The Narrative Craft: realism and fiction in the Arabic canon

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What is a novel? This is a critical question that is not often asked by historians of modern Arabic literature. In Arabic literature studies, the question is usually framed in genealogical and national terms: “what is the Arabic novel? When did it “begin”, and where did it come from?” Though these are certainly important questions, the way in which they are framed implies that the Arabic novel simply emerged out of a blueprint produced elsewhere and by other people. This is largely a problem associated with an orientalist teleology, and one that is only recently beginning to be interrogated by scholars and critics. According to this foundational paradigm, border texts—texts that do not formally belong to any distinct and recognizable generic tradition—become somehow inscrutable and problematic. (What exactly is a narrative fiction like Muhammad al-Muwaylihi’s Hadith ‘Isa Ibn Hisham? If it is neither a “novel” nor a **maqamah**, then what is it? What are the formal criteria being used to make these judgments and from whence do they derive?) Moreover, the clear link between the rise of the novel—as both an emerging canon and a literary critical practice—and the growing dominance of nationalist ideologies in the Arab world adds another twist to the potential question. It is well known that canon formation is a process of discarding texts that, for a variety of reasons, do not fit the ideological mold constructed by critics and historians. What about these texts? The fiction of the Niqula Haddads, the Zaynab Fawwazes and the various Arab Grub Street writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? Are they simply passing blips on the screen of literary history? Should we just forget about these works entirely, as though no one had ever written them, no one published them and no one read them? Or can they tell us something valuable about the historical autonomy of narrative practice and the ways in which changing literary genres inscribe specific social processes within and across cultures?

Orientalist literary history keeps them as interesting examples of the native cultures’ sincere efforts to reproduce the greatest of European literary forms. Since orientalism always positions modern Arabic/Islamic culture within a Eurocentric teleology, these texts are important because they belong to an intermediate stage in the development of the novel in Arabic. In other words, their sole significance lies in their being there to remind us of the validity of the paradigm itself. National literary history dismisses them with an embarrassed shrug. Though popular and commercially successful, these “proto-novels” were incapable of representing the national reality (of which, more later), or what is worse, they were actually both a symptom of, and a driving force behind the corruption of the marginally
literate masses and hence of the national character. Because both of these positions have enshrined the novel as the expression of a particular world-view (the former, Eurocentric and Hegelian, the latter nationalist and hegemonic), neither of them can accommodate early modern, non-canonical narrative fiction in their genealogies. In other words, they are not interested in asking the question “what is a novel?”

What is realism? This second question is also neglected by both orientalist and nationalist critics. In Arabic literature studies, realism is taken for granted as the natural apogee of modern narrative fiction and a point of departure for “postmodern” narrative production. Realism is enshrined, in both Europe and the Arab world, as the canonical foundation of all literary modernities. Because it claims to represent human reality in all its detail, it also claims to be simultaneously a universal and a particular form of representation. Moreover, realism in Arabic fiction can be clearly deduced from an existing European model. This is partly why Naguib Mahfouz—and not a Yusuf al-Sharuni or a Ghassan Kanafani for example—was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1989.

The example of Mahfouz raises an even more important issue related to the significance of realism in the Arab context. In this Arab context, realism is not simply understood as a technique of representation built on simple verisimilitude. Rather, realism here is constructed through a particular and very powerful discourse about collective social and political identity. Realism has to construct the basic elements of narrative fiction—time, place, character, plot—in a way that “mirrors” the particular social, cultural and political reality (waqi’) of the national collectivity. When Arab critics use the word “reality” to talk about Arabic fiction, they mean “national reality,” a term that raises the specter of a whole set of specific historical and social issues such as colonialism and the anti-colonial struggle, the rise and hegemony of national bourgeousies as well as the real and imagined social composition of the national community.

The seminal relationship between nationalism and culture in colonial and postcolonial societies has been much discussed across disciplines. My point in this paper is to foreground the ways in which this historical relationship has narrowly defined our literary taxonomies and limited our understanding of the representational and ideological structures embedded in modern narrative genres. I suggest that both the mechanics of representation in discrete narrative texts and the formal organization of these texts into literary canons construct a cultural discourse through which power is strategically instituted and wielded in the social world. One way of approaching this problem is to examine the discursive process through which a national canon is constructed (i.e., what is the normative answer to the question, “what is the Arabic novel?”). By examining the critical reception of the series of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Arabic texts that constitute what I will call, “illegitimate fictions”, we can better understand the ways in which genre is appropriated and constructed as a hegemonic cultural discourse at a given historical moment. Another related approach would be to scrutinize the strategies of representation at work in canonical realist fiction in order to explore the formal intersections between representation and ideology.

This paper will offer a tentative and introductory approach to the problem of genre and ideology in Arabic fiction, outlined above. The paper focuses on Egypt for two reasons. Much of the Arabic fiction of the later Nahdah was produced in Egypt by both Egyptian and Levantine writers. A more important reason has to do with the evolved and Egypt-specific nationalist ideology that came to dominate Egyptian intellectual circles in the first two decades of the twentieth century, and that was the single most important factor in the elaboration of an Egyptian “national literature,” and hence a national
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canon. Lennard Davis has suggested that both fiction and ideology work by “repressing the mechanism of their generation” (1996, 221). In what follows, I will attempt to trace the critical implications of this claim for modern Arabic fiction. I will begin the discussion with a look at the definitive modular taxonomy of the Nadhawi novel elaborated by the late Egyptian critic, Abd al-Muhsin Taha Badr in his classic 1963 study of the rise of the Arabic novel in Egypt in order to tease out the ideological positions built into canon discourse. I will close with a brief reading of two novels by Mahmud Taymur in order to examine more closely the representational bases of early realism in Egyptian fiction. I will conclude by suggesting that both Nadhawi fiction and early narrative realism inscribed a new ideology as it was in the process of instituting itself as a hegemonic discourse about the self and society.

Fictions, old and new

As in Europe, the novel in Egypt emerged as a socially contested literary terrain. Its critics attacked the genre as an immoral and corrupting influence on the impressionable minds of tender youth, while its champions defended it as a tool for educating the sensibilities of the emerging middle classes in a style and language which they could understand without difficulty. Ahmad Ibrahim al-Hawwari has studied the attitudes prevalent amongst turn-of-the-century Arab critics who explicitly identified narrative fiction as the most appropriate literary form for “instilling moral principles, improving habits, smoothing rough edges, and turning men of taste and intellect into educators of the indolent and the vulgar . . . amongst the masses, in the shape of amusement and humour” (27). Abd al-Muhsin Taha Badr identifies Rifa’a al-Tahtawi as the father of this trend and includes the satirical writings of Muhammad al-Muwaylihi, the philosophical narratives of Farah Antun and the historical novels of Jurji Zaydan in his discussion of the process by which original Arabic narrative fiction was produced side by side with the numerous contemporary translations of popular European fiction. Al-Hawwari also focuses on popular journalism as an experimental site of didactic narrative fiction and suggests that much of this new narrative was concerned with the relationship between the sexes—the novelties of romantic love and companionate marriage for example. Lutfi al-Sayyid contributed to the debate on the role of the new literature in a specifically nationalist context:

. . . Literature is not, as superficial thinkers imagine, merely an instrument to amuse littérateurs. Nor are its tales merely a beautiful way of killing precious time. The fact is that a literature and a literary history are among the strongest identifying marks of a nation; serving to link its past generations with the present one, defining its particular character, and rendering it distinct from all others. And so, its personality is perpetuated through time, the area of similarities among its individual members becomes broader, and the bonds of solidarity among them grow stronger. (as cited in Wendell, 275)

In turn of the century Egypt, reformist intellectuals conceived of the new fiction as a kind of social cement. By educating and improving the collective character of the Egyptians, it would prepare them for citizenship in the modern nation-state. On the other hand, these intellectuals—who by and large shared a highly ambivalent attitude towards the Egyptian masses, both urban and rural—understood popular narrativity as the antithesis of modern narrative, repeatedly attacking the former as both a cause and a symptom of the corrupt state of these masses. The social context of the café-based hakawati (storyteller) reinforced their slothful, vice-ridden habits, while the marvellous themes of the popular epic
cycles (sira) and the folk tale (haddutah) contributed to their superstition and gullibility. This specific—and often quite fervid—prejudice against the dominant literary genres of popular culture was built into much of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century critical discourse that contributed to the elaboration of fiction as a new and inherently modern narrative genre, and it has continued to colour the writing of literary history until fairly recently. Highbrow authors like Taha Husayn, Mahmud Taymur and Tawfiq al-Hakim openly and repeatedly complained about the scandalous but nonetheless fierce competition offered by the popular serialized fiction of the day, condemning it as yet another sign of the lamentable state of Egyptian culture. While popular narrative practice was understood to constitute a deliberate, formal act of deception, new fiction—the “artistic” novel or short story—represented social and individual truth. Realism (al-waqi‘iyyah) was championed as the formal mechanism for rendering this paradoxical identity between fiction and truth.

Timothy Mitchell has argued that, by the nineteenth century, Europe had produced an ontology that split the world into subject and object, observer and observed, reality and its representation. This was “a place where one was continually pressed into service as a spectator by a world ordered so as to represent,” and “where the real world ... was something created in the representation of its commodities” (12–13). Moreover, as Edward Said has shown, the power to represent was the power to order, administer and colonize. Thus the histories of capitalist modernity, imperialism, the expansion of the nation-state and of realism as an aesthetic philosophy are inextricably linked. Nineteenth century realism, in painting as in fiction, depended on a point of view that was imaginatively rooted in a centered and stable position of absolute authority and yet of absolute invisibility (Nochlin, 21–22). This point of view aspired to mimic the dispassionate “objectivity” of scientific truth. Mitchell speaks of “the great historical confidence” of this period in European history, where the wealth and power of national bourgeoisies and the unimpeded colonial expansion of the state was at its height. The “political certainties of the age” were reflected in “the certainty of representation” characteristic of realism and reproduced in the exhibit, the museum, the spectacle. The representation of “reality” thus implied a fundamental alienation and masked a basic strategy of power. It was not simply an “accurate” or “real” reflection of the exterior world, but rather the projection of “an effect called ‘reality’ ” onto an exterior world now marked as illegible and disordered (Mitchell, 31). “All Realists of genius,” remarked Guy de Maupassant in 1887, “should really be called Illusionists,” imposing a quiet and invisible “order” onto “the most differing, unforeseen, contradictory, ill-assorted things” (26–27).

The new Arabic fiction accompanied a similar upheaval in the social order, and the rise of a secular, cosmopolitan bourgeoisie enmeshed in the economic and cultural web of world capitalism and nation-state ideologies. This class understood narrative as the proper tool by which it would institute its social hegemony in a restive and hostile environment. The formal and thematic structure of the new fiction that emerged in the first decades of the twentieth century constituted a radical break with the old modes of both the Arabic literary canon and popular narrative traditions. In the same way that “society” came to be understood as a distinct and abstract field of human knowledge constructed around a subject/object relationship, so the act of narration itself came to reproduce the split implied in this new ontology. The “narrator” was no longer the custodian and transmitter of an accumulated civilization turath—a clearly defined and visible yet transparent figure through whom spoke the voice of communal history and collective wisdom. The new narrator was rather an individual standing “outside” the collectivity, observing it,
describing it, narrating it, not as a communal historian, but from a position that embodied a subjective but nonetheless authoritative and hegemonic point of view. Narration became the process through which the problem of the individual confronting society in an adversarial relationship was negotiated, managed, resolved. “Realism, in fact, is produced in the novel as a social narration of the individual as problem: what, where, how is the meaning of the individual in this prosaic world, confronted thus by society, by history? The novel ceaselessly makes sense for the individual, brings him or her . . . into this new field of reality, into recognition, knowledge, meaning” (Heath, 109). In its efforts to forge its own destiny, this autonomous self is made to contain and resolve the existential contradiction produced by the new social order, thus emerging as a kind of “mirror” of the social body as a whole. In the new Arabic fiction, this novel self is inflected in a variety of interesting formal and discursive ways. S/he is either a biographical subject whose interiority dominates and shapes the text, or an empty cipher, constructed as a sign of social pathology. In both cases, the project of reform (tahdhib al-akhlāq) is intimately bound up with the process of representation (taswīr al-muijtama‘). The act of narration thus came to embody a slippery relationship between the narrative subject (al-dhat al-riwa‘iyyah) and the ambiguous, abstract collectivity defined as “society” which represented a putative national reality (al-waqi‘).

Novels and Nations

The practice of fiction writing in Egypt, as elsewhere in the colonial world, was embedded in the emergence of liberal nationalist ideologies. While critics may debate the origins of the genre in the Arab context, its structural and discursive features and its representation of time and place are all located within the new historical space of the emergent nation-state. Benedict Anderson’s 1983 work, Imagined Communities, investigated the link between the historical discourses of nationalism, the emergence of print media and the novel genre. In another context, Davis has described the process, in eighteenth century Britain, by which journalism and the rise of print ideologies embedded in a truth/falsehood dialectic engendered the profoundly ambivalent novel genre. Anderson’s work has led to a spate of postcolonial theory on the dialectical relationship between novel and nation, both within and without the modern Western context.11 In this writing, the general consensus is that the inscription of a new kind of narrative mimesis—no longer the product of popular orality or stylized literary convention—became enmeshed in the sociocultural fabric of the emerging nation-state. Thus the novel’s “realistic” representation of a variety of “national” landscapes, languages and character types offers up a literary analogue to the syncretic social and political project of nationalism. Tim Brennan sums this relationship up nicely:

It was the novel that historically accompanied the rise of nations by objectifying the “one, yet many” of national life, and by mimicking the structure of the nation, a clearly bordered jumble of languages and styles. Socially, the novel joined the newspaper as the major vehicle of the national print media, helping to standardize language, encourage literacy, and remove mutual incomprehensibility. But it did much more than that. Its manner of presentation allowed people to imagine the special community that was the nation (49).

The new fiction, and particularly the novel, was especially suited to this project. After some initial controversy, nationalist intellectuals and writers across the colonial world recognized and advocated the practice of novel-writing and reading as a didactic tool that, if properly
wielded, could help to refine the moral sensibilities of their compatriots and familiarize them with their rights and duties as devoted and productive citizens of a single nation. In Iran for example, the early twentieth century writer and reformer, Ali Ahmad Jamalzadeh, praised the new genre for its syncretic, homogenizing and educational potentials—what Anderson has described as the delineation of a “knowable community” which can and must incorporate lands, peoples, classes and languages from within and without the literate, urban centers: “The novel informs and acquaints various groups of a nation with one another: the city-dweller with the villager, the serving man with the shopkeeper, the Kurd with the Baluch . . . the Orthodox with the Sufi . . . and in so doing removes and eradicates many thousand differences and biased antagonisms which are born out of ignorance and lack of knowledge and information” (as cited in Daraghi, 113). As we have already seen, Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid claimed a similar role for the new fiction in Egypt. The following generation of Egyptian writers and intellectuals further elaborated this project of “national literature” in numerous prefaces, essays and newspaper articles and assiduously set about putting it into practice in the burst of short fiction produced throughout the 1920s.

This new critical concept of “national literature” was a pivotal element in the later development and canonization of the novel genre in Egypt. Its three main distinguishing features are setting, character and time: Egyptian landscapes and Egyptian characters, urban and rural, and an overarching sense of national history were identified as the necessary ingredients for a genuinely national literature. Equally important was the construction of narrative subjectivity through the medium of a character, or characters, with a developed interiority and a distinct point of view. This could be the central character in the fiction or the narrator himself. In either case, this narrative subjectivity was a largely unprecedented feature in Arabic narrative before the end of the nineteenth century, and its elaboration in fiction was inextricably bound to the linked ideologies of nationalism and romantic individualism as they emerged in Egypt roughly around the time of the First World War and the 1919 revolution.

Though Muhammad Husayn Haykal’s novel, Zaynab, was, until recently, widely considered to be the first Arabic novel, numerous examples of Arabic fiction existed prior to it, beginning around the middle of the nineteenth century. A group of Syrian writers—Salim al-Bustani (1846–1884), Francis Marrash (1836–1873) and Nu’man ‘Abduh al-Qasatli (1854–1920)—published a number of extended works of fiction around this time. In Egypt, Abd al-Muhsin Taha Badr documents 167 novels published before Zaynab, between 1834 and 1914 (413–431). Among the most important of these were the historical and philosophical novels and romances written by Jurji Zaydan, Niqula Haddad and Farah Anton. Zaydan—historian, novelist, critic and the founder of al-Hilal—published no less than twenty-three historical novels between 1891 and 1914. Haddad published twenty-two melodramas between 1901 and 1950, while Farah Anton published six philosophical romances and historical novels between 1899 and 1906.

Most literary historians however, tend to dismiss this prolific fictional production prior to Zaynab as a series of imperfect experiments in an evolving process of adaptation and assimilation of an imported genre. This paradigm traces the origins of the Arabic novel to the concerted translation of European fiction in the nineteenth century. An extended period of apprenticeship follows, during which the Arabic novel undergoes its steady path towards “maturity”, finally culminating in the work of Naguib Mahfuz. The nineteenth century European novel, in both its late realist and early modernist phase is the prototype against which the “developing” Arabic novel is read and evaluated. Most of the numerous translations, adaptations and original texts produced by Arab writers around the turn of the
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twentieth century are thereby relegated to the outskirts of the national canon. The prejudices implicit in this model of cultural production are rooted in the attitude of orientalism towards the colonial subaltern. They are moreover, shared by the attitude of the nationalist critic towards local popular culture, and further complicated by the historical hegemony of realism as a modern aesthetic ideology.

In an attempt to deal with the problems involved in the periodization and classification of this diffuse and generically unstable modern narrative corpus, Badr distinguishes between three historical and modal types of novel in the foundational period between 1870 and 1938. They are “the didactic novel” (al-riwayah al-ta’limiyyah), “the recreational novel” (riwayat al-tasliyah wal-tarfih) and “the artistic novel” (al-riwayah al-fanniyyah). This classification roughly follows a historical chronology. In the first category, Badr includes nineteenth century travelogues like Rifa’a al-Tahtawi’s Takhlis al-Ibriz and Ali Mubarak’s Alam al-Din, Farah Anton’s philosophical allegories, Jurji Zaydan’s historical novels and Muhammad al-Muwaylihi’s maqamah-influenced narrative, Hadith ‘Isa Ibn Hisham. “The recreational novel” — which comprises by far the largest section of Badr’s bibliography — features the work of Niqula Haddad and includes the dozens of little-remembered writers who published their novels serially in the many literary journals that emerged in fin de siècle Egypt. Finally, “the artistic novel” includes the canonical narrative texts of the Nahdah, beginning with Zaynab, and continuing throughout the twenties and thirties with the novellas of the New School writers as well as the novels of Taha Husayn, Tawfiq al-Hakim and ‘Abbas Mahmud al-Aqqad. Badr’s critical methodology is rooted in two related generic and ideological premises. The first of these is a very particular kind of understanding of the structural features and historic mission of the novel genre itself. The second lies in the nationalist intellectual’s ambiguous attitude towards an antediluvian popular culture and narrative tradition.

Badr’s typology is characterized by an ongoing tension between “high” (classical-nationalist) and “low” (popular) culture. He attributes the decline of medieval Arab culture to its linguistic and literary “vernacularization”, as exemplified by the flawed style and usage of medieval writers from Ibn Iyas to al-Jabarti, and more generally, by the growing cleavages within what he views as a unitary, canonical cultural tradition: “The most prominent aspect of the age’s cultural life was first, the rupture between contemporary culture and the true intellectual and literary tradition of classical Arab civilization and second, the rupture between this tradition and [the culture of] the popular masses . . . Consequently, most of the age’s literary arts deteriorated into the realm of popular literature” (19). According to Badr, these same symptoms continued to afflict Arabic literary culture in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. For while “the didactic novel”, however formally inadequate, at least sought to address the great political and philosophical issues of the day as well as the decadence of contemporary society, the great majority of the novels produced during this period was made up of commercially profitable romances, adventure-stories, crime-fiction and the like, geared towards a popular audience, newly—and yet marginally—literate. This is what Sabry Hafez calls “the new reading public” of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Badr refers to this metamorphosed popular audience as “the semi-cultured” (ansaf al-muthaqafin) and, in a pregnant hypothesis, goes on to suggest that the popular novel (i.e., “the recreational novel”) was, structurally and thematically, the direct descendent of popular, oral narrative. This “semi-cultured” readership “. . . turned . . . towards translated novels—which only differed from popular literature in that they were somewhat more believable” (122). Jurji Zaydan’s remarks on the popular novel are relevant here:
The writers of the *Nahdah* translated many of these books—which are today called “novels” (*riwayat*)—from French, English and Italian. These translated Arabic novels are numberless and most of them are intended to be read for amusement—rarely for social improvement or historical value. Educated Arab readers have welcomed these novels in order that they may replace the stories authored in medieval Islamic times, popular amongst the masses up until now. For example, the stories of ‘Ali al-Zaybaq and Sayf Bin Dhi Yazan and al-Malik al-Dhahir and the Banu Hilal, etc., in addition to the old stories like *Antara* and *A Thousand and One Nights*. [These readers] found that the translated novels were closer to reality and hence better suited the spirit of the age, and so they became a dedicated audience (as cited in Badr, 122).

Though many of the novels that Badr classifies under the rubric of “the recreational novel” were certainly directly translated from European languages, a greater number were adaptations, very loosely based on French, English or Russian plots. Mustafa Lutfi al-Manfaluti’s immensely popular translations were condensed and Arabized adaptations of romantic French novels like Dumas fils’ *La Dame aux Camelias* and Bernardin de St. Pierre’s *Paul et Virginie*. Matti Moosa notes that al-Manfaluti “often took extensive liberties with the original to fit the theme to a Muslim background and to promote his own didactic purposes” (111). The prolific and colourful Tanius ‘Abduh “carried with him sheets of paper in one pocket and a French novel in the other. He would then read a few lines, put the novel back in his pocket, and begin to scratch in a fine script whatever he could remember of the few lines he had read. He wrote all day long without striking out a word or rereading a line” (Moosa, 107). Clearly, this method raises important historical and theoretical questions about the relationship between translation, adaptation and authorship. Moreover, it is not unjustified to suppose that many of the unattributed “translations” serialized in the popular fiction magazines of the day were in fact, original works that sought to cash in on the vogue for translated European fiction. In this context, Badr mentions an anecdote about Niqula Haddad, who had written two original novels—*Al-Haqibah al-Zarqa* (The Blue Case) and ‘Ayn bi ‘Ayn (An Eye for an Eye)—set them in Europe and tried to pass them off as translations, whereupon Jurji Zaydan convinced him to acknowledge his own authorship (144).

These popular novels were generically hybrid romances and adventure stories, often set in exotic foreign lands or in a legendary historical past. Their subtitles are not only amusing, but also provide an important insight into the fundamental generic instability of the novel form: Labib Abu Satit’s novel *The Innocents* (al-Abriyya’) was subtitled “a literary, romantic policier”; Muhammad Ra’fat al-Jamali’s *The Beauty’s Sustenance or The Lovers’ Sorrow* (Qut al-fatinah aw alam ‘ashiqayn) carried the subtitle, “an Egyptian historical, psychological romance” and Ahmad Hanafi’s *The Beautiful Vendor* (al-Ba’i’ah al-hasna’) was described as “a literary, historical, social love-story” (Badr, 175–180). As previously noted, Badr locates the generic antecedents of this illegitimate phase in the history of the Arabic novel in popular Arabic narrative and translated romances. The key structural features that relegate the recreational novel to its stillborn status as pulp fiction are all features that properly belong to what contemporary critics saw as the archaic and corrupt realm of *al-adab al-sha’bi*—the stuff of romance, adventure, the amazing and the improbable.

These structural features are setting, character, plot, narrative mode and language. The recreational novel almost always takes place in distant times or places (or both). Consequently, the characters that people these novels are usually foreigners and aristocrats, fictional historical personages, kings, knights and so forth. Moreover, the plots of these novels relied mainly on epic stories of adventure and battles, or melodramatic intrigues, all tied together by a series of coincidences or highly “improbable” events. Finally and most importantly, Badr describes the dominant mode of narration in these novels as being
“recitative” (uslub taqriri) rather than “representational” (uslub taswiri)—a feature which also has much in common with the typical narrative mode of popular epic and romance. In the latter, the narrator is an omnipresent voice, shaping and modulating the sequence of events, not by developing a steady temporal progression of cause and effect through the exclusive use of what Davis calls “the median past tense”, but rather by constantly moving between far-flung narrative tenses and locations. His omniscience and the authority that this omniscience endows emanate from his social and professional role as the vested custodian of the community’s sacred and historical knowledge rather than from the textual institution of authorship. Popular narrativity involves a kind of collective performance whereby the narrator situates himself as a physically present interlocutor between the narrative and the audience, who participate in turn, in the unfolding of the narrative through their comments and interjections. This immediate narrative presence supplies what the reader of the printed text now comes to perceive as the missing links of temporal and spatial causality in pre-modern or pre-realist narrative: the tale, the story, the popular epic. Moreover, the language of this narrative is generically complex and intertextual, typically incorporating poetry and proverb into the text as a way of amplifying and embellishing the events and their moral significance. Finally, as in epic and folktale, character and location in popular narrative are the function of event and plot, not the other way around. The idea of individuality or personality—of interiority—does not exist in popular narrative, for it is a character’s actions that determine his or her destiny within the preordained limits imposed by divine will and communal history, and not the unique interior moral landscape of individual consciousness. Similarly, location or setting is abbreviated, generic and symbolic. Description as a way of foregrounding the materiality and specificity of the object or the landscape was also a later narrative practice (and one of the more opaque and irritating features of the new novel in Egypt according to Muhammad Khayrat, who declared the penchant of European novelists for endless description of places and things to be “boring” for the Arab reader, Badr, 143). Badr uses a 1905 novel by Zaynab Fawwaz as a case study of the recreational novel’s wholesale adoption of archaic and decadent popular narrative structures:13

In structure and plot, this novel is representative of the recreational novel due to its haphazard accumulation of events and their subjection to fate and coincidence, and its reliance on adventure and the romantic plot. The author intervenes into the narrative by commenting on the events and addressing the reader directly, and [she] attempts to tie the chapters together quite arbitrarily for lack of any real connection. Moreover, this novel is characterized by the style of popular epic because the author comments on the events with poetry, describes the action using language similar to that of the popular epic and connects the chapters together in the same way that the popular narrator would do . . . For example, she says: ‘This is what befell that scoundrel, and as for Shakib and Naguib . . .’ or ‘as for Shakib, he continued to wander until he arrived at the very edge of Riyad al-Zahirah . . .’ or ‘here we leave him and take the reader in the direction of Jabiyah to find out what befell Jabir . . .’, etc. The author’s need for such strategies to unite her narrative lies in the lack of determinacy or causality in the novel. Hence the ending is not the final culmination of a logical sequence of events, but rather it is simply the result of the author’s having exhausted all her tricks and stratagems (156).

A particular pair of assumptions about the form and function of modern fiction underpin Badr’s analysis of the recreational novel as an underdeveloped or intermediate genre. The first has to do with the contemporary hegemony of realism as an aesthetic ideology while the second revolves around the ontology produced by nationalism, which requires the outside world, the individual’s environment, his “reality”, to fit into the discursive parameters generated by the idea of the nation. Badr identifies the “escape” from Egyptian reality (al-burub min waqi’ al-bi’ah al-misriyyah) as the single most salient fracture at the heart of the recreational novel. This flaw informs all the structural features mentioned
above. Time, settings, characters, narrative mode do not “reflect” the particular historical, social and existential environment of the newly defined contemporary Egyptian subject. They remain rooted in the mythic past, in the marvellous, the exotic realm of the distant other and in no way contribute to the representation of a properly national reality, whether this reality is understood as a social environment or an interior, psychological landscape:

These authors’ escape from the Egyptian environment to other environments did not mean that they succeeded in representing these new locations through the events of their novels. As we have already noted, [their failure] was due to the fact that they were busy satisfying their readers’ curiosity with a string of marvellous and intricate events which did not submit to rational analysis but rather, to coincidence and fate . . . Consequently, the author did not bother with cause and effect, nor with explanations and justifications. He simply wanted to present the strange and miraculous—a fact which binds his novels to the popular story. The author had not yet moreover perceived the necessity of giving expression to human experience, and the consciousness of a particular environment and of the unique individual that emerges from this perception. For this reason, he did not write in a representational style (uslub taswiri), which presents the details of experience and its minutiae. Rather, he wrote in a recitative style (uslub taqriri) which rests on the mere summary of events and the narration of their broad outlines (Badr, 148).

The “artistic novel” in Egypt emerges at the juncture of these twin ideas of the unique individual and the specificity of a national environment referred to above. Around the first decade of the twentieth century, ideas associated with psychoanalysis, romanticism and bourgeois liberalism had begun to shape the notion of the primacy of the subject, while nationalist ideology negotiated a particular kind of relationship between this new subject and his exterior environment. Badr pinpoints 1919 as the seminal date from which the new national subject in Egypt emerges with a radical consciousness of his identity as an individual and of the historical specificity of his social environment. In this context, the idea of independence acquires an aesthetic and existential dimension in addition to the straightforward political one usually associated with this period in modern Egyptian history. Most critics agree that it is during this period that the cultural and literary concept of “national character” originates in Egyptian intellectual history. The exoticism and the popular narrative techniques of the recreational novel were not adequate to the needs of this emergent national character, newly conscious of his subjectivity and of the social specificity and political urgency of his world. A new literature and a new narrative mode was needed to express this consciousness—one that privileged the individual’s subjectivity and point of view while simultaneously representing the outside world, with its places and peoples, as a properly national landscape.

**Ways of Seeing: Genre and Ideology**

The canonical, “artistic” novel in Egypt acquires its legitimacy precisely because it inscribes a new ideology of the individual in relation to place. Badr distinguishes between the old role of the writer as an “illusionist” and his modern role as a realist: “the goal of the artistic novel is to express the writer’s perception of the world that surrounds him. For this reason he turns his attention to reality rather than relying on deception (al-iham)” (198). The “realistic” representation of place, and of the individual self’s experience of place, merge to create the proper narrative space of modern fiction. But this idea of reality and its unmediated representation by a unified self is as much of an artifice as the “deception” practiced by romancers and hack novelists. Novelistic subjectivity or interiority is not some natural effect of the progressive evolution of human narrative practice, but rather the finite
product of a specific moment in the history of modern societies. In Europe, this was the moment, in the eighteenth century, when a mercantile, and later, an industrial bourgeoisie began to come into its own as a dominant national and imperial class. Similarly, in Egypt, the “artistic” novel emerges at the point when a properly nationalist bourgeois intelligentsia begins self-consciously to articulate its role as a powerful and exclusive political and cultural vanguard.

Novels do not depict life, they depict life as it is represented by ideology. By this I mean that life is a pretty vast and uncoordinated series of events and perceptions. But novels are pre-organized systems of experience in which characters, actions, and objects have to mean something in relation to the system of each novel itself, in relation to the culture in which the novel is written, and in relation to the readers who are in that culture. When we “see” a house in a novel . . . the house we “see” in our mind is largely a cultural artefact. It must be described as a cultural phenomenon with recognizable signs to tell us what kind of a house, what class, whose taste and so on. All of this description will depend on ideology—that is the vast signifying system that, in its interpenetration with the individual psyche, makes things “mean” something to a culture and individuals in that culture. Ideology constitutes the sum of that which a culture needs to believe about itself and its aspirations as opposed to what really is. Ideology is in effect the culture’s form of writing a novel about itself for itself. And the novel is a form that incorporates that cultural fiction into a particular story. Likewise, fiction becomes, in turn, one of the ways in which the culture teaches itself about itself, and thus novels become agents of inculcating ideology. (Davis, 1987, 24–25)

Lennard Davis’ description of the novel genre as a particular kind of cultural artefact illuminates the ways in which language, character and setting function as narrative sites of ideology in the modern European context. Of all genres, it is the novel that insistently claims to represent the realities of human consciousness and the social world, and yet this realistic representation of the world is based on an elaborate system of simplification and manipulation of the chaotic and incoherent jumble of experience that individuals live on a day to day basis. In this sense, the “reality” depicted by the novel—whether physical or psychological—is as much of an artifice as the fantastic landscapes and heroic adventures of popular storytelling. From Robinson Crusoe’s desert island to Jane Austen’s provincial drawing rooms, the creation of novelistic space inscribed a particular set of attitudes about “the nature of property and lands, foreign and domestic” that encoded the European bourgeoisie’s reification of property and its obsessive commodification of the material world (Davis, 1987, 54). Thus Davis’ hypothetical fictional house is not just a house in the mundane, quotidian, unremarkable sense. Rather, it is an elaborately constructed discursive space, whose architecture, location and contents are meant to signify the particular social, economic and indeed, moral status or psychological state of its owner. Far from being gratuitous “filler” or disruptive marginalia, this “thick description” of locations that Muhammad Khayrat found so tedious in European novels was intended to inscribe the all-important nuances of class hierarchies and the social relationships between ownership, social power and moral character that developed in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe. The construction of narrative subjectivity and character in this context was also an ideologically loaded project that projected the immense historical self-confidence of an affluent imperial bourgeoisie and that encoded a dominant middle-class value-system privileging individualism, industry and self-reliance as the keys to social and moral success. Indeed, Davis’ remarks on the “civilizing” mission of the novel in nineteenth century Europe could equally apply to the Arab context in the early twentieth century: “By this point in the nineteenth century, the novel was seen as important for the furthering of civilization and culture—particularly as the base of readership began to spread to the lower classes. The ideological role of character was certainly part of the civilizing, or if you will, the socially indoctrinating aspect of the novel” (1987, 117).
The portrayal of character and the process by which it is shaped through a combination of heredity, environment, circumstance and personal choice, was meant to illustrate the evils of sensuality and moral turpitude, and the rewards of moderation, thrift and sexual virtue. Novelistic subjectivity—the minute charting of an individual self’s interior moral and psychological landscape—was the necessary narrative medium through which contemporary bourgeois ideology was refracted, negotiated and disseminated. Its ideological efficacy rests on its pretensions to representing a very particular and yet very universal “reality”—the reality of the individual’s consciousness as it attempts to negotiate the world in which it finds itself. This realistic “development” of individual character is precisely the single most important feature which Badr and a host of other critics of modern Arabic literature find to be fatally missing from early Arabic novelistic practice, while its narrative inception marks the beginning of the canonical novel in Arabic.

**Al-adab al-Qawmi: national characters and ‘The New School’ of fiction**

While the recreational novel emerged from a social context in which established modes of popular narrative intersected new cultural marketplaces and patterns of consumption amongst the literate masses, the writing of the artistic novel in Egypt was associated with the rise and growing self-consciousness of a cosmopolitan, nationalist bourgeoisie. In Egypt, as in much of the periphery, the distinct social and economic formations created by global capitalism varied from the models of the imperial center. As in Europe, the rise of the novel in Egypt nonetheless accompanied the emergence of a new middle-class broadly defined, with social characteristics and political interests distinct from those of either the old merchant and ‘ulama classes, the masses or the courtly aristocracy. Jabir ‘Asfur suggests that the intelligentsia of this new bourgeoisie appropriated the novel genre as a way of challenging and dismantling the old Ottoman and Arabic social and literary hierarchies. If classical poetry was the proper genre of the courtly aristocracy and the folk tale or epic that of the popular classes, then the novel was the perfect literary vehicle by which the emergent nationalist middle-classes could assert their dominance on the cultural stage (106–110). More specifically, Badr points to the recreational novel’s exclusive focus on a non-native Egyptian and non-Muslim bourgeoisie as yet another sign of its social and literary illegitimacy. The canonical novel is written both by and for the native middle-classes, exploring their subjectivity and their particular milieu (Badr, 160). The spread of secular, western-style education and the consequent growth of the modern professions in addition to the new wealth generated by the emergence and consolidation of capitalist markets contributed to the rise of this class, while colonialism galvanized its self-consciousness and its growing assertiveness as a national vanguard. In this respect, 1919 is a landmark date from both a political and literary point of view. The 1919 revolution against the British occupation and the overwhelming popular demand for independence under the banner of the Wafd party that it crystallized stimulated the Egyptian bourgeoisie’s sense of its own identity and its role as a cultural and political vanguard. The aesthetic ideology of romanticism further contributed to its intelligentsia’s call for the liberation of the individual from the shackles of “dead tradition” and antiquated social mores, and the creation of a new and properly national literature that would explore the experience of this individual within the context of his contemporary social milieu. The novel now begins to be written and read as the mature expression of individual and collective identity. This is why Muhammad Husayn Haykal’s novel, *Zaynab*, is considered to be “the first” Egyptian—and
indeed, Arabic—novel and why Tawfiq al-Hakim’s *The Return of the Spirit* is regarded as an undying national classic.

The two central elements of national literature (*al-adab al-qawmi*) that emerge in the critical writing of this period are character (*al-shakhsiyyah*) and environment (*al-bi’ah*). They are linked through the idea of a national “reality” (*al-waqi’*) on both the objective level of landscape and the subjective level of experience. The idea of a national reality focused on the quotidian landscape of the City and its various markets, streets and residential quarters, but also on the countryside, the rural landscape of Egypt’s villages and vast agricultural estates. Character was a more ambiguous element however. Badr divides the early artistic novel in Egypt into two categories: “the analytic novel” (*al-riwayah al-tahliliyyah*) in which an omniscient and “objective” narrator explores the psyche of a particular character drawn from the ranks of the urban middle-classes or the city’s popular quarters. Muhammad Tahir Lashin’s *Hawwa’ bila Adam* (Eve without Adam) and Mahmud Taymur’s *Rajab Efendi* are examples of this type of novel. As implied in the terminology, character in “the autobiographical novel” (*riwayah al-tarjamah al-dhatiyyah*) is produced by a third-person voice that charts the interiority of a central, semi-autobiographical protagonist. This protagonist’s consciousness mediates and dominates the fabric of the text (Haykal’s *Zaynab*, Taha Husayn’s *The Days*, Tawfiq al-Hakim’s *Bird of the East*). In this type of novel, the demarcating line between protagonist, narrator and author is indistinct.

I have discussed this ambiguous narrator/character at the heart of the autobiographical novel in another work. For now, I would like to focus on the fiction of the writers that formed the “New School” group in order to examine the emergent relationship between realism as both a technique and an epistemology, and the “national literature” doctrine that came to dominate Egyptian literary discourse in the twenties and thirties. As previously noted, the idea of national independence in the writing of Nadhawi authors incorporated an aesthetic and existential component in addition to the obvious political one. The anticolonial struggle also involved a struggle to liberate the Egyptian sensibility from the chains of social convention and blind imitation of what was now seen as an aging and decrepit literary canon. One of the most important strategies by which this new Egyptian man would create his world afresh in his own image was literature—particularly narrative fiction, itself a new genre, unfettered by the shackles of a burdensome and largely irrelevant classical and medieval tradition. Romanticism was a major influence on the way in which Egyptian intellectuals understood and formulated the idea of the autonomous individual in both the social and literary sense. The romantic and iconoclastic literary production of the Diwan School—poetry, criticism and, to a lesser extent fiction—was instrumental in shaping the new literary sensibilities of the age. The invention of narrative subjectivity was a corollary to this process which privileged and celebrated the inner life of the artist—a process that Muhammad Husayn Haykal describes as taking Arabic literature from “mere storytelling to the prominence of the Self (*buruz al-dhatiyyah*)” (12).

Already in 1911, Lutfi al-Sayyid was positioning the idea of a historically distinct and homogenous Egyptian Ummah in opposition to the ideological breadth of the Ottoman imperium. Egypt was a distinct nation with its own specific geography and cultural character formed by shared language, religion, color and blood. Lutfi al-Sayyid believed that literature must have a significant part to play in the consolidation of a modern national consciousness. In a lecture delivered at the Egyptian University in 1918, the critic Ahmad Dayf further elaborated Lutfi Al-Sayyid’s ideas on the role of literature in the nationalist project: “We wish to have an Egyptian literature which will reflect our social state, our
intellectual movements, and the region in which we live; reflect the cultivator in his field, the merchant in his stall, the ruler in his palace, the teacher among his students and his books, the Shaykh among his people, the worshipper in his mosque or his monk’s cell, and the youth in his amorous play. In sum, we want to have a personality in our literature” (as cited in Gershoni & Jankowski, 192). It is this notion of “personality” or “character” (shakhsiyyah) which was to become the dominant element in subsequent formulations of a properly modern and national literature.

The “New School” writers, whose short-lived journal, al-Fajr (1925–1927), was dedicated to the dissemination of the Egyptian short story, were largely responsible for the invention of the national character in narrative. Mahmud Taymur, who was loosely affiliated with the group, reflects on this period in Egyptian literary history:

The birth of the modern Egyptian story was bound up with other new beginnings which equally encompassed the institutions of our social, economic, political, intellectual and cultural lives. . . . The outline and specificity of the Egyptian character were obscure, lost amongst foreign currents, and so all intellectual effort turned towards the reform and foregrounding of this Egyptian character and to the exploration of its strengths and capabilities in life. . . . During this period, the nationalist forces were preparing to rid the country of the colonial yoke and to expel the foreign exploiter as a first step in the struggle for renewal and productivity. The new writers responded to the calls for modernization that demanded the creation of a properly Egyptian literature that would express Egyptian feelings and experiences in a narrative form modelled on western literature. . . . And when Egypt’s national revolution of 1919 ignited and the Egyptian character burst forth, shining, in all the various walks of life, the modern artistic story immediately responded, representing, describing and analyzing this authentic popular character which was both the genius and the child of the revolution (as cited in Badr, 206–207).

The New School writers were trying to define an entirely new relationship between fiction and the real; the quotidian social world in which they lived. They were specifically reacting against what they saw as the deceptive and fantastic characters and landscapes of contemporary popular fiction, and frequently complained of the impervious popularity of these serialized novels, translated and otherwise, in their writing.15 This world was, as we have seen, constructed in terms of a national coherence and specificity. Reality and the real in fiction were thus understood to be refracted through the prism of individual, yet metonymic “character”. ‘Isa ‘Ubayd, another of the writers associated with the New School, dedicated his first volume of short stories, Ihsan Hanım (1921), to the Wafdist leader Sa’d Zaghlul. In this preface, ‘Ubayd describes the method of realist narrative as follows:

The purpose of fiction must be the investigation of life and its sincere portrayal as it appears to us. [The writer must collect] the greatest number of observations and documents so that the story becomes a kind of “dossier” in which the reader can peruse the history of an individual’s life or a page from that history. The writer uses this individual history as a means of studying the secrets of human nature and the hidden recesses of the obscure human heart, as well as the moral and social development [of men] and the role of civilization, environment and heredity [in that development] . . . For the function of the writer is to dissect the human soul and to record his discoveries [in writing] (9).

The language of this passage is important because it appears repeatedly in critical writing of and about the formative period in question, and because it illuminates the central technique of representation at the heart of the new realism. Narrative fiction is now concerned with the private, the hidden and the interior aspects of “human nature”. This interiority is constructed in both human and material terms. From the battlefields, aristocratic courts and salons, and the criminal public streets of the recreational novel, fiction now moves into the enclosed and private spaces of the social world: the domestic
parlour, the bedroom, “the obscure human heart”. Lennard Davis’ insight into the essentially voyeuristic and libidinous nature of realist fiction is certainly relevant here (1996, 58–59). More importantly, this private “dossier” of an individual human life was required to express a set of moral and social truths about “Egypt” and “Egyptians.” But which Egypt and which Egyptians? My assertion is that far from simply being a neutral and/or “maturing” mimetic strategy of representation—as implied in ‘Ubayd’s idea of “the dossier”, as well as by developmentalist critical discourse—realism in Nahdaoui fiction encoded a specific social ideology, a specific set of social attitudes towards class, gender and culture as they were in the process of being instituted. These attitudes were naturally centered and produced in colonial Egypt, but they were also immediately and universally recognizable features of a social modernity and of a modern novelistic language located in nineteenth century Europe.

The Politics of Realism: Mahmud Taymur

Taymur and ‘Ubayd were both students of the French Naturalists. Naturalism was one of the major vehicles through which literary modernity was formulated and negotiated in Egypt, as in France (and elsewhere in Europe). Rooted as it was in nineteenth century positivism and scientism, and simultaneously breaking with the forms and sensibilities of Romanticism and Neo-classicism, literary Naturalism aspired to observe and document, in a precise, “scientific” manner, the laws “which were held to control and determine human existence” (McFarlane, 113). This clinical, voyeuristic, authorial gaze was habitually turned upon the sordid urban masses of Paris, Berlin—and Cairo. The Naturalists were both fascinated and repelled by their national working-classes and petite bourgeoisie. By removing “the fourth wall” that hid them from the intelligentsia’s view, writers like Flaubert and Zola fleshed out the hierarchical social taxonomies constructed by nineteenth century social thought, and rooted in environmental and genetic determinism. Zola’s preface to the second edition of his controversial novel, Thérèse Raquin, provides the most elaborate formulation of the Naturalist aesthetic in relation to its social postures:

Dans Thérèse Raquin, j’ai voulu étudier des tempéraments et non des caractères. Là est le livre entier. J’ai choisi des personnages souverainement dominés par leur nerfs et leur sang, dépourvus de libre arbitre, entrainés à chaque acte de leur vie par des brutes humaines, rien de plus. J’ai cherché à suivre pas à pas dans ces brutes le travail sourd des passions, les poussées de l’instinct, les détraquements cérébraux survenus à la suite d’une crise nerveuse. Les amours de mes deux héros sont le contentement d’un besoin; le meurtre qu’ils commettent est une conséquence qu’ils acceptent comme les loups acceptent l’assassinat des moutons . . . L’âme est parfaitement absente, j’en conviens aisément, puisque je l’ai voulu ainsi. (24)

Stripped of their “soul” and of all agency, Laurent and Thérèse are written in bestial terms. Thérèse is half-Algerian while Laurent is a good-for-nothing flâneur. Their illicit affair and the subsequent murder that they conspire to commit are the sheer product of brutal, unthinking instinct, naturalized in the novel as the universal condition of the inferior classes of French society. If nothing else, it is the author who “wills that it should be so.”

Taymur’s early fiction also constructed eccentric, sinister, even dangerous characters taken from amongst the deviant urban masses and presented as universal Egyptian “types.” In this early work, the institution of literary character and the politics of representation are molded by a fascinating conjuncture of Naturalist practice and nationalist ideology. In his later fiction of the forties and fifties, Taymur abandoned Naturalism, preferring the structure of the bildungsroman as a more appropriate vehicle for a properly bourgeois
realism. In both cases, “realism” emerges as a strategic articulation of specific yet very different social values and attitudes.

As an illustration of this claim, I will now take up a brief discussion of two novels by Mahmud Taymur: *Rajab Efendi* (1928) and *Salwa fi mahabb al-rih* (Salwa, Tossed by the Wind, 1947). Both novels focus on the fortunes of a central character and as such, both novels do what realist novels are supposed to do: that is, contextualize, describe, embellish and somehow “explain” a transformative moral dilemma that confronts the protagonist and leads to his or her downfall (or salvation) through a narrative process that imitates the movement of real time and temporal causality. Rajab Efendi falls prey to his mystical credulity and his morbid imagination, surrendering himself to the unscrupulous clutches of a snake-oil spiritualist, and finally murder and insanity. Salwa is a sensitive and brooding young orphan, raised by her grandfather and subsequently taken in by her estranged, courtesan mother upon the grandfather’s sudden death. Salwa’s domestic boredom and her girlish aspirations to love, wealth and social status (in addition to her mother’s cynical example) are what lead to her undoing: in this case, financial ruin, illegitimate pregnancy, her lover’s suicide and her own social exile. Both novels are narrated in real time, against the backdrop of real locations (pre-revolutionary Cairo) and incorporate detailed description of personal history, physical characteristics and interior landscapes (rooms, furnishings, dress, food, etc.). In this sense, they are both realist fictions. But the way in which this narrative realism is constructed and negotiated in both novels is nonetheless significantly different.

Salwa is a middle-class girl who lives in one of Cairo’s affluent modern suburbs and studies French and dancing. Her world is peopled with Pashas, professionals and domestics, motor-cars, nightclubs and cinemas. Rajab (who is also an orphan) is a middle-aged Azhari dropout who lives in the vicinity of al-Husayn and spends his days attempting to write a treatise on obscure medieval mystical tracts. His world is peopled by an assortment of louche and grubby characters: one-eyed beggars, decrepit shaykhs and shady vagrants.

*Salwa* is narrated in the first-person, taking the form of a confession. This narrative mode allows Taymur elaborately to construct her personality as an unfolding process of self-reflexion and moral hindsight. In other words, Salwa is constructed as a human interior. This interiority is negotiated through the intersection between human agency (i.e., free will, personal choice) and social mobility as a process of moral development. *Rajab* on the other hand is narrated in the third-person and more literally approaches the startling clinical sense of the dissection metaphor used by ‘Ubayd to describe the role of the fiction author. Rajab is constructed as an exterior, as a sign whose signified can only be deduced from his final and shocking fate, and not from the complex yet transparent web of subjective experience and reflection that Taymur develops in *Sahe’. Both characters and both stories are somehow intended to make sense within the specific context implied in the subtitle of *Rajab Efendi*—“an Egyptian story” (*qissah misriyyah*)—yet they do so in very different ways: ways that mirror the social tensions at the heart of the new narrative ideology. Taymur frames *Rajab Efendi* thus in his important preface to the novel: “Rajab Efendi is a contemporary Egyptian tale with a simple subject that is nonetheless frequently repeated in our daily life. I have tried to analyze the psychological state of a number of members of our middle and base classes (*al-tabaqat al-haqirah*), and to lift the veil from one aspect of their environment. The story is thus a page taken from our social and psychological existence” (1928, 3).

The attitude implicit in the term “the base classes” is representative not only of Taymur’s personal social prejudices vis-à-vis the Egyptian urban underclass and its culture, but of the social and ideology of an entire generation of writers and intellectuals who saw popular
culture and popular narrative as symptoms of the perversity and corruption of the Egyptian masses. This ambiguous attitude is refracted through Taymur’s construction of the popular psyche—in *Rajab Efendi* and many of his short stories—as a kind of a collective, lower class pathology that springs from a determinate social and genetic environment. Rajab does not choose his destiny, but is chosen by it. Unlike Salwa, whose first-person narrative produces the moral and psychological coherence and resolution of the *bildungsroman*, he is not endowed with the essential agency of an integrated and fully differentiated individual, and is thus fixed by his environment, unworthy of—or at least impervious to—self-knowledge and hence the possibility of salvation. This is what Badr means I believe, when he remarks on Taymur’s obsession with the “anomalous” or “eccentric” character in his early works (all members of the “base classes,” 252).

Rajab’s dark and inscrutable descent into madness and murder is explicitly associated in the novel with the sinister art of the popular tale. The dramatic turning point in Rajab’s obscure psychological crisis comes immediately after Shaykh ‘Abd al-Wahab al-Makki’s cryptic tale of the mystic and the black cat, a story whose narrative structure is markedly different from the clinical, descriptive and “realistic” technique used by the narrator of the novel itself. This story within a story is important because it juxtaposes and frames an example of “bad narrative” within “good narrative,” thereby pointing to the corrupting effects of the former on the unstable minds of the lower classes. The framed story structure was a pervasive and central convention in popular Arabic narrative—*The Thousand and One Nights* being the most famous example—and its absence in realist fiction is significant, pointing as it does to the social and narrative anxieties of writers bent on creating a new representational language.

The association made between popular narrative and social pathology is the soil out of which realism as a national literary ideology grew and flourished in the first few decades of twentieth century Egypt. As we have seen, it is based on the discursive opposition between truth and falsehood; reality and illusion, realism and deception. Both the early realists and later literary critics reproduced this opposition in their writing, and the lengthy and bitter debates on realism that emerged in the 1950s throughout the Arab world and that have continued to shape narrative, if not critical practice, in Egypt and elsewhere, have precisely attempted to engage and reconstruct this binarism in important political and literary ways.

In closing, I would like to refer to the preface that Taha Husayn wrote to Mahmud Taymur’s twelfth published collection of short stories, *Qala al-rawi* (“The Narrator Said”, 1942). In the spirit of *Rajab Efendi*, the collection represents a sort of human bestiary: many of the stories are studies of eccentric or shady lower class characters, both urban and rural, who fall victim to (or indeed, profit from) their single-minded ignorance, lust or greed. Husayn’s short essay, which takes the form of a letter to the author, is remarkable for its perception of the artifice embedded in realism as both a formal technique and an epistemological discourse. Husayn begins the letter by loftily admitting that he was hard-pressed to summon up sufficient interest in the volume when asked to read and review it by the publishers, being rather inclined to devote himself to more serious material about the Second World War (then raging) or books belonging to the classical (Arab and European) canon. “As for current publications in Arabic or other languages with which I am familiar, I am rarely able to find the time—or the inclination—to peruse them” (Taymur, 1942, d). Husayn goes on to praise the “enchantment” produced in the reader by the collection, in equivocal terms that develop and exploit the reality/deception discourse at the heart of the realist fiction:
You are not cunning, my friend, but, there is a great deal of cunning in your writing. Of all people, you excel in generosity, sincerity and honesty. But there is an element of hidden deception in your art that steals your reader’s vigilance and energy (not to mention his time). . . Your stories are an artistic staging (‘ard fanni) of a variety of subjects, impressions and opinions such that, when we are done reading them, we do not deem them mere tales but rather a wonderful and moving description of some aspect or condition of life, or of some particular Egyptian landscape, character or emotion. It seems possible that your art has so excelled in deception that it has managed to deceive even you yourself, for you imagine that you are narrating [a story] when instead, you are actually describing, criticizing, preaching or moralizing. (y-l)

Husayn describes the charm of Taymur’s fiction with a graceful condescension that leaves no doubt in the reader’s mind that he is nonetheless anxious to be allowed to return as quickly as possible to the pages of “Montaigne, Rabelais, Balzac, Flaubert . . . al-Aghani, al-Kamil, al-Jahiz and the diwans of the pre-Islamic and Islamic poets” (z). However, Husayn’s final and most unequivocal praise for the volume is based on its didactic potential, defined in purely representational terms, rather than thematic ones. “[These stories] contain valuable lessons for educated youth (shabab al-muta’allimin), from whence they may understand—without boredom or difficulty—how to see (kayfa yandhurun), how to think, and how to represent and express (kayfa yusawuirun wa yu’abbirun)” (m). Husayn here clearly understands the representational mechanics of the new fiction as, above all else, a strategic craft that involves a hierarchical and disciplinary relationship between a middle-class national elite, and the rest of society—particularly its “base” classes. It is this kind of understanding of the politics of representation within a particular social context that Arabic novel studies have neglected to take into account when describing and cataloguing the history of the genre. Taymur’s previously discussed pair of novels, written, twenty-odd years apart, have been read as an example of a “maturing” narrative practice in which writers become progressively adept at creating “realistic” or “living” characters according to some phenomenological ideal. I have argued that in fact, the formal realism of both novels—and indeed, of national fiction in general—influence character, time and place in markedly different narrative and discursive ways that are rooted in turn, in specific, finite and ultimately contingent social ideologies. It was not until the period of social and political upheaval of the second half of the twentieth century in the Arab world that the representational politics of narrative realism were interrogated and radically rearticulated by a new generation of social realist and neo-realist writers. The intensity of the passions aroused by this literary project and the institutional forces mobilized against it, testifies to the deeply political nature of the narrative craft.

Notes

1. Up until the late 1980s when interest in structuralism and Russian formalism was on the rise, Arabic novel-criticism and history were very much influenced by mid-twentieth century British novel studies. Percy Lubbock’s 1957 study of Henry James, The Craft of Fiction,—frequently cited by Egyptian critics and scholars—elaborated on the necessary link between the novel, the unique human experience and realist form. Even more influential was Ian Watt’s 1962 classic, The Rise of the Novel, which both rooted the genre in modern European—particularly English—intellectual and social history. Other often cited sources included Arnold Kettle’s An Introduction to the English novel (1951). E.M. Forster’s Aspects of the Novel (1927) and Henry James’ The Art of Fiction (1948).

2. The insistent question of the novel’s origins is not unique to the Arabic context. Many books have been devoted to the origins of the novel in Europe. In his excellent study of the origins of the English novel, Lennard Davis has distinguished between three main methodologies for determining “the threshold” of the novel genre in Europe—“evolutionary”, “osmotic” and “convergent”—which have useful implications for Arabic literary history. See Davis, 1996, 1–10.

3. Almost all of the standard European-language works on the Arabic novel take this position. See for example, Hilary Kilpatrick, The Modern Egyptian Novel: A study in social criticism, London: Ithaca Press, 1974 and
Moosa, *The Origins of Modern Arabic Fiction*. Moreover, even national (i.e. Arabic-language) novel studies have been, to a large extent, modelled on orientalist sources. H.A.R. Gibb and Carl Brockelman’s work on the modern period has been particularly influential and is often cited by Egypt’s main mid-century critics and literary historians.


5. It should be noted here that the iconoclastic social realist critics that emerged in the early 1950s (such as Mahmud Amin al-‘Alim in Egypt and Husayn Muruwwa in Lebanon) certainly did both question and elaborate on the representational politics of realism. However, they were mostly interested in the content of realist narrative rather than its semiotic and structural mechanisms.

6. Mahfouz is almost always constructed as the literary descendent of the great, nineteenth century European novelists on the dust jackets of translations—Balzac and Dickens being the two favourites—in spite of the fact that his oeuvre includes a large variety of non-realist works, particularly from the post-1967 period. Nonetheless, as Roger Allen has ruefully noted, western critics, publishers and booksellers usually single out the famous trilogy (al-thulathiyyah) for particular attention (208).


8. Jabir ‘Asfur notes that the early twentieth century novel, beginning with *Zaynab* and including works like Al-Mazini’s *Ibrahim al-Kattib*, Al-‘Aqqad’s *Sara* and Mahmud Tahir Lashin’s *Hauwa’* Bila Adam, was primarily preoccupied with the problems of love and marriage in the age of “the new woman,” and that the obsession with this controversial theme went hand in hand with the genre’s rebellion against the literary canon itself (111–113).


13. It is worth noting that many of the un-novelistic devices (“tricks and stratagems”) listed in the following passage—the intrusion of the third person narrator into the narrative, the non-contiguous positioning of locations and times, not to mention the insertion of poetry into the text—are all notable features of the canonical European novel since the eighteenth century. The paradox provoked by Badr’s critique of Zaynab Fawwaz further points to the unitary conceptualization of the novel genre in both orientalist and nationalist scholarship, based as it is on strict and superficial models informed by English and French realism in general, and the Bildungsroman in particular.


15. Mahmud Taymur describes popular fiction thus: “Non-artistic fiction shuns truth and reality, and the non-artistic author chooses the path of least resistance [in his writing], indifferent to all but the execution of his purpose. He is not guided by the natural movement of his characters’ lives but forces them to take the direction he chooses and delivers them to the ends that he has constructed, thereby creating an artificial and deceptive chain of cause and effect with a cheap skill and a temporary varnish . . . These non-artistic stories are a fertile grazing ground for uncultured audiences and greatly influence—albeit in a fleeting manner—the inferior classes of this audience in particular” (1948, 44–45).


17. Many of the twenty-nine volumes of short stories Taymur published in his lifetime included material previously published in journals and earlier collections. *Qala al-rawi* is mostly comprised of previously published stories, most of which were originally written between 1925 and 1930, and included in two other volumes, ‘Amm Mitwalli (1925) and *al-Hajj Shalabi* (1930).

18. One of these stories in particular—“Al-Hajj Shalabi” (the title story of Taymur’s fourth collection, published in 1930)—stands out for the masterful economy of its brutal portrayal of a violently polygamous local thug, thus offering an excellent case-study of the structural and semiotic relationship between “objective” narration (realism) and social ideology in national literature.

Works Cited


