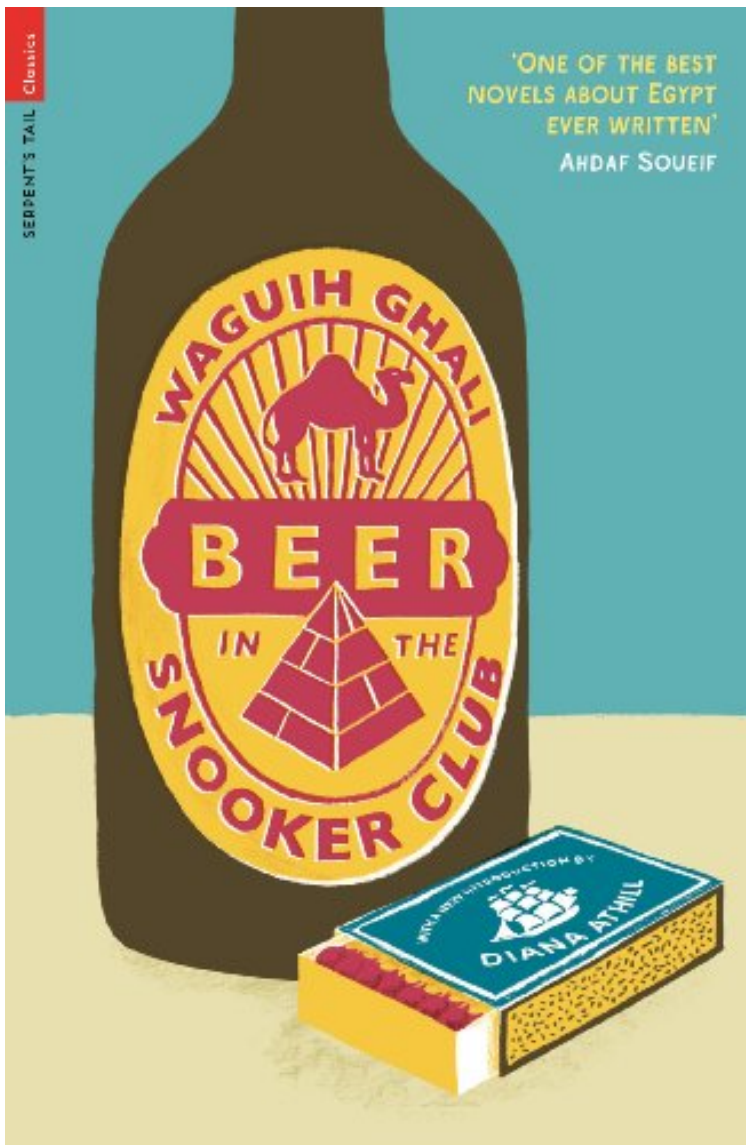


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Beer in the Snooker Club



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurBehind the bar at Jameel's in Cairo hang two mugs engraved with the names of Ram and Font. During their years together in London, they drank many a pint of Bass from these mugs. But there is no Bass in Nasser's Egypt, so Ram and Font have to make do with a heady mixture of beer, vodka and whisky. Yearning for Bass they long to be far from a revolution that neither serves the people nor allows their rich aunts to live the life of leisure they are accustomed to. Stranded between two cultures, Ram and Font must choose between dangerous political opposition and reluctant acquiescence. First published in 1964, Beer in the Snooker Club is a classic of the literature of emigration.ExtraitExcerpted from the IntroductionI N T R O D U C T I O NHistory, Stephen Dedalus says in Ulysses, is a nightmare from which I

am trying to awake. By the 1960s, this plangent cry was being echoed by many sensitive men and women in Asian and African countries that had only recently entered modern history as sovereign nation-states. The passionate idealism of anti-imperialist movements and the longing for justice and dignity that went into the making of many new nations had been compromised by the corruption and ineptitude of the first generation of rulers. The futile cycle of coups and countercoups, and the long game of musical chairs between military strongmen and civilian politicians, had already begun. The politics that came, writes the disenchanted Caribbean narrator of V. S. Naipauls *The Mimic Men* (1967), made people aware of their pain. Later they came to see their helplessness. Few people felt more vulnerable to this postcolonial chaos than members of the property-owning classes. These local elites had prospered during European rule, often as collaborators in a system of exploitation. Educated in Western or Western-style institutions, they had become emotionally and spiritually, as well as materially, dependent on the European metropolis, all the while growing aloof from the rest of their compatriots. After independence, they tended to see their often expensive lifestyles, no less than their power, menaced by newly assertive political movements of peasants, factory workers, and ambitious military officers. And even the most altruistic and perceptive of these native aristocrats found themselves thwarted by their remoteness from ordinary lives. Alienation was, for them, more than a pose cheaply borrowed, along with black turtlenecks, from French existentialists. It stultified private life a realm often defined by quietly desperate love affairs with European men and women as well as political gestures. *The Mimic Men*, detailing a career sunk in the taint of fantasy, was among the extraordinary spate of novels and films in Asia, Africa, and Latin America from Driss Chraïbi's *Heirs to the Past* and Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* to the film *Memories of Underdevelopment* by Cuban Tomas Gutierrez Alea that diagnosed the failure and premature exhaustion of the most privileged and talented young men and women before the arduous challenges of revolution, nation building, and self-renewal. But the work of art from this era that has effortlessly assumed the authority of a classic, and has actually felt more prescient and moving since the Arab Spring, is Waguih Ghali's *Beer in the Snooker Club*. Little is known about Ghali except that he was born into a well-off family of Coptic Christians and seems to have known intimately the radical postures and precarious bohemianism that his only novel describes with perfectly balanced harshness and solicitude. His true literary predecessor, in many ways, is Albert Cossery, who was from a Greek Orthodox bourgeois family in Cairo and who wrote in French. Cossery denounced the modern world altogether in fictions that upheld a strategic indolence as the correct response to its imperatives to think and work hard. Even the most politicized Egyptian in Cossery's 1948 novel, *Laziness in the Fertile Valley*, wonders, Why did [men] have to struggle, always vicious and discontented, when the sole wisdom lay in a careless, passive attitude? But Ghali belonged, like his first-person narrator, Ram, to a generation of listless youth that had been galvanized by the overthrow of Egypt's cravenly pro-British monarch Farouk in 1952 and the advent of the pan-Arab nationalist Gamal Abdel Nasser. The only important thing, Ram says, which happened to us was the Egyptian revolution. Yet, as his account goes on to show with unsentimental insight and acid humor, this was yet another revolution that as Milan Kundera wrote in *Life Is Elsewhere*, another 1960s fiction about the fantasies of the romantic intellectual had no desire to be examined or analyzed, it only desires that the people merge with it; in this sense it is lyrical and in need of lyricism. Revolution may have been the opiate of the brighter demimonde, but Egypt in the 1950s did possess its conditions. Its cities, especially Cairo, were overwhelmed by a massive influx of people who had fled rural subsistence economies only to face unemployment and the degradation of life in slums. The national economy was dominated by a large class of coldhearted landlords, rent seekers, and businessmen who ferreted their profits abroad rather than reinvesting them in the country. One of the wonders of *Beer in the Snooker Club* is the delicacy with which Ghali sketches a background of deprivation and anger into the confusions of a parochial elite. In what is essentially an account of drift and futility, Ghali's card-carrying Communist is always clear about the fate of the insulted and injured people he wanted to care for. The novel opens with Ram's aunt, a member of the cosmopolitan feudal class, or parasites, as Ram's friend Font calls them, selling surplus land to the fellaheen and pretending to the government she was giving the land to the poor. These are the Cairenes who, having migrated spiritually to the European metropolis, won't bother to learn Arabic and despise the celebrated singer Umm Kulthum. Ram himself is shown to be initially indifferent to the inequities of his society. I was neither Red, Pink, Blue, nor Black. I had no politics in me then. His political and sentimental education is initiated by Edna, a Jewish member of Cairo's upper class. Unlike Ram, Edna has successfully rebelled against her comprador origins. I hate Egyptians of your class as much as I do my parents, she tells Ram. It was Edna who introduced me to Egyptian people, Ram writes, adding, it is rare, in the milieu in which I was born, to

know Egyptians. He and his close friend Font hungrily start to read the books she suggests. She initiates them into the cruelties of European imperialism, and the struggles for freedom waged across the postcolonial world. Gradually, we began to see ourselves as members of humanity in general and not just as Egyptians.

One symptom of political awakening in the postcolonial world during the 1950s was anti-Americanism: Ram and Font share a vehement phobia towards Egyptians who read the American Time Magazine. When Rams America-returned cousin Mounir claims that American Democracy is the thing and pontificates about the Red Menace, he finds himself violently challenged by Ednas intellectual protg Ram, who has since picked up a lot of information about the plight of blacks and Native Americans in Freedoms Land. Yet Ram cant help sense some falsity in his new role as a firebrand, and his exposure to the big world outside Egypt also breeds a different kind of appetite for life elsewhere. The world of ice and snow in winter and red, slanting roof-tops was beginning to call us. The world of intellectuals and underground metros and cobbled streets and a green countryside which we had never seen, beckoned to us. The world where students had rooms and typists for girl-friends, and sang songs and drank beer in large mugs, shouted to us.... I wanted to live. I read and read and Edna spoke and I wanted to live. I wanted to have affairs with countesses and to fall in love with a barmaid and to be a gigolo and to be a political leader to win at Monte Carlo and to be down-and-out in London and to be an artist to be elegant and also to be in rags. Some of these exuberant and contradictory desires are actually fulfilled as Edna helps Ram and his friend Font travel to England Jesus, Font; here we are, London and everything and Ram turns out to have a better time of it than most other people from the colonies. As an exotic, he finds himself quickly adopted by a left-leaning English family in Hampstead. His superior class and education and fair skin help him transcend the racism that most other colonials are subjected to. So he can pity rather than despise the uneducated former soldier in Kilburn who calls Egyptians wogs, and even find it natural to sleep with the Englishmans fiance. He has the upper hand on the condescending white woman who tries to pigeonhole him as one of the intelligent Egyptians... at the Gezira Sporting Club. Worried that he is turning into a phoney like his shiftless compatriots, the Cairo arties, who if not slumming in Europe, are driving their Jaguars in Zamalek, he imagines being down-and-out in the East End before deciding against the idea. He ends up with a compromise in Battersea, living with a working-class man and his Irish stepfather. Ghali recounts these adventures in Englishness with bittersweet comedy: the lonely London bedsits we know from the novels of Patrick Hamilton and Muriel Spark are suffused here with the hopefulness and energy of the deracinated colonial, who has been made to wait too long for life to begin elsewhere. To a man like Ram, conditioned by his provincial background and education to revere the metropolis, London represents all the unalloyed and thrilling glamour of metropolitan modernity; indeed, England on the whole turns out to embody the coherent world of Europe, where, unlike in Egypt, words hadnt drifted free from their meanings: where miners were communists and policemen fascists; where there was something called the bourgeoisie and someone called the landlady. But the West, so seductive with its ever-renewed promise of pleasure and stability, remains a source of ambivalence to Ram. When in 1956 Britain tries, in a fit of neo-imperialist delirium, to militarily seize control over the Suez Canal, Ram is further radicalized. In spite of all the books we had read demonstrating the slyness and cruelty of Englands foreign policy, it took the Suez war to make us believe it. Of course the Africans and the Asians had had their Suezes a long time before us... over and over again. Ram joins the Communist Party. But he cant avoid the suspicion that he is not a political animal. He wonders to Edna if he is just someone who likes to gamble and drink and make love. Constantly remaking himself to suit others people expectations in London, he also comes to feel an inner incoherence the distinctive panic, as the dandyish narrator of Naipauls *The Mimic Men* precisely defines it, of ceasing to feel myself as a whole person and of failing to fashion order out of all these unrelated adventures and encounters, myself never the same, never even the thread on which these things were hung. Ram is appalled to discover that he is developing a split: between the external doer and the inner observer, the one participating and the other watching and judging. More disturbing, he finds that there is a touch of gimmick in whatever I do. Even his professions of love for Edna are haunted by an oppressive sense of *dejà vu*: a scene probably already encountered in a film or a play. He cant get rid of the feeling that I have lost my natural self. I have become a character in a book. This loss of spontaneous feeling would seem less consequential a personal flaw at most if it didnt also preclude original thinking in a postcolonial society still ruled by nostrums imported from abroad. The revolt of the Third World, Octavio Paz once warned, has degenerated into different varieties of frenzied Caesarism or languishes beneath the stranglehold of bureaucracies that are both cynical and fuzzy-minded. New nation-states had become prone to despotism largely because the revolt against the West had

not discovered its proper form ideas and institutions suited to indigenous realities. Its political and intellectual leaders suffered from a split personality, or in moral terms, inauthenticity. They invoked modern ideas revolution, freedom, democracy, socialism, industrialization, mass literacy but these ideas in many cases have been mere superficial borrowings: they have not been instruments of liberation but masks. Like all masks, their function is to shield us from the gaze of others, and, by a circular process that has often been described, to shield us from our own gaze. Ram is aware that he must find a life for himself; but, sunk in the taint of colonial fantasy, and obscured by the masks of modern ideas, this basic task of self-definition is harder for him than for the Egyptian people he seeks to represent. Yes, he has joined the Communist Party, but, as he admits, only because he can't do anything else with his knowledge of suffering and injustice.

Returning to Egypt, where the parasites, it turns out, hadn't been dealt a heavy blow by the revolution, the fellahs remain exposed to exploitation, communists have been imprisoned, and Edna has become victim to the bigotry that would soon rid Cairo of most of its Jewish, Greek, and Armenian population, Ram and Font drift into another kind of playacting: this time, as superfluous intellectuals. Font finds a job brushing the snooker tables with the Literary Supplement. Ram tries his hand at human-rights activism. But no newspaper wants to publish his evidence of torture in Egyptian prisons. Furthermore, Ram has the terrible feeling that some of the pictures wouldn't be so gory if we didn't pay for them. His most sincere act seems to be drinking homemade Bassa cocktail of the Egyptian beer Stella, vodka, and whisky in a snooker club, or trying to pater le bourgeois by pushing Mounir, the slick America-phile, into the swimming pool of the Gezira Sporting Club. Even the anti-Americanism is now a brittle affair, undermined by the irrecoverable colonials self-pity: Were so English it is nauseating. We have no culture of our own. The mental sophistication of Europe, Ram concludes, has killed something good and natural in us, killed it for good... for ever. He even longs for the blissful ignorance of the time before he met Edna. Wasn't it nice to go to the Catholic church with my mother before I ever heard of Salazar or of the blessed troops to Ethiopia? I never realized I had made you so lonely, says Edna, and this impossible love between a radical Jewish woman and a Coptic intellectual manqué, both abandoned by history as well as by their gods, is the aching heart of this novel. However psychologically damaged and denuded of genuine emotion, Ram achieves a tragic intensity in his feelings for Edna: I saw her bullied by nationalities and races and political events and revolutions and dictatorships and particularly by her own vague idealism. I held her tenderly in my arms and also saw my own shallowness and unworthiness in contrast to her deepness and sincerity. But Ram is also aware that he is never really natural with Edna, and she knows he won't be happy with her. As the novel ends, Ram moves to marry a rich heiress he has flirted with previously. He confesses he wants to live in a beautiful house with lots of books bound in leather. You know me better, he finds himself saying, than to think I'd sacrifice my comfort or life or anything. This may seem an excessively cynical and dramatic conversion to bourgeois ease. But Ram is acting out what to us in the early twenty-first century is a demoralizingly well-known script. How often have we met the Western-educated scion of a wealthy or powerful family in the postcolonial world, who speaks with beguiling passion of democracy and human rights and women's education, and then at the first sign of any threat to his privileged lifestyle retreats quickly into the prejudices of his class? Recent years have also made many of us familiar with the polished products of the English Left or their contemporary version, the adepts of Western social media and digital radicalism, who are lonely and without lustre in the budding revolution of the Arab world. Ghali and his generation of westernized intellectuals were the first to confront the brute reality that the budding revolution they passionately supported could not bloom. Ghali, pitilessly anatomizing the dilettante upper-class activist, seems to have also understood the reasons behind his political impotence and despair: Egypt, like many countries damaged by colonialism, was condemned to decades of economic subordination and geopolitical compromise abroad, as well as a futile circulation of ruthlessly self-serving elites at home. Not surprisingly, Ram chooses, like the hero of Albert Cossery's last novel, *The Colors of Infamy* (1999), merely to survive in a society ruled by crooks, without waiting for the revolution, which was hypothetical and continually being put off until tomorrow. By hiding us from others, Octavio Paz had warned the Third World's intellectuals, the mask also hides us from ourselves. But such self-deception wasn't Ghali's burden. In his ability to see through private and political impostures, and to violate the genteel protocol of much fiction produced by the postcolonial bourgeoisie, he has no peers, not even Naipaul and the great Cossery, who had intuited early the curse of underdevelopment in Egypt. Rather, Ghali's cruel fate was to pay in his own life the devastating psychic costs of a near-permanent political impasse. Threatened with arrest for being a communist, Ghali had been forced to leave Egypt in 1958. His passport expired in London. Unable to return to Egypt or stay in England, he went into exile in Germany, where he wrote *Beer* in the

Snooker Club while working in a factory. He began a second novel, ostensibly about the misery of being a guest worker in Europe's greatest postwar miracle economy, on his return to London in 1966; but he never finished it. Whatever happened in Egypt and by the late 1960s, the spell of Nasser over the Egyptian masses had broken or Europe, history was going to remain a nightmare for him; his attempt to awaken from it would never succeed. All he could hope to do was douse the ferociously warring impulses inside him. What are you, Ram? Edna asks at one point in *Beer in the Snooker Club*. He replies, I am insincere, but honest. The confession substituting authenticity for sincerity is the key to the novel, its author's tormented life, and the manner of his death. On the night of Boxing Day 1969, Ghali wrote in his diary: I am going to kill myself tonight.... The time has come. I am, of course, drunk. But then sober it would have been very very very difficult. (I acknowledge the drunken writing myself.) But what else could I do, sweethearts? loved ones? Nothing, really. Nothing. A scrupulous observer to the last of his innermost turmoil, Ghali swallowed twenty-six sleeping pills, then wrote: And the most dramatic moment of my life the only authentic one is a terrible let-down. But Ghali knew, in this terrible instant of perfect lucidity, that he finally had his only chance of moving out of the stalled dialectic of insincerity and honesty, and into a much-longed-for peace. I have already swallowed my death, he added. I could vomit it out if I wanted to. But: Honestly and sincerely, I really don't want to. It is a pleasure. I am doing this not in a sad, unhappy way; but on the contrary, happily and even (a state of being and a word I have always loved) SERENELY... serenely. Pankaj Mishra 2014 *Revue de presse* One of the best novels about Egypt ever written. Adhaf Soueif Like *The Catcher in the Rye* in America, [*Beer in the Snooker Club*] articulated the identity crisis of a generation. . . . [The novel] presents uncanny parallels to today's Egypt, where artists, intellectuals and youth at large are beginning to fashion a new cultural republic of sorts even as they also struggle to find their bearings. The New York Times [Ghali is] a plainspoken writer of consummate wryness, grace and humor. Los Angeles Times [The] novel reproduces a cultural state of shock with great accuracy and great humor. The Nation A triumph of genuinely comic social satire. The Times Literary Supplement (London)