

# The “Middle East”? Or . . . / Arabic Literature and the Postcolonial Predicament

Magda M. Al-Nowaihi

## 1 The “Middle East”? Or . . .

When I was initially invited to participate in this volume, the request was to submit a paper of 7,500–8,000 words on “The Middle East.” This I felt I could not do, and after some negotiations with the editors, we agreed that I would focus on Arabic literature, after briefly explaining my reasons for rejecting the initial category “Middle East.”

“The Middle East” stands for over a dozen countries situated in two continents (Africa and Asia), with at least four official languages (Arabic, Hebrew, Persian, and Turkish) as well as a handful of unofficial ones (Armenian and Kurdish, for example). Those countries mainly were colonized by two European powers, England and France (and Italy if we include North Africa) in a variety of arrangements and under differing conditions. Resistance to colonization also took on many different forms. If we look back to before the nineteenth century, recorded history offers us examples of indigenous groups in the area imposing their will and power over others, under the pretext of religion or even racial superiority, to forge dynasties or empires (the Abbassid dynasty and the Ottoman empire, to mention just two examples), and there were what may perhaps be termed anticolonial movements dating back to over a thousand years (the *shu’u-biyya*, for example). Attempting to cover all this in an essay of 7,500–8,000 words risks homogenizing the differences and glossing over the specific histories and multiple contextual nuances of the peoples and cultures of this geographical area both in their relations with one another as well as with the phenomenon of colonialism *per se*. Ironically, this homogenization of the “other” is itself one of the basic strategies of colonialism, as has been demonstrated repeatedly by different scholars over the last two decades. This classification, “Middle East,” could easily push us into a discussion of “us” versus “them,” a discussion which is of lesser value the wider and more amorphous the categories of “us” and “them” are.

Nor would this be the only way in which sticking to the category “Middle East” replicates colonial premises and tactics. In this context I would like to quote

Rey Chow critiquing the continued and persistent use of national categories as a basis for classification in literary studies:

Of all the prominent features of Eurocentrism, the one that stands out in the context of the university is the conception of culture as based on the modern European notion of the nation-state. In this light, comparative literature has been rightly criticized for having concentrated on the literatures of a few strong nation-states in modern Europe. But the problem does not go away if we simply substitute India, China, and Japan for England, France, and Germany. To this day we still witness publications that bear titles such as "comparative approaches to masterpieces of Asian literature" which adopt precisely this Eurocentric, nation-oriented model of literature *in the name of the other* . . . The critique of Eurocentrism, if it is to be thorough and fundamental, cannot take place at the level of replacing one set of texts with another set of texts – not even if the former are European and the latter are Asian, African, or Latin American. (Chow, 1995: 109)

But why does the term "Middle East" not serve as a rallying call for an empowering unity that transcends national and linguistic boundaries? Why has it never functioned as a basis for enabling agendas of resistance? The reason lies in the origins of the concept, which is not a consequence of a grassroots awareness or indigenous movements. The very appellation is a creation of colonialism, for this region is "Middle" simply because the point of reference, in more than one way, is Europe. People who live in these countries understand themselves to be "Middle Easterners" only in relation to the West, and use the term primarily within the context of discussion of geopolitical considerations and configurations of world powers. Their own self-designated parameters of identity would not include this category. No one would say: "As a Middle Easterner, I . . .", while people do say, "as an Arab," "an Egyptian," "a Muslim," in addition to "as a woman," "a physician," "a Marxist," etc. If people of the region want to use a more encompassing designation that transcends national, linguistic, or religious classifications, they tend to use the term "peoples of the third world."<sup>1</sup>

The field of "Middle Eastern Studies" suffers from similar problems. Departments of Middle Eastern Studies are usually composed of scholars working on different "regions" within the area, each within one language, and these scholars are more often than not interested in and capable of talking to colleagues in other departments, such as English literature, rather than with one another. The colonial barriers which divide the different peoples in the physical "Middle East" are reenacted within the space of the western academy, and these departments amount to a number of individual scholars who have been forcibly lumped together as a matter of convenience for powers that need to look at the countries they focus on as one region. The ghettoization of these departments within the western academy parallels the disenfranchisement of the cultures they represent in the power games on the world arena, and their lack of inner cohesion and

solidarity is reminiscent of the sad divisions between the different nation-states of the Middle East. The historical roots behind this state of affairs were aptly analyzed over twenty years ago by Edward Said in *Orientalism*.

But I do not want to imply that the peoples and cultures of that geographical area have nothing in common, for they do and have done for many centuries now. And of course artificial barriers should be crossed in the virtual “Middle East,” and fences, to borrow Mary Louise Pratt’s metaphor, ought to be jumped over within the academy. The troubled state of affairs in the Middle East lies well beyond my expertise. I might instead say a few words about the study of that area. Like many third-world peoples, we in the Middle East, and in the field of Middle Eastern Studies, have mostly lost the ability to talk to one another in any language other than English (and occasionally French), and in reference to any terms outside those set by western discourses. It is rare indeed that we encounter one another and experience each other’s cultural productions without the mediation of the West. I know no Hebrew, Turkish, or Armenian, but my English, French, and even German are quite good, and the only reason I learned some Persian, to be quite honest, is because it was required by my department at that august American academic institution, Harvard University, where I conducted my graduate studies. In that I am quite representative of the field, I think. But the fact that I am forced to rely on English translations to experience a Turkish novel troubles me, not because I hold on to the belief that only cultural insiders who read the material in the original language are authorized to represent it. Rather, my anxiety stems from my knowledge, through my own first-hand experience in dealing with translations from Arabic, that the works that make it into English, and the English forms they take, offer more insights into the politics of reception in the host culture than the cultural dynamics of the target one. At best, what makes it into English replicates an elitist and hegemonic canon in the original culture, at worst it creates an alternative English canon that privileges works easily consumed by western audiences because they reinforce preexisting stereotypes and misconceptions.<sup>2</sup>

While many of our limitations as scholars in Middle Eastern Studies are results of the very processes of colonialism which we are now attempting to struggle against, we have not been entirely blameless, and have participated in the mechanisms that keep us apart, or at least we have not been as committed to fighting them as we ought to be. Our department of Middle Eastern and Asian Studies at Columbia University is attempting to initiate and sustain conversations through team-teaching, devising courses that are not limited to one national context, and perhaps most importantly, encouraging our students to do comparative literature *within* our own department and between our cultures rather than with the more customary English or French. Only last year we voted, not without internal opposition I should add, that the two research languages required of doctoral candidates do not have to be French and German, which is the case in almost all departments of the Middle East in this country, but can include Arabic,

Hebrew, Persian, etc. We are hopeful that this new group of scholars will be able to transcend artificial barriers and forge empowering alliances. Meanwhile, while understanding that "Arabic Literature" as a category of analysis does not eliminate all the difficulties I have with the alternative one of the "Middle East," at least it is one within which I feel more comfortable with my abilities to overcome externally imposed, and internalized, limitations.

## 2 Arabic Literature and the Postcolonial Predicament

In Nabil Naoum Gorgy's surrealistic short story "The Slave's Dream", a young man is captured and enslaved by a group of lepers who force him to witness their horrifying acts of rape, torture, and murder – yet there are moments when he can escape these horrors through dreaming. As his slavery continues, however, his dreams of escape and freedom make way for fantasies in which he participates in the lepers' sadistic activities, and as the story concludes, we are told that "night after night I dream of the coming of the new slave" (1993: 63–8).

Writing an essay on Arabic literature for a volume on "postcolonial studies," I am well aware of the dangers of participating in what Aijaz Ahmad has described thus: "efforts are now underway also to designate the contemporary literatures of Asia and Africa as 'postcolonial' and thus to make them available for being read according to the protocols that metropolitan criticism has developed for reading what it calls 'minority literatures'" (1996: 282). There is no doubt that the organizing principle and terms of reference for this essay will privilege concepts, issues, and strategies closely affiliated with the field of "postcolonial studies," and will exclude other equally valid prisms through which to look at Arabic literature. But I am also convinced that in spite of the well-warranted criticisms, this field has touched on and brought about discussions of some of the most serious and persistent preoccupations of Arab authors and intellectuals who predate and/or know nothing about "postcolonial studies," and therefore cannot be said to be mindlessly mimicking it in their own work. Arab literary works have continued to exhibit and illustrate a sophisticated awareness of the structures of power and manipulation between nations, as well as between different segments of society whose competing interests result in different allegiances to such notions as modernity, democracy, nationalism, etc.<sup>3</sup>

Arabic literature has a long, rich, and varied history that includes both prose and poetry and encompasses a variety of genres, with records dating back to the sixth century AD. Yet most literary histories consider the period from roughly the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries to be one of cultural and literary decadence, and connect the renaissance (*nahda*) in the nineteenth century to Napoleon Bonaparte's invasion of Egypt in 1798. The story goes that although this French campaign lasted only three years, it shocked the Egyptians so, showing them the amazing technological and military advantage the Europeans

had over them, and stimulating the impulse towards modernization initiated by Muhammad Ali, who ruled Egypt 1805–48. Ali sent missions of students to Europe, especially France, and commissioned the translation of various French texts to Arabic, whose spread was facilitated by the Arabic printing press that was set up in Bulaq in 1822. This process of education and translation quickly widened its scope to include literary, historical, philosophical texts, etc. But because Arabic culture has an established written history, as compared to some other colonized societies with primarily oral cultural histories, soon reprinted works from the *turath* (heritage) circulated widely and took their place next to the translated works to push forth the *nahda* or renaissance.<sup>4</sup> It is between these two general impulses that modern Arabic literature is said to have developed, and at least in its early stages, the *nahda* had an important component of looking backwards to the past as well as looking westwards to Europe.<sup>5</sup> Much of the early works were deemed “neoclassical,” with the “neo” somehow being seen as the outcome of the European influence, and the “classical” of the Arab one. In fact, histories of Arabic literature have been quite obsessed with the issue of origins, with one camp, for example, arguing that the novel emerged from indigenous narrative forms, while another insists that it is absolutely and undoubtedly a borrowed European form – arguments that unfortunately seem to go on forever and lead nowhere.

More recently, a number of younger scholars have suggested that this account of the birth of modern Arabic literature shows a historiographical bias in privileging the violent confrontation between east and west as the moment of inception; that the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries were decadent only if we have a rather narrow and limited definition of what “good culture” is, and that the *nahda* actually had begun earlier than is generally acknowledged, due to internal as well as external reasons. And yet Bonaparte’s invasion of Egypt was an important moment in the development of modern Arabic literature, to say the least, when Europe became an integral part of the worldview of the Arabs; a central component of the landscape that was impossible to shut out. From then on, the Arab world could not just let Europe be because Europe, and later the United States, did not let the Arab world be: militarily, economically, or culturally.<sup>6</sup>

The earliest groups of fiction writers around the turn of the twentieth century were mostly, though not exclusively, middle or upper class and western educated, and their story is not an uncommon one. Through their education and training, they developed a taste for European music, art, and literature, and their class affiliations made a certain liberal humanism attractive to them, at the same time creating a painful ambivalence in their relationship to the “masses” who came to represent indigenous culture. On the one hand, ideals of equality and social justice under the model of the nation state were central to the evolving hopes for the future and necessitated including these “masses” into the emerging body politic. But at the same time these elite intellectuals also bought into the perception of these “masses” as ignorant, dirty, backward, undemocratic, unfair to

women – in short: uncivilized, and requiring their intervention as intermediaries in the civilizing mission.

But the admiration for European civilization was tempered, if not sometimes actually reversed, by the way actual Europeans behaved in the Arab countries, with arrogance and ruthlessness that were in such stark opposition, or so it seemed, with the ideals of liberal humanism which symbolized European culture.<sup>7</sup> This “superior,” infuriatingly aggressive and oppressive west, with its master narratives of nationalism, democracy, individualism, and modernity, its schools of thought and intellectual giants, and its material power over the Arab world, in the various guises that this material power takes, is at least one of the crucial parameters within which, and *against* which, a sense of identity: individual, collective, and national, is negotiated. I would like to trace some of the most significant moments in this negotiation process as represented in, and through, narrative texts, starting with the deep resentment against colonial powers, made even more painful by the enthrallment with European modernity in the earlier part of the century, on to the emerging subaltern voices talking back around the middle of the century, and concluding with the most recent narratives exposing globalism, cultural hybridity, and the new world order as the new masks of empire that are more difficult to resist precisely because they are “post-colonial.” Within this schema I will discuss how different Arab writers have dealt with such issues as sexual morality, gendered oppressions, class conflicts, the tensions between individuality and collectivism, and nationalism. On the surface, my organization may look like a neat history of linear development, so I want to emphasize that there have always been multiple intellectual and political cross-currents at any given historical moment, sometimes even within the works of one and the same writer.

Arabic narratives are generally considered to have reached their full artistic maturity in the 1920s in Egypt, by a group of writers who, though not all of Egyptian origin by any means, were actively involved in launching an “authentic national Egyptian Literature” (*adab Misri qawmi*) as a necessary part of envisioning the Egyptian nation.<sup>8</sup> One such important group of writers was *Jama'at al-Madrasa al-Haditha* (the New School), whose nucleus was formed in 1917, and who published the weekly journal *Al-Fajr* (Dawn) starting in 1925. The group was interested in establishing a national narrative literature which did not simply contain Egyptian local color or address the concerns of their readers, but also applied Max Weber’s notion of “ideal types” to “real Egyptians” (Hafez, 1993: 217). The short stories of Mahmud Tahir Lashin, one of the most important members of the group, are an excellent illustration of the ambivalent feelings towards the West and “real Egyptians” that were typical of intellectual life at the time.<sup>9</sup> The European characters who appear in his stories seem to bring doom and destruction in their wake, and an important theme is the growing power of the British in Egypt. Whether it is a soldier in the army of 'Urabi, who fought and was defeated by the British in the battle of Tal al-Kabir, after which the British occupied Egypt in 1882, or a brilliant university student who

participated in the 1919 revolution, or even a lawyer who marries a French woman, Egyptians who cross paths with Europeans suffer rather unhappy fates. Sabry Hafez is absolutely right that “it is not mere coincidence that Lashin chose a soldier to portray the deep suffering and humiliation of Egypt’s defeat by the occupying British forces and a clever student to portray the far-reaching effect of the crushing of the country’s hopes for independence [from the British]” (Hafez, 1993: 21).<sup>10</sup>

But the resistance against British military, political, and economic presence in Egypt should not lead us to underestimate the degree to which European ideas on secularism, rationality, and democracy were infiltrating Lashin’s and his colleagues’ minds. A brief analysis of Lashin’s arguably most successful short story, and the only one that takes place outside the city, is a good illustration. In “Village Small Talk,” the narrator accompanies a friend, a son of the aristocratic landowning classes presumably, for a day’s visit to “his village,” nameless to symbolize rural Egypt in its entirety (Lashin, 1929: 262–8).<sup>11</sup> While impressed with the natural beauty of the countryside, he is horrified by the peasants, who are described by him in terms that hardly distinguish them from the animals they live with. His friend, on the other hand, believes this lifestyle to be quite suitable for these peasants whose “primitive exteriors” hide “the treachery of wolves and the cunning of foxes.” A meeting with the peasants quickly disintegrates into strained silence, during which the narrator and his friend actually exchange a few words in English. Finally, the peasants invite the village sheik, or religious leader, to converse with the two gentlemen. His speech is replete with lies and superstitions according to the narrator, who tries to counter what he sees as the sheik’s negative influence by lecturing the peasants on free will and how they could better their lives. They respond by “staring open-mouthed in dumb amazement,” then abruptly change the subject and ask the sheik to retell the story of a certain ‘Abd el Sami’, a peasant who was lured to the city with promises of a better life by a city dweller whose real purpose, it transpires, is to carry out an affair with the pretty wife of ‘Abd el Sami’. Upon discovering the affair, ‘Abd el Sami’ kills both of them and ends up in prison. The message is not a subtle one, and the narrator dejectedly realizes that he has not and cannot reach the peasants.

What is lacking, however, is any awareness of how the narrator, on his part, has “othered” these peasants, and transformed them into alien entities, to the extent that he asks with astonishing naiveté what they could possibly talk to their wives about, and whether they ever noticed how impoverished their lives were. His attempt to sell them an Egyptian version of the American dream – a better life achieved through belief in free will and ambition, quite deserves their “open-mouthed amazement.” But this othering of the peasants does not stop with the narrator and his friend, for the author draws the two gentlemen from the city as distinct personalities with different attitudes and views, whereas the peasants remain a mass of undifferentiated bodies, a bunch of subalterns who, if they can speak at all, do so in chorus fashion, incapable of thinking for themselves and

merely echoing the sheik's views. The sheik's depiction is negatively one-sided, the story concluding with him going to meet with the mayor and notables, implying his collaboration with a corrupt political system, but there is no similar attempt to explore the narrator's own complicity in these structures of power. The peasants are "happy to follow their teacher into the darkness," and again there is no attempt to delve into the complexities of their relationship with the sheik. Rather, the ending indicates their unchanging, undemocratic nature, so that we may ask to what extent the narrator, and Lashin, are different from the friend who believes that these peasants are actually quite satisfied with and deserving of their poverty and oppression. The figure of the woman is interesting as well, for 'Abd el Sami's wife is not sacrificed at the altar of honor by her husband and the peasants alone, but also, in an arrangement where discourse mirrors reality, by the narrator and the author. The tragic hero, for the characters within the story as well as the readers of the story, is not the murdered wife, who is nothing more than a shadowy background figure, but rather either the unfortunate duped husband or the anguished narrator.<sup>12</sup> For Lashin and his westernized, fairly affluent middle- and upper-class colleagues, resisting the British and being well aware of their exploitativeness and cruelty did not preclude believing that reason, secularism, and democracy must do battle with the religious and traditional powers of darkness in order to move ahead on the path to progress and develop a strong, civilized nation, and for this lofty cause poor ignorant peasants had to be educated in the virtues of modernity.

"The masses" do talk back in subsequent narratives, written from the forties to the sixties by writers with different class and political affiliations, and a strong sympathy to Marxist and socialist ideologies. The interest in socialism was concurrent with the beginnings of success in the struggles for independence from colonial powers, and the emerging empowering concepts of pan-Arabism and pan-Africanism, strongly advocated by the immensely popular Egyptian president Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser (1952–70). Writers like Naguib Mahfouz, Yusuf Idris, and 'Abd al-Hakim Qasim came from more modest backgrounds than the older generation of writers generally did, and were capable of more nuanced depictions of the lives and characters of the lower and lower-middle classes. Representations of "the masses" now balanced depictions of poverty, ignorance, etc., with strong expositions of the forces, both internal and external, that contribute to these conditions. While the harsh realities of lower-class life were not glossed over, there was also an understanding of some of the more joyful aspects of that life, and, in some cases, of the capacity of the underprivileged to resist and bring about change.<sup>13</sup> And although alleviating the suffering of the masses was still seen very much as best realized within the rubric of a strong modern nation, and the solidarity of that nation with other "third world" nations undergoing similar struggles, ambivalence towards a number of values linked to a western-style modernity began to creep into the narratives. 'Abd al-Hakim Qasim's *The Seven Days of Man* (1969) is one such novel in which the complex tensions between tradition and modernity are richly explored. In seven chapters, the novel skill-



fully links seven stages in a village's pilgrimage to a saint's annual festival in a nearby city to the changing worldview of the protagonist, 'Abd al-'Aziz, as he moves from childhood to late adolescence and is exposed to city life. 'Abd al-'Aziz's increasing alienation from the village is never free from a deep sense of loss, for if religious faith, for example, makes the villagers seem like an unquestioning herd, he also understands that it creates a sense of communal solidarity, of warmth and loyalty that he sorely misses as he moves towards autonomy and independence. Moreover, his initial infatuation with the city gives way to an understanding of the manipulative and coercive relation it has with the village. As he painfully witnesses the derisive tone of the small businessmen as they cheat the villagers, or the outright cruelty of the policemen as they control them, and the humiliated acquiescence of the villagers who cannot answer back, he understands that their dumb silence is a condition of their sense of displacement in the hostile city, for within the village and with each other they can certainly speak intelligently, argue passionately, laugh robustly, and sing movingly. 'Abd al-'Aziz's irresolvable in-betweenness allows us to hear the subalterns' voices as well as witness their silencing, and to admire the very qualities which we recognize as causes for their exploitation by the forces of modernity. Mahmud Diyaab's *A City's Sorrows: A Child in the Arab Quarter* (1971) links the growing sense of alienation and loss of the protagonist/narrator, who here belongs to the urban lower middle class, with western intervention in Egyptian affairs. The events take place in the thirties and forties, on one street in the coastal city of Ismailiyyah in which eight families form a closely-knit community, making decisions collectively, and celebrating happy and sad occasions as a group. As a result, the children grow up in a caring, protective atmosphere that also offers rich and varied interpersonal relationships and experiences. As the protagonist moves towards adolescence, his difficult individuation is made more painful because it parallels the displacement of that warm communal life with a new lifestyle that is more affluent, but that is characterized by materialism, rampant consumerism, and personal greed. This new lifestyle is linked to the general changes brought about by the European powers involved in the Second World War, who used Egypt as one of the playing fields for their conflicts and created havoc in the country's economy and social fabric.<sup>14</sup>

If for the generation of Lashin a favored motif was that of the individual, often an elite modern intellectual, facing the uncomprehending, intractable masses, and for Qasim and Diyaab's generation it was that of a young man torn between the desire to melt into the collective on the one hand and to live out the modern paradigm of individual autonomy on the other, some of the works of the exiled Saudi writer 'Abd al-Rahman Munif<sup>15</sup> offer a different model. Here the conflict is no longer between the individual and the group, but rather between competing interests and forces in which individuals are mere playthings. Many of Munif's works take place in unnamed Gulf countries closely resembling Saudi Arabia. In *Endings* (1978), he focuses on the imaginary village of al-Tiba during one of its drought seasons. Technology does not come to al-Tiba in the form of

the water dam which the villagers had been pleading with city officials to build for years, but in the shape of sophisticated machine guns and Jeeps which city dwellers, in search of adventure and attempting to recapture some notion they have of the past, use for hunting the animals and birds which the villagers survive on. The resulting deaths of these creatures are very different from those caused by the traditional way of hunting, when man was forced to come close to his prey, and thus achieve an understanding and respect for the various creatures surrounding him, and learn to distinguish, for example, between a male and a pregnant or nursing female. Death through the old hunting style was an integral part of a natural cycle of regeneration, whereas the new type of hunting only brings abrupt, meaningless endings. As Munif mourns a dying world, he does so in a narrative style reminiscent of that world. Instead of a biography of various characters we have detailed descriptions of the geography and weather patterns of the village. There is no exploration of inner thoughts and feelings in the psychoanalytic language of modern narrative, but rather an external witnessing of people's actions and the various interpretations the community gives to these actions. The relationship between a man and his dog, or between a litter of puppies and a flock of birds, is given considerably more narrative space than the typical romance storyline. Animal stories written by the medieval author al-Jahiz are blended in with stories issuing from the collective memory of the village, told and retold by unnamed narrators at funerals and similar occasions to bring the community together and help them determine future plans and strategies, which are thus made inseparable from their past and their specific conditions. Munif's rejection of an exploitative form of modernity thus extends from the content to the form of his narration, which is innovative precisely because it is traditional.<sup>16</sup> Munif continues his campaign in his five-volume masterpiece *Cities of Salt* (1984–9), which traces the destructive effects of the discovery of oil in a poor oasis community in a desert kingdom during the thirties, and the descent upon the area of large numbers of American oil company employees who, in collaboration with short-sighted, uncaring, and corrupt authorities, do not hesitate to trample on the people and culture in their pursuit of profit.

When the European powers officially "left" the region, one of their other major legacies was the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, resulting in the forced dispersal and living under occupation of millions of Palestinians.<sup>17</sup> Palestinian literature has not been arrested in a reactive mode because it has not moved to a "postcolonial" state and still lives within the parameters of colonialism.<sup>18</sup> It presents us with a rich and varied body of narratives that struggle with courageous honesty with various facets of the relationship between individual and national identity, including the ethics of resistance, the bitter travails, and sometimes unexpected pleasures, of a diasporic existence, and the multiple costs of living under occupation. Much of this corpus of works goes well beyond easy finger pointing, and looks deep into the regional and global forces that have resulted in this disaster. Ghassan Kanafani's masterpiece *Men in the Sun* (1963), for example, depicts the attempts of three Palestinian refugees to cross the

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borders into Kuwait to fulfill their dreams of a better life, focusing on the complicity of Arab bureaucracy in their tragedy.<sup>19</sup> Imil Habibi's darkly humorous *The Pessoptimist* (1974) traces the failed attempts of its protagonist, Said, to be accepted or even spared the constant humiliations of being an Arab citizen of the state of Israel. Although the Israeli state comes out as no angel, Said himself is also a target of the biting humor, and his fumbling endeavors to show the Israelis what a good loyal citizen of the state he is lead him from one disaster to the next. Sahar Khalifah's *Wild Thorns* concentrates on Palestinians in the occupied territories, whose competing personal and national obligations are played out in their struggles with the decision of whether or not to work within the state of Israel. These jobs are usually building houses for new Jewish immigrants, often enough on the rubble of torn down Palestinian homes, while at the same time the Israeli authorities are demolishing the construction workers' own homes on the West Bank for any suspected "illegal activities." Khalifah (1976) does not hesitate to reveal the differences within the Palestinian community along generational and class lines. For example, while there is no doubt that the dismal employment situation in the occupied territories is primarily due to the enforcement of unjust Israeli economic policies, she also shows the weak ties some of the hired help or temporary workers have to the land as a result of their disenfranchisement well before the Israeli occupation. Khalifah brings in an important gendered dimension to issues of resistance and national affiliation in her later *Saha Gate* (1990), in which women from different backgrounds passionately debate whether the cost of constantly doing battle against the Israelis is worth it, particularly in view of the fact that their own concerns as women have often been given short shrift in the liberation agenda.<sup>20</sup>

Gender as a prism through which to analyze the problematics of nationhood and nationalist feelings is not of course limited to the Palestinians. Some of the most powerful novels critiquing the Lebanese civil war that culminated with the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, for example, have been by women. Hanan Al-Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra* (1986) attempts to understand the attraction of war through telling the story of a lower middle-class, not very attractive, not particularly well-educated or self-aware, and in fact somewhat mad woman. The men who desire Zahra, her own love affair with a sniper, and the see-sawing political affiliations of her brother allow for a masterful excavation of the normalizing effects of war on frustrated individuals who were already misfits in a society that did not successfully include any but its most powerful members in the body politic. Hoda Barakat's *The Stone of Laughter* (1990) takes a gay male as its protagonist: Khalil's "femininity" results in his exclusion from society, and he himself tries to keep his life separate from the madness of the war. Eventually, however, the temptations of the war, indeed the basic need to survive it, lead him to surrender and assume a more acceptable "masculine" identity. As Fadia Faqir notes in her introduction to the translation (Barakat, 1990: vi-vii): "One of the main characters of this novel is the beleaguered city of Beirut . . . all parties of different persuasions are mocked and ridiculed. From the sidelines,

Barakat blasts her city with words, trying to 'betray' it in order to reconstruct it." Ahlam Mosteghanemi's *The Body's Memory* (1993), remarkably the first Algerian novel written by a woman in Arabic,<sup>21</sup> uses a failed love affair between a painter and a novelist to dissect the artistic and intellectual Algerian community living in France. Disillusioned by the failure of their revolutionary aspirations to materialize after independence from France; disappointed by their former comrades in the resistance movement who have now turned into self-satisfied businessmen with no national vision or collective dreams; and equally dissatisfied with life in France, these exiles wallow in guilt and despair that make their alienation impotent rather than oppositional.

Even Egypt, arguably the Arab country with the oldest and most solid sense of nationhood, has witnessed a recent onslaught of critiques of the state. Comparing two novels by Latifa al-Zayyat illustrates some of the changes in attitudes towards different agendas of liberation and the possibilities of linking them together. In al-Zayyat's first novel *Open Door* (1960), whose events take place in the forties, the protagonist Layla is oppressed as a young person in a society where authority is mostly in the hands of the elders; as a woman in a bourgeois family whose values tie a woman's worth to superficial qualities of attractiveness; and as an Egyptian in an Egypt ruled by the iron fist of England. After a number of misguided attempts at rebellion, Layla recognizes that her self-realization and liberation as a woman and an Egyptian are one and the same and she enters into an equal relationship with a young man who, like her, is fighting the British and the Egyptian monarchy. As the novel concludes, we realize with Layla that although the road ahead is not easy, the door, at least, is open. Compare that to the claustrophobic atmosphere that pervades *The Owner of the House* (1994), in which Samia is running away from the Egyptian political police with her husband and their comrade Rafiq, and hides in a house which is gradually transformed in her mind from a safe haven to a prison, and its owner from a guardian angel to a jailer. Samia comes to realize the degree to which she is infantilized by the men and consistently excluded from full membership in their brotherhood. She finally understands that the liberation agenda will not include her unless she is willing to assert herself, through violent confrontation with the owner of the house if need be. This is a remarkable novel considering the fact that al-Zayyat, up until the end of her life, rejected the application of the term "feminist" to herself, and insisted that the only category or general label she would be willing to accept would be that of communist. (See, for example, al-Zayyat, 1994a.) It is clear, though, that the al-Zayyat of the eighties and nineties recognizes that it is not enough for the British to leave Egypt, or even for the communists to come to power, for a state of harmony and social justice to prevail and equally include all citizens, and that multiple oppressions related to class, gender, sexual orientation etc. need to be fought simultaneously on different, even competing, fronts. Also, it is not unreasonable to see shades of president Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser in the figure of the owner of the house, or rather perhaps in the dependent relationship that develops between a powerful and charismatic figure like 'Abd al-Nasser

and a people desperate for a leader to protect and empower them, with their hero-worship ultimately stifling their own inner strength and independence.

In her autobiography *The Search* (1992), al-Zayyat explicitly voices some of her ambivalent feelings towards 'Abd al-Nasser – an ambivalence shared by many other intellectuals throughout the Arab world.<sup>22</sup> The Nasserist era, at least in its earlier phases, marked an end to foreign domination and outmoded corrupt monarchies, a strong sense of solidarity with other struggling countries finding expression in the movements of pan-Arabism, pan-Africanism, and treaties with non-aligned countries, and the spread of socialist ideals and laws guaranteeing, among other rights, a free education and affordable healthcare to all. On the other hand, 'Abd al-Nasser soon showed very low tolerance for internal dissent, whether from the right (the Muslim brotherhood) or the left (the communist party), and exercised repressive measures against writers and thinkers which included state censorship, and sometimes imprisonment and torture. The low point of his Presidency and leadership was the defeat of the Arab forces by Israel in six days in 1967, which was a shocking and humiliating end to an era of dreams and hopes. But in spite of the disappointments of the Nasserist era, which at least represented a genuine if failed attempt at liberation and social justice,<sup>23</sup> it often appears as a shining period compared to the following Sadatist period (1970–81). President Sadat knew how the winds of the new world order were blowing, and decided to be swayed by them rather than take any oppositional stance. His Camp David agreement with Israel, brokered by the United States in 1978, effectively put an end to the dream of a united Arab nation, at least for a while, and signaled his abandonment of the Palestinian cause and the ideals of “third world” solidarity.<sup>24</sup> His “Open Door” policy privatized large sections of the economy and changed laws to encourage foreign investment in Egypt, at the same time cutting down on welfare-like programs and promoting the philosophy that those who were unsuccessful had brought this fate upon themselves through their laziness, lack of motivation, and conversely, envy. In response, the eighties and nineties have presented us with a rich assortment of innovative narratives mourning the failed dreams of freedom and independence and critiquing the new Arab world that has emerged within the neocolonial world order.

Baha Taher's *Love in Exile* (1995) bitterly indicts the new yet strikingly familiar forms of injustice while showing how no one parameter is sufficient for explaining these emerging structures that somehow succeed in continuing the older patterns of manipulation and exploitation. The protagonist is a middle-aged Nasserist journalist banished by his Cairene newspaper to an unnamed European city where he ostensibly serves as foreign correspondent. He comes into close contact with a group of journalists, healthcare professionals, and lawyers of different nationalities and ethnic backgrounds trying to publicize and fight against human rights abuses in different parts of the world. He is not alone in failing to get stories that matter printed by his paper, so that, with the exception of a few leftist newspapers with minuscule circulations, horrifying facts about torture in Chile, for example, are not disclosed to the public. New forms

of censorship, determined primarily by material factors, are in place, and are no less intractable because they are executed with a smile rather than a whip. The glimmer of hope offered by the promises of a wealthy Arab prince to establish a new progressive Arabic newspaper in Europe collapses when it transpires that the "progressive prince" is a close ally of a wealthy Jewish businessman involved in gentrifying poor neighborhoods and supplying the Israeli army with plentiful aid. Nor is this the only unholy alliance that crosses national lines, for the brutal massacres of poor Palestinians in the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila which are a central event in the novel are seen to be a result of the collaboration of Israelis with Lebanese militia forces, and made possible by the silence and implicit acceptance of most Arab regimes. And while the lone figures who fight the brutality are of various nationalities (two of the most powerful testimonies about the massacres are by a Norwegian nurse and an American Jewish journalist who exist in real life, as Taher tells us at the end of the novel), their efforts are relentlessly crushed on every level. Thus while it is true that there are many individuals who can transcend racial, religious, or national boundaries, it is also clear that structural racism is as pervasive as ever, and the narrator is convinced that left-wing and right-wing parties are ultimately indistinguishable when it comes to the treatment of poor non-European countries. But while structures of oppression, whose victims are most often nonwhites and the poor, persist and gain in strength, agendas of resistance, whether class or nationalist based, have failed dismally. The narrator, in one of the many heated arguments he has with his communist friend Ibrahim, screams in anguish: "If you ask me where are the Arabs I will ask you where are the workers of the world who have united." Finally, even private love, grasped at by those in exile as one of the last possible refuges, also collapses under pressures from the outside world. For example, the love between a European woman and her African husband cannot survive the pervading racist hostility, culminating in a rape attempt against her by a group of white youths who cause her to miscarry her baby, while her husband is being held down, taunted, and humiliated with racial epithets.<sup>25</sup> Taher's bleak vision does not underrate the power of personal salvation, but will not allow us the comforting myths of individual escape so long as structures of oppression continue to flourish.

The bleak visions of quite a few novels of the period are couched in a bitterly irreverent humor that has the capacity to shock readers out of their apathy and self-pity; to produce an angry laughter that is hopefully more productive than despair; to disorient in order to reorient. Salwa Bakr's *The Golden Chariot Does Not Ascend to Heaven* (1991), which takes place in a women's prison where all the inmates are slightly mad, juxtaposes thematic and stylistic spaces to create a disorienting humor that leaves no myth intact: whether it is love, marriage and family life, state apparatuses like the judiciary, the army, and the police, the languages of the media, political ideologies of all colors, and the novelistic medium itself. The result is a fiercely original narrative which creates a pathos that is both hysterically funny and devastatingly tragic, and which overcomes many of the

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limitations of the middle-class novel when it seeks to represent the underprivileged. Salwa Bakr's mad criminal women neither speak for themselves in the self-aware language of modern narrative, nor are they spoken for by the narrator, who seems just as befuddled as they. The meaning of the novel emerges from the irreconcilable gaps between their realities and their dreams, between their lives and the various discourses that attempt to represent them, and between their madness and what society has decreed as sanity.<sup>26</sup>

The last two works of Son'allah Ibrahim have concentrated on the fate of Egypt as one of those poor non-European countries whose citizens have fallen under the spell of globalization and cultural hybridity. The front cover of *Dhat* (1992) is at once an instance and indictment of "cultural hybridity." A woman with the Islamic headdress and a face empty of features except for lips painted with a glaring red lipstick is standing in front of, or just under, a construction which is a kitchen shelf that resembles a crown (or heavy weight) on her head, covered with foreign consumer goods such as 7UP, Tang, and Nescafé. The novel alternates chapters on the life of its female protagonist Dhat (meaning self or identity), with actual clippings from newspapers and magazines, and soon a link is established between the life and character of Dhat and the material conditions which make it impossible for her to be anything other than what she has become. Dhat's story, also told with a great deal of humor, is an all-too-typical one of a middle-class young woman who gets married in the sixties, and whose aspirations become progressively limited to the acquisition of more consumer goods than all her neighbors – the more foreign and unnecessary the goods the better – this at the same time that the most basic needs of the majority of the population: for education, healthcare, housing etc., are unsatisfied. The chapters with the newspaper clippings direct the responsibility clearly towards the deals transacted between Egyptian politicians, government officials, and public religious figures on the one hand, and western and multinational corporations as well as political figures on the other – all of whose appetites for ever-increasing profits make any notion of integrity or ethics quite quaint. We learn from the clippings, for example, that while the King of Saudi Arabia has declared himself "the servant of the two holiest places [of Islam]," the amount of money deposited in European and American banks by oil-rich Gulf countries is enough, according to United Nations figures, to create job opportunities for millions of individuals in the industrialized world, at the same time that unemployment reaches unprecedented levels in the Muslim Arab countries. We find out that the well-known officially-sanctioned Muslim sheik who guides Dhat and many like her towards a "virtuous life" has announced that women should cover themselves up, that listening to Beethoven at bedtime is a sin, and also that good Muslims should not covet or envy the rich their wealth. Meanwhile, the sheik has accepted a gift of a fabulous mansion from some of these very same rich, who have acquired their money from making deals with foreign companies, pushing forth laws that give these companies amazing tax breaks, effectively killing off their local competition. The imported products are not just foot massage machines

and the latest shades of lipstick, but also expired foods and medicines, and pesticides that cannot be used in the producing countries because of their proven links to cancer. What is extremely impressive is the amount of research that Ibrahim has put into *Dhat*, and his courage in naming names and meticulously building up his cases so that they cannot be dismissed as the rantings of an angry ideologue.<sup>27</sup>

If Dhat has a momentary tweak of consciousness every now and then (after all, she did grow up during the idealistic Nasserist era), in *Sharaf* (1997) we are confronted with a protagonist who is totally vacuous and unaware, whose only concerns are to wear Calvin Klein jeans, Ray-Ban sunglasses, a Polo shirt, etc. Young Sharaf, whose name means honor, grew up in the Sadatist "postcolonial" era, when imperialism, colonialism, etc. were thought of as things of the past, over and done with, and as a result Sharaf seems like a trapped animal – fearful and wanting but uncomprehending of the real dangers surrounding him. Sharaf's sexuality becomes a metaphor for his exploitation. A European tourist attempts to seduce him with some imported goods, but Sharaf holds on to his "honor," which he equates with not allowing another man to penetrate his bodily orifices, and he therefore kills the attempted rapist and ends up in jail. Prison is a microcosm of the outside world, and the privatization efforts sweeping the country extend to it, so that the richest prisoners end up with quite a comfortable incarceration experience, while those less fortunate, like Sharaf, clean their toilets, wash their clothes, etc. By the end of the novel, Sharaf has already hidden illicit drugs up his anus, and is shaving his bodily hair in preparation for becoming the lover-boy of one of those powerful and wealthy prisoners, in a relationship very unlike an earlier one of mutual affection, respect, and budding passion which had begun to develop between him and another equally powerless inmate, and which came to an abrupt end when the other inmate was moved to another prison. In acquiescing to hiding the drugs and shaving his legs, Sharaf has finally understood the degree to which he has already been penetrated.

Intellectuals like Ibrahim may have come a long way from Lashin and his contemporaries, both in their more nuanced understanding of the versions of modernity and "progress" made available to the third world by the West, and in their respectfully critical rather than nobly condescending representation of the masses. And yet young men like Sharaf, decked in the latest European and American fashions and dancing to rap music, are no less disenfranchised than the "dirty, ignorant" peasants who populated Lashin's village, and may be even more so. While those who experienced European colonialism were, for the most part, well aware of what they were dealing with, Sharaf, the product of a "post-colonial" era, is a mimic whose mimickry is neither a real understanding of western culture nor a form of resistance against western hegemony, but rather a half-conscious attempt to belong to a "civilized" world which promotes and feeds on this misguided desire for its own profit. Compared to his naiveté, Lashin's peasants, with their wily suspiciousness of city dwellers, speakers of English, and those who promise them better lives if only they believed in free will and were

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ambitious, seem extremely sophisticated. Unfortunately, Sharaf's only act of awareness may precisely be his final decision that the only way left for him to hold on to a shred of dignity and honor is to learn to be the compliant slave and bide his time, until a new slave is ushered in.

### Notes

- 1 In a discussion of this issue I had with the Israeli literary critic Hannan Hever, he pointed out that the term "Middle Eastern" is sometimes used by Israelis in much the same way that, according to his analysis, the term Mediterranean is used, as part of "the Zionist narrative and the mode in which this narrative makes use of the Mediterranean as a tool to strengthen and fortify the national narrative." "Such a reading will expose the Zionist national appropriation of the Mediterranean as an apparatus of repression and erasure of the violence with which territorial representations are saturated, as they always include traces of the conflict that occurred in space, traces of the violence accompanying occupation, as the people living in this territory disrupt the smooth progression of the narrative of integration in space." Hever also points out that whereas the term "Middle East" erases the territorial violence of occupation, the term Mediterranean "erases the Palestinian and the Mizrahi, the Arab Jew [Jews from Arab countries] as others, and the Mediterranean becomes the new otherness: not so much Morocco and Tunis, but the shores which are perceived as non-Arabic – Italy, France, Greece, and Spain. They now appear as the culture to relate to as a mirroring one, as the one to adopt as its origin and proximity." Hannan Hever, "Zionist Albatross: Symbolism and Nationalism in Modern Hebrew Poetry" (unpublished paper).
- 2 Excellent work is being done on this issue for the field of Arabic by a number of younger scholars, including Amal Amiereh, Nancy Coffin, Jenine Dallal, and Therese Saliba.
- 3 Due to the limitations in space, this essay is extremely selective, and while I have made an effort to choose material that gives an honest picture of the field, it is of necessity a limited one. I have excluded works not originally written in Arabic despite their importance, as these involve a somewhat different constellation of issues. I have also decided to focus on narratives in order to give the discussion some cohesion. An extremely important and rather complicated topic which I did not feel I could adequately cover in this limited format is the relationship of literary theory, criticism, and history of the Arab world to western literary studies. I would just like to briefly mention that the term "postcoloniality" has only recently made its appearance in literary journals in the Arab world. The literary journal *Fusul* is currently preparing an issue on the subject, and a recent issue of the magazine *Al-Qahira* (Cairo, Nov. 97) had a "file" devoted to *ma-ba'd al-kuluniyaliyya* (the "coloniality" part of the term is not translated). This file is composed of either translated material, or analysis of non-Arab works, with Edward Said the only Arab writer discussed. What is encouraging, though, is that some of the authors whose work is analyzed are not westerners, breaking the general pattern of talking back to a West

- that rarely listens, and hopefully starting a true dialogue with other “third world” intellectuals.
- 4 European culture is of course not a discrete entity unrelated to Arab culture. See, for example, Maria Rosa Menocal (1987).
  - 5 Meaghan Morris’s observation on “the modern” as a local reproduction of “something which has already happened elsewhere” is true of the standard of cultural greatness that developed at that time – a greatness which was seen as absent from the contemporaneous time/space, and needed to be captured from a different place, or recaptured from a different time. Morris (1990: 10).
  - 6 For a brief chronological table of events of the West’s more obvious interventions in the Arab world, see Badawi, ed. (1992: viii–xi).
  - 7 A varied group of thinkers found that Islam was one way to challenge and offer alternatives to this liberal humanism, though this was not by and large the mode of challenge favored by literary writers.
  - 8 For a richly detailed account of the early modern development of Arabic narrative and its relationship to rising nationalism see Hafez (1993).
  - 9 Yahya Haqqi was another important member of this group. See the analysis of his novella, *The Saint’s Lamp*, in Layoun (1990: 56–104).
  - 10 One of the meatiest and most readable depictions of the events of the 1919 revolution, and the brutality of the British in stamping it out, can be found in Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz’s *Bayn al-Qasrayn* (1956), translated as *Palace Walk* (1990).
  - 11 Hafez also has a detailed analysis of the story, which he thinks “in one sense is a cry against the regression into vulgarity” (1993: 258).
  - 12 For an excellent analysis of the ambivalent attitudes towards women as a result of the encounter with Europe, and how one patriarchy (Islamic) came to be replaced by another (Victorian), as well as how women from different classes were impacted by modernization efforts from Muhammad Ali’s time onwards, see Ahmed (1992).
  - 13 Samah Selim (1997) has traced some of these developments through focusing on the Egyptian village narrative. She shows how different is the depiction of the village in the works of the pioneers, such as Haykal’s *Zaynab* (1913), from al-Sharqawi’s *Al-Ard* (The Land) (1953), where we actually hear the peasants speak in their own simple yet aware and immensely subversive language, making fun of the languages of the educated, and taking matters into their own hands to fight back against the corrupt landowning classes. The peasants are neither reduced to mute imbeciles nor are they romanticized (the impotent language of Romanticism is in fact subjected to hilarious debunking by the earthy village beauty, Wasifa, in her interactions with the educated adolescent schoolboy who fancies himself in love with her). The character of the sheik, as well as his relationship with the villagers, is generally negative but still more complex than in “Village Small Talk,” for example.
  - 14 For a more detailed analysis of Diyab’s and Qasim’s novels, see Al-Nowaihi (forthcoming).
  - 15 Exile and imprisonment are a part of the lives of most of the writers I am discussing in this essay.
  - 16 The Egyptian Yahya al-Tahir ‘Abdallah, who died in a tragic car accident in 1981, provides an interesting comparison to Munif. His narratives, also written in an innovatively traditional style – folk-like and deceptively simple, take place in the remote

villages of upper (southern) Egypt and cover the same time period. 'Abdallah is not impressed with the modern world, which makes occasional appearances in the form of central government policies that draft the young village men to fight wars in places and for causes they have never even heard of, for example. But he does not depict a benign traditional way of life in these villages either, and masterfully delineates the descending chain of cruelty that accompanies poverty and extreme deprivation, without ostensibly ascribing blame to specific individuals or entities. The central government in Egypt has largely ignored the south in its economic and social plans, and only recently, after the belated realization of the connection between the extreme poverty and hopeless conditions of the region and the outbreaks of violence by religious groups, has the government decided to pour some money into the area and start various "development" projects there. See 'Abdallah (1983a) and the translation of a collection of his short stories (1983b).

- 17 Palestinians are the major but not the only national group that has suffered from second-rate citizenship and forced dispersal. Another such group is the Kurds, whose suffering has found eloquent expression in the works of the brilliant Salim Barakat.
- 18 For more discussion of this issue see Maxime Rodinson's classic *Israel: A Colonial-Settler State?* (New York: Monad Press, 1973), and Joseph Massad, "The 'Post-Colonial' Colony: Time, Space and Bodies in Palestine/Israel," in *The Pre-Occupation of Post-Colonial Studies*, ed. Fawzia Afzal-Khan and Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks (Durham: Duke University Press, forthcoming).
- 19 For a detailed analysis of this novel, see Layoun (1990: 177–208).
- 20 For a detailed analysis of some of these issues see Coffin (1998).
- 21 For the work of her predecessor Assia Djebar, written in French, see note 21, below.
- 22 She also reveals some of her ambivalence towards the Egyptian communist party as a woman. For a detailed analysis of this autobiography, as well as the autobiographies of the Palestinian Fadwa Tuqan and the Algerian Assia Djebar, see my "Resisting Silence in Arab Women's Autobiographies" (forthcoming), in which I trace the evolving relationships between the political, the sexual, and the textual in the life struggles of these women, as they try to reconcile gendered resistance with the need for national solidarity against hostile external forces.
- 23 For an excellent depiction of the failures of the revolution due to internal forces, see Mahfouz.
- 24 This dream has never entirely died. In August 1998, over sixty artists from all the different Arab countries got together and produced a song entitled "Operette al-Hulm al-'Arabi" (The Arab Dream), as a protest against Arab regimes that have been unable to sustain this dream of a united Arab nation. The song began playing on some television stations in October of 1998, and the stations have been inundated with requests to play the song over and over again. The 23 singers made an appearance in Beirut, and the concert was attended by half a million to a million persons, or a quarter to half the population of the city. It must be remembered that if modernity came to the Middle East stained with colonialism, nationalism was stained with the blood of resistance to imperialism.
- 25 The theme of Arab male/Western female has been an important one in Arabic literature almost from its inception, and is often employed in explorations of the difficulties of cross-cultural and colonial relationships. Perhaps the most well-known

- novel dealing with this issue is the Sudanese Al-Tayyib Salih's *Mawsim al-Hijra ila al-Shamal* (Cairo: Dar al-Hilal, 1969), translated by Denys Johnson-Davies as *Season of Migration to The North* (London: Heinemann, 1969). See also Sulayman Fayyad's *Asmat* (Cairo: Kutub 'Arabiyya, 1977), translated by Hosam Aboul-Ela as *Voices* (New York: Marion Boyars Publishers, 1992). For how the situation gets played out when an Arab woman becomes involved with a European man, see, for example, the Palestinian Hamida Na'na's *Al-Watan fi al-'Aynayn* (Beirut: Dar al-Adab, 1979), translated by Martin Asser as *The Homeland* (Reading, England: Garnet Publishing, 1995), and the Egyptian Ahdaf Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun* (New York: Vintage International, 1992).
- 26 For a detailed analysis of this wonderful novel, whose humor is unfortunately mostly lost in the translation, see my "Disorienting Spaces: Salwa Bakr's *The Golden Chariot*" (forthcoming).
- 27 The publishing house was concerned enough about being sued (an extremely rare occurrence in Egypt) that it included the following disclaimer: "The events appearing in some chapters of this novel are taken from Egyptian government-sponsored and opposition newspapers, and reprinting them is not intended to corroborate their accuracy or defame those mentioned. Rather, the author meant to reflect the general media atmosphere that surrounded his characters and influenced them." For a detailed analysis of this novel see Mehrez (1994).

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