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Negm, Ahmed Fouad

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(1929–2013),

Egyptian vernacular poet, songwriter, and political activist, popularly known as el-Fāgūmī, was born in May 1929 in Kafr abu Negm village in Sharqiyya governorate. His father, Mohammed Ezzat Negm, was a police officer and his mother, Hanim Mursi Negm, was a farmer. His father's sudden death was a tragic event in his life. His family abandoned him when he was ten years old and he had to move to an orphans' shelter where he stayed for seven years. From that moment, Negm lived an unstable, though rich, life. At the age of seventeen, he returned briefly to his village and worked at farming, only to move back to Cairo shortly after. Negm worked many odd jobs but failed to keep any one job for a prolonged period of time until he worked for the Egyptian railways in 1951. In 1959 he was accused of fraud and robbery and sentenced to almost three years in prison. He was later imprisoned nine more times because of his political poems in the Nasser and Sadat eras. Negm married five times at least and had three daughters; Afaf, Nawwara, and Zainab. He died in Cairo in 2013 aged eighty-four.

Negm's life was a series of astounding coincidences. On the same day he was released from prison in 1962, he was awarded the Supreme Council of Culture's prize in vernacular poetry. A few months later, he got a job at the Afro-Asian Writer's Union, and his poems were broadcast on national radio. The turning point in Negm's literary career was his chance encounter with Sheikh Imam, a blind Egyptian composer and singer, in 1962. A few years later, they formed a unique duet in Egyptian cultural and political life and established a new tradition of Arabic political songs. Their satirical songs about the 1967 defeat were widely distributed and well received. Their humble home at Hoosh Adam neighborhood became a focal point for Egypt's intellectual elite. Between 1967 and 1982 Negm and Imam were the popular voices of Egyptian leftwing discourse. Their songs' influence was reinforced by the students' and labor movements. They were surrounded by Nasser and Sadat's antagonists and their songs became icons of resistance. Their collaboration continued for more than twenty years until they separated in 1984 for unknown reasons.

Negm started writing poetry in prison in the early 1960s. He was highly inspired by the Egyptian poet Fouad Hadaad. His first collection, *Ṣuwar min al-Sijn wal-Ḥayā* (Portraits from Prison and Life), was published by the Egyptian Supreme Council of Culture in 1962. His collections include: *Baladi wa Habibi* (My Country and My Beloved): *Qasaid min al-moataqal* (Poems from the Detention Camp, 1973); *Uyun al-kalaam* (The Words, Eyes, 1976); *Ishi ya Misr: Ashar qasaid gadidah* (Long Live Egypt: Ten New Poems, 1979); *Tihran: ughniyat wa-ashaar lil-thawrah* (Tehran: Songs and Poems for the Revolution, 1979); *al-Anbarah: ashaar* (The Ambergris, 1982); *al-Fagumiati* (1985); *Sunduk al-Donia* (The World Box, 1985); *Ughniat al-hubb wa al-hayah* (Songs for Love and Life, 1988); *Kalam ala Safr* (Talks During a Journey, 1989); *Ajayb* (Wonders, 1994); *Kalb al-Sitt* (The Lady's Dog, 1995); *Nawwarah* (1996); *Ya Ahli ya hubbi ya hittah min qalbi* (O My Family, My Love and Piece of my Heart, 2008). In addition to his poetic writings, Negm wrote *el-Fāgūmī*, a unique autobiographical narrative in colloquial Egyptian. His second book in prose, a gossip work under the title *Anā Ba`ā wa Adel Hammouda* (Me and Adel Hammouda), was published in 1998. Negm's poems are characterized by their satirical style and poignant political and social critique. His vernacular poetic language is loaded with vulgar words and expressions. Both his meanings and style gave him to access the popular mind and heart as he became the poetic voice of the poor Egyptian alleys and suburbs. It is therefore little surprise that one of Negm's most famous titles is "the poet of the deprived."

Negm's political and literary influence strengthened in the last twenty years of his life. Politically he was an active founding member of the Kefayya opposition movement that emerged in 2005 and aimed to end Mubarak's long rule. Five years later he joined the liberal New Wafd Party, the second biggest party in Egypt at the time. However, he abandoned the New Wafd Party less than one year later and joined the Liberal Egyptian Party. The Arab spring revived Negm's heritage and supported his legacy as a patriotic poet. His poems were recited at the Egyptian squares and broadcasted around the country.

Negm received little institutional recognition during his life. In 2007 the United Nations Poverty Action chose him as an ambassador of the poor. A few weeks before his death, he was awarded the 2013 Principal Prince Claus Award for Unwavering Integrity. Unfortunately, he didn't receive the prize himself, nor did he know that he would be awarded the Medal of Sciences and Arts of the Highest Class from the Egyptian president a few weeks after his death on 3 December 2013.

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