moustapha Hidjazi (مدخل إلى سيكولوجية الإنسان المقهور) argues that the occupied individuals collaborates uncounsciously with the occupier as a defense mechanism against their feelings of shame and inferiority:

Collaboration with the oppressor is one of the prominent manifestations in the oppressed individual's quest to resolve their existential crisis and alleviate the lack of security and the personal devaluation resulting from their submissive position. It is a solution that involves escaping from one's own identity and denying it, as well as escaping from the community and denying one's belonging to it by

imitating the oppressor and embodying their aggression, dominance, lifestyle, and values. It is the submission of the oppressed individual who seeks to dissolve themselves in the world of the oppressor and their system, hoping for salvation...The phenomenon of alignment with the aggressor is particularly prevalent during the stage of submission to both local and foreign oppressors, when the oppressed individual feels the weight of their situation and their inability to change the oppressive relationship. However, this phenomenon permeates various aspects of life and behavior unconsciously, making it elusive to attempts at change. (حجازي, ٢٠١٣, pp. ١٢٣-١٢٤, Trans. Ghariri, , personal translation, ٢٠٢٤).

The aforementioned applies accurately to Mahmoud. This latter used to own a slave named Ni'ma and he was deeply in love with her. She represented to him all the joyful meanings, from the warmth of family to the memories of innocent and secure childhood. In her arms, he can feel the comfort of going back to being a little child. However, Mahmoud did not accept nor did he ever imagine the idea of taking Ni'ma the slave as a lover. In one of the scenes, Ni'ma asks Mahmoud for the first time if he loves her and unexpectedly Mahmoud rages violently and reprimanded her harshly, reminding her of her lowly position compared to his. He even threatened to dismiss her and in doing so, he is no different from the occupier who, despite showing kindness and protection towards the Egyptian subjects, never fails to remind them of their inferior status compared to his own. Thus, Ni'ma left home and Mahmoud without ever showing up again, deepening so Mahmoud's feelings of guilt and self-loathing:

She asked me, as she lay next to me on the bed, 'Does My Master Mahmoud love me?' I rebuked her: 'What nonsense is that, girl? If you talk like that again, I'll throw you out on to the street!' She laughed and said, 'You're right, Master Mahmoud. Nonsense.' And she buried her head in my chest, repeating in the midst of her

laughter, 'What nonsense!' But then she went out on her own into the street and disappeared. It was my good luck, or my bad luck, to be distracted thereafter by what happened in Alexandria, and the war, and the investigations. Ni'ma still brings back to me the child and the man, the joy and the regret. (Taher, ٢٠١٧, p. ٧٠)

Mahmoud was unable to rise up and rebel against racism and slavery, as black-skinned people were considered inferior and treated as servants and slaves. So how can he revolt and rebel against the English occupiers and against those who govern and manipulate him as they wish?!

III. Mahmoud's Melancholic Journey in a Colonial Landscape

III.١. The Path from Guilt to Melancholia:

According to Freud, Guilt is often associated with melancholia, as it causes significant pain to the victim. Consequently, melancholia leads a person to self-hatred, self-contempt, and a constant inclination towards self-punishment:

We have long known that in severe cases of melancholia the patients are overwhelmed by a tormenting sense of their own worthlessness and guilt. They reproach themselves bitterly for every loss they have suffered, whether or not they could have done anything to prevent it, and they represent the loss to themselves as a punishment for some crime" (١٩٩٠, p. ٢٦٢).

Thus, the victim tends to practice certain deeds of self-destruction whether consciously or unconsciously to ease the pain caused mainly by guilt. For the victim, there should be some sort of punishment as a form of repentance for the harm he has committed against the others. Such punishment can escalate to death as the victim may not find any kind of punishment sufficient for what he has committed and decides ultimately that he does not deserve living ending up in committing suicide:

In melancholia, the subject no longer knows against whom he is to direct his hostility; he has turned it back onto his own ego and wants

to do it harm. Thus, the shadow of the object has fallen upon the ego, which then possesses the same power of becoming impoverished and losing interest in the outside world as we have found to be characteristic of mourning" (Freud, ١٩٩٠, p. ٢٥٠)

One of the novel's scenes that translates faultlessly what has just been mentioned is Mahmoud's journey to Siwa. Deeply within Mahmoud, he finds it fair that he was summoned to Siwa Oasis as this latter was considered the grave of all police officers. Thus he was not afraid of the long journey he should take through the desert to reach the oasis nor what fate awaits him once there. During the journey, the convoy consisting of Mahmoud, his wife Catherine, and several accompanying police officers was hit by a fierce storm that almost endangered their lives:

As the cloud got closer, the whistling of the dust devils was transformed into a thundering roar and no one could hear any longer what the guide was screaming. Catherine threw her arms around me and we staggered like the rest, were forced to our knees, then got up and staggered about again in the middle of the circle of kneeling camels while I tried to protect her and myself from the hail of gravel and small stones that pelted us. Then total darkness fell upon us and the roaring enveloped us. I could no longer hear the voice even of Catherine, who was screaming at me as she clung to me. (Taher, ٢٠١٧, p. ٢٧)

Yet, ironically, Mahmoud felt a great relief that he may die any moment now: "and in those moments when I was incapable of breathing and a terrible constriction pressed down on my chest, I wished for death with all my heart" (٢٠١٧, p. ٢٧). When Mahmoud felt death so close to him, he could for the first time dispose of his tearing pain. Later on when he speaks to Catherine he even describes death as "smooth" and "soft" (Taher, ٢٠١٧, p. ٢٩).

Mahmoud sees himself as a helpless person who cannot do anything for himself or others. Despite the pleas of the oasis residents to lower the tax price for them, Mahmoud could only resort to contacting the authorities in Cairo and requesting it from them: "I sent my opinion to the ministry: excessive taxation is the cause of their rebelliousness and the murder of the officials appointed by Cairo to govern them. I suggested the taxes be cut by half" (٢٠١٧, p.٦٣). He then obediently followed their orders not to lower it at all: "the ministry had refused my request for the reduction of the tax" (٢٠١٧, p.١١٨). Therefore, deeply within him he carried an enormous feeling of shame and insignificance.

Actually a melancholic person suffer from a constant mood swing that may affect badly his/her relationships. In most of his writings like: *Écrits: A Selection* (٢٠٠٤), *The Seminar, Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis* (١٩٩١), *The Seminar, Book X: Anxiety* (٢٠١٦) Jacques Lacan argues that melancholia, the subject is caught in a cycle of alternating moods, oscillating between a sense of loss and a desperate clinging to the lost object. These mood swings reflect the ambivalence and internal conflicts that characterize the melancholic condition and this is exactly what is happening with Mahmoud. He responded with a question: 'Do you mean, "Do I have women other than you?"' I nodded and he said calmly, 'Yes.'" (Taher, ٢٠١٧, p.١٥).

III.٢. Mahmoud's Lens on Women: A Tapestry of Complex Views:

His relationship with his Irish wife, Catherine, is no less turbulent and ambiguous, and its content does not differ from Mahmoud's relationship with the people of the oasis or even with himself. Sometimes he approaches her and expresses his love for her, but other times he distances himself from her and even tries to harm her. He even confessed once to he was betraying her and frequenting suspicious places without caring or paying attention to the impact of his words and actions on her feelings. After having a lot of suspicions about him betraying her, Catherine decides to face Mahmoud: "Mahmoud, are you being unfaithful to me?" He responded with a question: 'Do you mean, "Do I have women other than you?"' I nodded and he said calmly, 'Yes.'" (Taher, ٢٠١٧, p.١٥).

In fact, even allowing her to accompany him to Siwa may conceal a hidden desire to harm her. Mahmoud, who has repeatedly confessed that he doesn't want to get married and doesn't care about it, and even claims that he is not suitable for it, has chosen to marry Catherine, who represents the opposite of him in every aspect. Catherine is a free-spirited, energetic person, full of compassion and innocence. She embraces life and loves all forms of beauty. Unlike Mahmoud, who withdraws his helplessness, sadness, and oppression behind his silent and gloomy demeanor. Mahmoud saw in Catherine everything he desired to possess and believed that by marrying her, he would inherit her qualities. However, he increasingly feels more and more overwhelmed by his helplessness, oppression, and sadness. As a result, Mahmoud becomes conflicted between a person who loves Catherine and another who despises her and desires to harm her.

On another note, Mahmoud does not differ in his thoughts and actions from his Egyptian counterparts at the time. He even behaves similarly to the people of the oasis, despite appearing otherwise. His desire to marry Catherine and his fascination with her strong personality, liberated spirit, and ideas have instilled in him a strong desire to control and oppress her. Mahmoud has developed a habit of viewing women with a purely derogatory and instinctual perspective. He only associates with them or seeks them out for purely physical pleasure. Even when he developed feelings for the maid, Na'ma, he could not confess it to himself or anyone else as cultural norms and customs do not allow for such expressions.

Mahmoud also reveres traditions and customs, glorifying and adhering to them. He neither wants nor dares to defy them. Despite assisting Catherine at the beginning of their marriage and their move to Siwa Oasis, accompanying her to the temples to fulfill her dream of finding the tomb of Alexander the Great, he eventually becomes frustrated with her and her dream.

In one of the scenes, Shawish Ibrahim, Mahmoud's assistant, sustains an injury to his leg that could have led to amputation. This incident occurred on a day when Mahmoud and Catherine went to one of the temples in the oasis for Catherine to continue her research. They were accompanied by a child carrying the donkey Shawish Ibrahim. When they arrived, Catherine entered the temple, leaving Ibrahim and Mahmoud waiting outside. Meanwhile, the young child fell asleep next to a wall. To their surprise, a large rock fell from the mountain and rolled towards the wall where the child was sheltered. Mahmoud and Shawish Ibrahim rushed to save the child, but when Mahmoud approached the child, he suddenly stopped. Meanwhile, Shawish Ibrahim jumped to protect the child and the rock fell onto his leg. No one have noticed the sudden stop of Mahmoud by Mahmoud himself who berated and scorned himself severely afterward:

Catherine, however, goes on reading her books and reviewing her drawings as though nothing at all has happened, and she seems amazed at my insistence on staying by Ibraheem's side all the time. What right does she have to think she knows what's going on in my mind - that constant interrogation of past and present? I say to myself, 'Right there I faced the death which I philosophized about in the desert, talking about its seductive qualities and the voice that called to me. But when I saw it descending, in the shape of a stone, from the sky, I was terrified. Even when it was a duty that I had absolutely to obey, I behaved like a coward and let another perform it. Is this then my reality?' (Taher, ٢٠١٧, p. ١١٤)

Once again, Mahmoud's sense of shame, cowardice, and insignificance deepens. He sees himself as unworthy and incapable of performing any heroic act to save an individual or an entire nation. The abhorrent guilt that Mahmoud carries within him has made him assume responsibility for any pain or misfortune that befalls him or

anyone closely or remotely associated with him. He blames himself of not stopping Catherine from going to the temple that day and thus causing the incident.

I am the one who always holds myself to account. It astonishes me that Catherine doesn't feel any regret or pangs of conscience. It never occurs to her that everything that happened did so because of her visit to that ill-omened temple on the day of that ominous heat. If only she'd understood what the heat was saying and given up th visit! If only I myself had understood it and insisted we stay at home!(Taher, ٢٠١٧, p. ١١٤)

Catherine, on the contrary, believes in the interconnectedness of events and the notion that all events in the universe are intertwined in some way. She does not blame herself for any occurrence and, in fact, finds it surprising that Mahmoud would do so:

He's got much worse since Ibraheem's accident. He was with him from the time he was hurt until he could stand. He behaves as though he were responsible for what happened to the poor soldier. Stranger still, he talks about my visit to the temple almost reproachfully, as though that were the reason for Ibraheem's leg getting broken! He ought to understand it was just an accident and that no one's responsible for fate. And anyway, it can't have been that grave an accident, since it was possible to treat it with primitive medicine. Mahmoud, though, is always panting after reasons to be miserable. (Taher, ٢٠١٧, p. ١١٩)

IV. Guilt and Melancholia's Journey towards Death

In truth, Mahmoud's self-hatred and contempt for himself have started to take an unstoppable direction and the sense of guilt and inadequacy has dominated every aspect of his life. Life in Mahmoud' eyes has become unbearable, and he inevitably reached the final solution he believed was his only way out. According to Freud "'In melancholia, the ego has taken a loss which it seeks to repair by self-punishment."

(١٩٩٠, p.٤٤) and the ultimate self-punishment for Mahmoud is evidently to end his life. Mahmoud wanted to kill two birds with one stone. He wanted to end his suffering and deliver a painful blow to everybody who still believes in his/her greatness simply because of the ancestors' one. Mahmoud has chosen to blow the temple by blowing himself in the inside of it because he no more sees the glory of having a great ancient civilizations if the descendants cannot stand for themselves and fight for their independence, if the descendants agree to work for the occupiers against their own compatriots: "Not a trace must remain of the temple. We had to be done with all the stories of the ancestors if the descendants were to wake from their delusions of greatness and their false complacency. One day they'd thank me! They'd have to thank me!"(Taher, ٢٠١٧, p.٢٤٠).

Despite choosing to end his life by detonating the temple and dying inside it instead of being captured, which may still suggest cowardice, he firmly believes that he doesn't deserve a second chance. He does not deserve being alive. Freud states: "the analysis of melancholia now shows that the ego can kill itself only if can treat itself as an object. If it's able to direct against itself the hostility which relates to an object and which represent the ego's original reaction to objects into the external world." (Freud, ١٩٩٠, p. ٢٥٢). Indeed, Mahmoud cannot anymore have a contact with the human side within him. He dehumanizes himself seeing it as an object, a robot that is not allowed to feel afraid, hesitated or guilty.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the exploration of Mahmoud's journey reveals the intricate interplay between guilt and melancholia, showcasing how these complex psychological states shape and define his experiences. The narrative unfolds as guilt becomes a catalyst for Mahmoud's internal conflict, leading him down a path of melancholia characterized by self-hatred and a constant desire for self-punishment. Freud's insights into the torment associated with melancholia find resonance in Mahmoud's narrative, particularly evident in moments where death is viewed as a

relief from the overwhelming emotional pain. Mahmoud's interactions with others, as well particularly his relationships with his wife Catherine, illustrate the broader implications of these psychological struggles on interpersonal dynamics. The turbulence within his relationships mirrors the internal conflicts he faces, highlighting the ripple effects of guilt and melancholia in both individual and collective contexts.

Ultimately, Mahmoud's journey serves as a poignant illustration of how guilt and melancholia, intertwined and often inseparable, can profoundly shape an individual's perceptions, actions, and relationships. The nuanced understanding of these psychological states contributes to a deeper comprehension of the human psyche, offering valuable insights for those seeking to navigate and address the complexities of guilt and melancholia.

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