Modern Arabic Fiction—an overview

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0. NB: Disclaimer

This contribution focuses on Egypt and the Levant since these were the ‘cradles’ of modern Arabic fiction and have generally been regarded, until the second half of the 20th century, as its centres. The way literatures developed in other regions of the Arab world, and the pace at which this took place, may differ considerably from what is described in the present article, although with its general traits the Egyptian-Levantine case may serve, mutatis mutandis and in many respects, as a paradigm for other regions as well. The extent to which this paradigm is applicable will vary according to the degree to which, and the time when, the respective country/region has gone through similar processes of modernization, ‘Westernization’, or ‘globalization’ in general. As a ‘rule of thumb’ it may be said that literature in the Gulf states has, until recently, remained less affected by ‘modernization’ along the Egyptian-Levantine lines and that ‘traditional’ literature, particularly also oral forms, have preserved a stronger position there. The course of Iraqi or Libyan literature was to a large degree determined by the long periods of repression under Ṣaddām Ḥusayn and al-Qadhīḥāfī. In the Maghreb, ‘modernization’ in fiction took place almost exclusively in Franco-phone writing before independence, and the French model has remained a constant point of reference ever since, be it as something to reject and replace, to learn from, to interact with, or to try to outvalor. For histories of some of these national literatures cf.


1. The Emergence of modern Arabic fiction during the nahda (2nd half of 19th c.)

Together with theatre, modern Arabic fiction emerged from the middle of the 19th c. C.E. onwards, accompanying and forming itself part of a process of virulent economic, political, social and cultural change. In order to recover from what was experienced as ‘decay’ (inḥiṭāṭ), to meet the challenges (and cope with the territorial losses) brought about by movements of
national independence in some provinces of the Ottoman Empire, and to catch up with the powerful and increasingly influential West, compared to which the Arab world (and the Middle East in general) felt lagging behind and inferior, esp. in terms of military and technological development, the region went through a period of deep and extensive reforms. First decreed by the Ottoman sultan (so-called tanzīmāt, i.e., ‘corrections, regulations’) and, in Egypt, by his ‘viceroy’, Muhammad ʿAlī (r. 1805-48), during the first half of the century, these reforms encompassed all important state sectors and aimed at replacing dated military, judicial, administrative and educational institutions with ‘modern’, up-to-date ones. In order to gather and implement the necessary know-how, study missions were sent to Europe, European advisors invited into the country, translations of (mostly scientific) publications and textbooks made into Arabic, new schools and colleges with modern-type curricula created (teaching al-ʿulūm al-ḥadīth, ‘the modern sciences’, and foreign languages instead of the traditional canon of Islamic learning), and printing facilities rapidly extended. Two consequences of the processes set into operation by the reform movement became decisive for the history of the modern Middle East and its literatures. First, a new social group, or class, emerged: the efendiyya, i.e., an educated elite who had studied in Europe, Western missionary schools already present in the region, or at schools of the new, largely secularized system and worked in modern-type, mostly state-run institutions (schools, courts, public service, etc.), later also in private (esp. printing) enterprises. Unlike the traditional, predominantly religious elite (ʿulumāʾ), the efendiyya/WOGs (‘Westernized Oriental gentlemen’)—typically they would wear a European redingote, or suit, and a Turkish fez, a ʿarbūs) perceived of themselves as ‘social engineers’ and of contemporary society as a ‘machinery’, a mechanical system (al-hayʾa al-iṭtimāʿīyya) that needed ‘repair’ and which they, as the ‘enlightened’ torchbearers of science- and rationality-based ‘progress’ (taqaddum), or the ‘doctors’ of the ‘ill patients’, actually were able to repair, or cure. Most writers of modern Arabic fiction belonged to this class of ‘intellectuals’ (muthaqqaf). Second, the new institutions were in most cases implemented parallel to the old ones (Qurʾānic schools, madāris, sharīʿa courts, etc.), a fact that created a situation of constant competition and opposition, if not open rivalry, among the representatives of the two groups, each trying to conquer and/or defend their place in society and the respective field. Literature/adab thus became a field of competition.

The vehicles used by the new elite to promote their ideas, launch their attacks against the traditionalists and thereby negotiate their place in a changing society were mainly theatre (since the late 1850s, first in Lebanon) and the private press (from the 1860/70s onwards), and it was in the course of battles between the old established genres and the new ‘anti-genres’ that the former concept of adab began to take on the modern meaning of ‘literature’ (while in turn fiction and theatre were, to a certain degree and until c. WW I, often endowed with the classical adab features of linguistically pleasing, entertaining, and at the same time useful distraction—i.e., the ancient Horatian ideal of prodesse et delectare—, but also of good morals and culture in general; cf. GUTH 2010 and 2011). The conservative and the modernist camps both counted on the emerging public sphere, the ‘people’, of their imagined ‘nations’ for support and as their addressee (as opposed to the ruling elites as the social referee of premodern refined ‘high’ culture) and accordingly sought to popularize knowledge and to spread ‘modern, enlightened’ ideas. In newspapers and periodicals, preferred genres besides the article (maqāla) and the epistle/treatise (risāla) that discussed current events and sought to familiarize the readership with all kinds of useful modern knowledge, were satire (bitingly deriding formalist tradition and ‘backwardness’) and fiction. All texts from this
period are characterized by the strong presence of a paternalistic author-narrator as the reader’s teacher and guide. Since literature should serve the function of enlightening and reforming society and help to build a modern ‘nation’ (→nationalism, waṭaniyya, qawmiyya), referentiality was key, i.e., literature had to refer to the world outside itself (as opposed to the self-reflexivity of highly rhetoricized literary language in traditional aesthetics). Until early 20th c., one group of intellectuals believed that indigenous genres, if only reformed and adapted to the needs of the day, were absolutely capable of serving modern purposes. In their eyes, the project of a nahda, the much longed-for “awakening” and “getting up”, the “rebirth” or “renaissance” from the perceived ‘decay’, could well be achieved by means of “revitalization” or “revivification” (īḥyāʾ) of tradition and exploiting the riches of the literary heritage (HALLAQ/TOELLE eds. 2007). In most cases, however, the heritage these ‘neo-classicists’ rediscovered, was not the same as the canon championed by the more conservative traditionalists. They therefore not only embarked on editing and publishing (with the hope of popularising) major works of classical adab (such as the →maqāmāt of →al-Hamadhānī, ed. by M. →ʻAbduh) as well as classical dictionaries and encyclopedias, but they also elevated ‘popular’ literature (until then almost exclusively transmitted orally and considered part of ‘low’ culture, not worthy of the educated elite’s attention) up to the ranks of ‘respectable’ written/printed texts (for this purpose, popular romances and epics often had to be ‘translated’ from the vernacular into literary →fuṣḥā; cf. →sīra; cf. also →Alf layla wa-layla). This kind of literature appeared more lively, less artificial to them than the ‘dead’ self-reflexivity of traditional aesthetics, unrelated as it seemed to reality, with its worn-out imagery and its indulgence in ‘beautiful’ meanings and sounds. Although the neo-classicists nevertheless upheld an often demanding style in their own writings (al-ʻAbdī 1801-73, al-Shidyāq 1804-87, Nāṣīf & Ibrāhīm al-Yāzījī 1800-71 resp. 1847-1906, Muhammad al-Muwayliḥī 1858-1930), in this way “attacking traditionalism by using the legitimating principles of the traditionalists to subvert it” (HAMARNEH 1998: 231b), the instrumentalization of fiction as a means of enlightening and reforming very often meant, or implied, deliberately sacrificing classical aesthetic ideals, elitist as they were, in favour of less embellished, but more entertaining and distracting narratives.

In doing so, they came closer to the other trend, which began to take over as the dominating one from neo-classicist tendencies by, roughly, the turn of the century, but had started to make itself felt much earlier in the bulk of translations and adaptations/indigenizations (PELED 1979, BARDENSTEIN 2005), mostly from French and English originals, as well as in the ‘social romances’ of Sallīm al-Bustānī (1846-84; since the 1870s), Nuʾmān ʻAbduh al-Qasāṭīlī (1854-1920), and others (cf. BADR ʻ1983, DOLININA 1973, GUTH 1999, HAFEZ 1993, MOOSA 1983). In contrast to the traditionalists and neo-classicists, this group of writers (often Christians) sought inspiration not from the classical heritage but, besides the above-mentioned ‘low’, popular tradition, mainly from Western models, dedicating much of their energy/activity to translating/adapting, but soon coming out with own creations too (the first Western-type narrative probably being Khalīl al-Khūrī’s [1836-1907] Way, idhan lastu bi-ifranjī! “Oh dear, so I am not a European then!”, of 1859/60), which found a broader readership from the 1890s onwards (at the latest) thanks to the historical novels of Jurjī Zaydān (1861-1914; KRACKOVSKIJ 1930, PERES 1957). Authors of this group neither claimed nor aspired any longer to produce ‘good’ or ‘beautiful’, i.e., linguistically demanding, artfully rhetoricized prose in line with classical norms; for them, as for the growing new secularized ‘bourgeois’ readership, practical usefulness, liveliness, and the discussion and
The emotionalist trend was strongest around WW I, especially with authors like Muṣṭafā Luṭfī al-Manfalūṭī (1876-1924) and Jubrān Khālīl Jubrān (also Kahlil Gibran, 1883-1931) whose generally contemplative narrators reflect the authors’ claim to possess superior, ‘philosophical’ knowledge about the world—Jubrān later even likened himself to a prophet (The Prophet, 1923)—and whose radically idealist ‘black and white’ moralism, combined with lachrymose sentimentalism, can be read as the expression of a wish to assert themselves (and the newly emerged bourgeoisie) as an important social player (implying, though not yet openly claiming, that they should be granted political agency as well); the ‘tragic’ defeat of their righteous, honest, innocent heroes at the hands of representatives of the ruling elites marks, on the one hand, the authors’ feeling of utter helplessness in the face of the persistence of the old order, be it the sultan’s ‘despotism’ or increased foreign domination/colonialism; on the other hand, it is a rebellious outcry and denouncement of the existing order as unjust and ultimately illegitimate (Naṭīj 1983, Guth 1997) and as such clearly a form of harsh social and political criticism. This type of writing owes the great popularity it enjoyed at the time also to a cultivated language that succeeded in employing elements from the ‘high’ registers of classical Arabic for the purpose of spiritualization and emotionalization.

The lamenting accusations of the powerless ‘philosopher-prophets’ were however paralleled, and gradually superseded, by a more dynamic trend when nationalism became the driving force of the educated elites and writers developed the idea of a “national literature” (adab qawmī). Gaining momentum by the 1910s—Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal’s (1888-1956) Zaynab (1913) is often regarded as the first ‘truly Egyptian’ novel—, the movement rejected earlier traditionalism and neo-classicism as dated and elitist as well as Manfalūṭian ‘romanticism’ as too idealistic and ‘passive’; instead they called for ‘realism’ (in the programmatic foreword to his collection of short stories, Ḥāsān Ḥānim, of 1921, Ḥāsā ‘Ubayd renders the term as madḥhab al-ḥaqāʾiq “the approach of the true facts”), a ‘modern’ literature that would be “based on observation (mulāḥaẓa) and psychological analysis in order to portray life as it is, without exaggeration or curtailments” (ibid.). Unlike translated fiction, which flooded the market but whose plots were essentially alien to Arab environments, national literature should be set in a local ambiente, portray ‘typical’ characters and the ‘national personality’, and address pressing issues of contemporary society, all this in a non-elitist, functional style that should not refrain from ‘naming names’ and using ‘ugly’ words, should these be to the point, for evils that needed to be abolished. The authenticity of the contents, combined with mod-
ern, if need be complex, narrative technique would, it was believed, eventually ensure global recognition, if not acceptance into the circle of the world’s most cultured nations. It was mainly in the short story genre that writers from the “Modern School” (al-Madrasa al-Ḥadīthah) like the brothers Taymūr (Muḥammad 1891/2-1921, Maḥmūd 1894-1973), Maḥmūd Ṭāhir Lāshīn (1894-1954) or Yalḥāyā Ḥaqqī (1905-92) tried to translate their program into concrete pieces of literature. According to Hafez, it was Lāshīn who brought the new narrative discourse to the point of “maturation” (1993: 215 ff.).

3. Later ‘National Literature’ (Interwar period)

When the novel followed, the initial enthusiastic optimism of the adab qawmī pioneers was however only rarely to be found any more—the still self-confident, albeit sober belief of a Tāhā Ḥusayn (1889-1973) that his country belonged to a Mediterranean civilization rather than to the Arab-Islamic world and, in his novel-autobiography al-Ayyām (i: 1929; ii: 1939; iii: 1973), that progress indeed was feasible, stands out almost as an exception at the time. In most other cases, like that of Ibrāhīm ʿAbdalqādir al-Māzīnī (1889-1949), ʿAbbās Maḥmūd al-ʿAqqād (1889-1964), or Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm (1898-1987), it is evident from their sad surrendering to the facts, the sullen grimness of their ideological determination, or, as the case may be, the strained insistence on taking pleasure in suffering as a national trait (al-Ḥakīm, in ʿAwdat al-rūḥ, 1934), that the new secular educated urban middle-classes’ noble, yet all too unrealistic idealism has gone through a period of bitter disappointment: the gap between them and ‘the people’ had become evident and by the time appeared almost unbreachable, all hopes that the masses, particularly those in the underdeveloped countryside, would readily accept the urban effendis’ guidance and, thanks to their leadership, soon develop into a modern ‘progressive’ society, had proven to be vain. Consequently, a number of writers gave up writing or withdrew into their ‘ivory tower’ (cf. the title of P. Starkey’s 1987 study on al-Ḥakīm). This gap, which had arisen in Arab societies during the nahḍa due to the creation of the ‘tradition vs. modernity’ divide, would continue to inform, and often haunt, modern Arabic fiction ever since (cf. Selim 2004). Exacerbated in the interwar and WW II period due to increased industrialization and the massive influx of labour migrants from the rural areas into the cities, the predicament often took shape in the novels in form of ‘(progressive enlightened) individual vs. (backward ignorant) society’ or ‘city vs. countryside’ clashes. In a period of ideological radicalization, when also communism, socialism, fascism and the Muslim Brotherhood formed, the narratives tended to explain the world and the difficulties arising from the modernization project and their own role in it, in terms of ideological dualisms such as ‘materialism of the West vs. spiritualism of the East’. These also served to make sense of very personal failures, e.g., the unsuccessful attempt of an Arab writer to establish a relationship with a Western woman—the conflicts were often both culturalized and gendered.

4. Social(ist) Realism and ‘Neo-Romanticism’

Where disillusionment was not diverted into ideology it fostered in the authors a rediscovery of the essentials of what the advocates of ‘national literature’ had called for: realism. The new realist trend was to dominate the scene until the 1960s and came to be identified to a large degree with the early works of one of its major proponents: Najīb Maḥfūẓ (also Naguib Mah-
fouz, 1911-2006). Like the previous generation, the new realists too believed that literature should mirror reality as it was, unvarnished, in order to help advance progress. For them, however, ‘reality’ was not only a national but predominantly a social issue. The community that the adab qawmī group had been so eager to help create by representing and imagining it in literature, this ‘nation’ now existed. But it was still far from what it should look like. Far-fetched idealisms having proven to be as useless as desperate passivity, it was the task of a writer now to hold up the mirror to this nation and practice social criticism. (Note that ‘realism’ now mostly was rendered as wāqi‘īyya rather than as madhhab al-haqā‘iq, i.e., the new realists replaced the sublime idealism inherent, in spite of all, in the adab qawmī pioneers’ quest for “truths”, with an orientation on al-wāqi‘; i.e., on what actually was ‘the case’—cf. the etymologies of wāqi‘ < ʿāwq ‘to fall; to happen’ and English case < Lat. cadere ‘to fall; to happen’). Many authors were influenced by the idea, advocated by the French existentialists, particularly Sartre, of a writer being responsible to society and of commitment in literature being imperative (the French term littérature engagée was rendered as adab multazim in Arabic, cf. KLEMM 1998). Compared to the experimental miniatures of adab qawmī, the view now widened to include more complex panoramas, for instance, the ‘lifeworld’ of a whole urban neighbourhood or a village society; accordingly, the longer genres (novellas, novels) were favoured more than before, besides the still popular short stories. In the novels, the focus was less on the author-narrator’s own problems (as was the case with the pioneers) but on what society as a whole was suffering from, e.g., the feudal system, continued foreign domination, widespread corruption and social inequality, the position of women, the ideological confusion of the youth, the world war and its aftermath, etc. First-person narratives became rarer, giving way to third-person ones in which the author’s presence still could be felt, but had receded into the sporadic comments of an otherwise silent, ‘objective’ observer who tended to withdraw behind his characters (dialogues, free indirect speech) and remain outside the events. In some cases (as, e.g., ʿAbd al-Ḥa珉ān al-Sharqāwī, 1920-87), social realism combined with leftist ideology to produce a ‘socialist realism’ that was less reluctant than a Mahfūẓ, Yūsuf Ḥdīrīṣ (1927-91), Yūsuf al-Shārūnī (1924-), Fathī Ghānim (1924-99) or Ghassān Kanafānī (1936-72) to more or less directly suggest solutions to the problems of the post-WW II and early Nasser era. Many women writers raised their voice against the patriarchal social order (Laylā Baʿalbākī 1934-, Latīfa al-Zayyāt 1923-96; cf. HAFEZ 1995, ZEIDAN 1995). Since literary criticism from Nasser onwards was phased with the regime, non-‘progressive’ tendencies such as the so-called neo-Romanticism of authors like Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Ḥa珉ī ʿAbdallāh (1913-70; on him cf. GUTH 1987), Yūsuf al-Sibāʿī (1917-78; on him cf. RAMSAY 1996), or Iḥsān ʿAbd al-Quddūs (1919-90) were largely neglected as ‘escapist’ although they enjoyed great popularity and although they too, despite undeniable sentimental traits in their writing, generally followed a realist agenda, not seldom taking up topics from the taboo-loaden triad sex, religion, and politics (STAGH 1993) in a daring manner that sometimes even provoked scandals.

5. Between Realism and Postrealism

During the first years of his reign, Nasser had managed to give the Arab world back much of the hopes it had lost during the interwar and post-WW II period, which latter had seen the defeat of the Arab armies and the erection of the state of Israel in 1948. The ʿrayyis scored a tactical victory in the Suez crisis and was able to nationalize the Suez Canal; for the first time,
true sovereignty was achieved after the expulsion of foreigners and the last British troops; the king was sent to exile, the old feudal system abolished, lands redistributed, lost pride regained through the adoption of a leading role in the Third World movement, Arab nationalism saw a new heyday; giant public housing projects were initiated, free education granted, food and books made affordable to the masses, jobs guaranteed and industrialization rapidly advanced. It did not take long, however, until the regime had to face critique, mainly from religious groups because of its secularism, but also from the idealist leftist wing (to which quite a number of writers belonged). Doubts began to creep in. The modernization project was already called into question in Maḥfūẓ’s Avlād hārīmā (The Children of Our Alley, 1959): Wasn’t the envisaged science-based progress leading to the death of God? al-Ṭayyib Šāliḥ’s (1929-2009) Mawsim al-hijra ilā ‘l-shamāl (Season of Migration to the North, first published 1966) came as a powerful, strikingly clear-sighted damper on early post-independence optimism and any naive belief in the possibility of catapulting a largely backward society into modernity and of being able to quickly overcome the traumas inflicted on Arab societies by colonialism. Moreover, novels like ‘Abd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim’s (1934-90) Ayyām al-insān al-sab‘ā (The Seven Days of Man, 1969) staged processes of emancipation from dominant patriarchal figures, a major topic especially after the Arab defeat in the June war of 1967 (cf. NAGUIB 1989). While during Nasser’s lifetime open critique would soon be silenced by sending those who voiced it to prison, the post-Nasser years saw the publication of novels like Gamāl al-Ǧiṭānī’s (1945-) al-Zaynī Barakāt (1974) with its uncompromisingly detailed analysis of the regime’s despotism and the horrors of a repressive surveillance state.

6. The Postmodern Turn

With the defeat of 1967, the big bubble of Nasser’s propagandist rhetorics burst with a sudden bang. A disturbing testimony of the paralysing effect the “naksā” (setback, debacle) left on Arab writers is Maḥfūẓ’s story Taḥt al-miẓalla (Under the Bus Shelter), written shortly after the events: the world was no longer comprehensible, chaos and absurdity ruled, nobody and nothing could be trusted any more, even the ‘reality’ that you observing with your own eyes could be fabricated, fiction, a lie. Still new fuel was added to the shock of the June war when only a few years later civil war broke out in Lebanon and when, in 1981, the Israeli invasion caused a total breakdown of all hopes whatsoever. In literature, these experiences triggered what came to be referred to as a ‘new sensibility’ (KHARRĀṬ 1993) and in its essence parallels the global turn to postmodernism (NEUWIRTH/PFLITSCH/WINCKLER eds. 2010), although the literary devices used in Arabic fiction often are reminiscent of experimental ‘modernist’ techniques in western literatures (BALLAS 1978, MEYER 2001). Where the belief in the “knowability” and “representability” of reality (HARMARNEH 1998) had, in spite of all, remained intact (or, as with Maḥfūẓ, was restored after the first shock), the sub-trend termed “neo-realist” by al-Kharrāṭ described and analyzed its object of observation with still greater, uncompromising scrutiny and attention to minute details than earlier realism had done. For many, however, the “naksā” and the Lebanese war questioned the very fundamentals of mimetic realism since it was built on the same premises as the modernization project with its patriarchal, ultimately authoritarian subject-object discourse that considered man as capable of (re-)shaping, (re-)creating, (re-)forming, (re-)presenting ‘reality’—an assumption both events had proven to be fatally erroneous. Literature then had to be put on a new basis. In their search for new be-
ginnings and different, hitherto neglected dimensions of reality, the literary avant-garde, often also called the ‘generation of the sixties’, who gathered round magazines like Gālīrī 68 (Gallery 68; cf. KENDALL 2006, STEHLI-WERBECK 2011) and closely followed the anti-patriarchal student uprisings in the West, explored a number of alternative approaches. Some, like al-Ghīṭānī or Imīl (Emile) Ḥabībī (1922-96), rediscovered the premodern (i.e., pre-19th century) Arabic literary heritage as a pool that held in store ‘authentic’ ways of writing with which to counter the devastating impacts of modernity, not only the legacy of the Nasser era, incl. the absurdities of Palestinian life after 1967 or the cruelties of the civil war, but particularly also those of the period of economic liberalization and the politics, initiated (in Egypt) by Nasser’s successor, Anwar al-Sādāt (president from 1970 until his assassination in 1981), of opening towards the West, the global markets and foreign investors (al-infiṭāḥ al-iqtīṣādī), a change in tack that soon also brought a radical upheaval of the social order (‘bread riots’, January 1977).

Keeping the past present as a contrastive foil here performed the twofold task of (textually) arresting the ubiquitous decay and loss of identity by a revival and retention of tradition and, while in principle re-affirming the heritage, also adjusting it to the new realities, the contrast between old form elements and contemporary contents provoking the reader through its internal tensions (GUTH 2010). Contrast (muḥāraqa) as a means to incite in the recipients an active questioning of the realities presented by fiction and in this way transferring interpretative authority, or sovereignty, from the writer to the reader (and thereby, hopefully, make literature itself less ‘authoritarian’, more ‘democratic’), was also the main structural principle of another sub-current of New Sensibility, al-Kharrāt’s “external-oriented, things-in-themselves mode of writing”. The world here (seemingly) had no affect on the narrator, was perceived by him/her as something alien, a world in which human action was determined by the physical surroundings (cf. the French nouveau roman and its theme of chosification “objectification”). The objective of this contrastive technique was to produce an alienation effect that would “disclose the stupefying reality in all its aspects and indicate the source of resentment and frustration”, of “impotency and estrangement” (ABUL-ENNEIN 1984: 373-4) and in this way indirectly point to the “inverted, [...] passionate, completely suppressed love for life” (KHARRAT 1991: 190) that in this sub-current was concealed behind the markedly nonchalant and seemingly detached writing style. In contrast, the same love for life was expressed in the “inner-vision” current by means of a description, again in overwhelming breadth, of the repercussions the absurd, unbearable world inside the subject. Here individuals were grasped as “an ever-moving mass of sensations and notions” (KHARRAT, ibid.), the subtlest emotions stirred inside were traced, and for this reason the hitherto represented reality became now interpolated with that of dreams, nightmares, fantasies, and augmented with ‘surrealistic’ images (cf. also the frequent use of interior monologue). The focus on the internal reality of the subject also implied a departure from the traditional concept of time and space, chronological and topographical fragmentation becoming an often employed means to express the divide between subject and objective reality. As in the external-oriented trend, authors here too remained almost invisible, refrained from commenting on the inner realities they presented, and left it to the reader to draw his/her own conclusions and read the ‘material’—the crisis of an “alienated self caught in the labyrinth of his own hallucinations and delusions” (KASSEM/HASHEM eds. 1985: 11)—as refractions of the social or political realities outside (GUTH 2011: 97-8). Significantly, most protagonists of the time were anti-heroes rather than actors in life, and sexual impotence a recurrent motif, prison narratives taking on also a metaphorical, existential dimension.
The military defeat of 1967, the Lebanese civil war, the collapse of the old social order, the breakdown of ideologies and corresponding hopes, the loss of cultural identity due to increasing Westernization as a result of globalization, the persistence of corrupt and repressive oligarchic regimes—these and many other factors were the background of the parables of existential alienation (King 1978), of loneliness and forlornness in modern societies, of the narratives of ‘destroyed homes’, rejected coherence and ontological confusion that were characteristic of the literary production of the 1970s and 1980s. Yet, the shock and changing realities did not only produce images of catastrophe, destruction, fragmentation, dissolution, desintegration...and open questions.

With time granting a breather and allowing writers to rethink the situation, and with also a younger generation moving up, the depressing facts could, without losing their essentially traumatic traits, simultaneously be turned into a dynamic potential. Thus, fragmentation and existential unsecurity remained important topics (Hafez 2001 and 2010), while also some ‘treasures’ could be detected from among the ‘ruins’ (Guth 2007) in that the destruction of ideologies opened the way for critical deconstruction as well as careful attempts at reconstruction. The revision of language, for instance—a highly ideology-loaden issue until then (→fiṣḥā) that had also played a key role in the fabrication of the regimes’ lies—brought the discovery of many hitherto neglected idioms (dialects, vernacular, sociolects, classical language) that could, and should, be allowed to form part of new literary discourses. The reality-fiction confusion was not necessarily something diabolic but could as well be turned into metafictional plays, both enlightening and entertaining, that sounded the power of the author-creator or highlighted the consequences of a ruler’s control over the media. A self found to be fragmented or ‘adulterate’ had not to be the source exclusively of alienation, fear, or panic, but could instead be experienced as even more authentic, ‘truer’ and much richer than an ideologically precast uniform identity. The breakdown of traditional chronology and topology would not automatically destroy a narrative, it might also liberate it and allow for a “polygamy” of time and place (Neuwirth/Pflitsch/Winkler eds. 2010: 233 ff.) that could be realized not only structurally but also with regard to content: it was possible to be ‘at home’ at once in several places (life in exile and/or the diaspora of Arab communities outside the Arab world fostered this trait) and in several times (remembered history and the cultural heritage forming part of one’s identity). The current subjects and established genres of literature too were deconstructed as forming part of hegemonic discourses, which opened for hitherto marginalized groups to enter the narratives, for regions other than the previously dominating Egypt and Levant to emancipate and gain a certain position in the market, and for genre as well as “gender transgressions” (ibid.: 361 ff.). With regard to subject, the postmodern turn sparked off an unprecedented variety of possible topics, be it from the past and/or history, from the world of mystics, or the mysterious and exotic, but also from everyday life and that of sub-cultures, from popular practices to lived biculturalism, and from the Gulf states and the Libyan desert to Paris, London or Buenos Aires. In terms of form, fictional prose got enriched by elements from historical novels, memoirs, crime narratives, pornographic and other ‘light’, entertaining genres as well as traditional popular storytelling, but also from lyrics (Behzadi 1996) and other experimental forms (Taha 2000). Genre transgressions were often paralleled by a play with normative established gender roles.
7. Towards new horizons

The shift from the depressive, desperate mood to more positive ‘messages’ could be observed particularly during the 1990s and early 2000s—often, significantly, in writings from outside the Arab world, particularly the European diaspora (cf. Guth et al. eds. 2008). These voices insisted, despite completely adverse conditions at home, and deliberately ignoring the many taboos and dangers, on the Arab individual’s right to get his/her ‘share in life and happiness’; against all kinds of political repression and suffocating social or cultural norms, they articulated a powerful longing for freedom and demonstrated the possibility, and necessity, to affirm oneself as a human being by means of speaking out, expressing desires and live out pleasures. This trend was continued after the turn of the millennium, profiting more and more also from the new freedoms provided by modern information and communication technology and the corresponding difficulty, for the regimes, to control opposition and to operate censorship. A new ‘state of aggregation’ was reached when texts like ‘Alī’ al-Aswāní’s Ḥumārāt Ya’qūbiyān (The Yacoubian Building, 2002) or Rajā’ ‘Abdallāh al-Ṣānī’ī’s Banāt al-Riyāḍ (The Girls of Riyadh, 2005), which neither bothered about taboos nor expectations in a sophisticated literary style any longer, became best-sellers (Rooke 2010) and in this way helped to spread new attitudes and values, and when, in 2007, The International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF) was launched “with an intention to address the limited international availability of high-quality Arab fiction” (from the website, <www.arabicfiction.org>, as of Sep. 03, 2012), in this way circumventing the restrictions literature still had to cope with in individual Arab countries.

It is perhaps too early—still less than two years after the ‘Arab Spring’—to attempt a general statement about how the political and social changes initiated by the uprisings will reflect in modern Arabic fiction. In any case, the period immediately preceding the events made clear that a share in life and happiness from now on, and once and for all, was considered to be a general human right—in some texts it was even realized as a call of Nature (Guth 2009). Until then, individuals had been denied this legitimate share by what was shown to be a whole system (of traditional patriarchal norms, of gender discrimination, state control and repression, etc.) and the taboos it erected against the violation of its norms. In most texts the clash between the two forces resulted in a high number of casualties. But it was demonstrated also, for a very few of them, that individual happiness and a kind of ‘New Humanism’ were achievable—on the condition, however, of a courageous rupture with the system (significantly, many protagonists were ‘dropouts’ who had left traditional society behind). The texts ended with imagining new beginnings in form of small ‘cells of pure humanity’, without however becoming explicit about the nature of this ‘new humanism’. The years to come will certainly make that clearer. The developments may be inspired and/or enhanced by what is currently happening on the Internet. The most popular genres so far—novel and short story—may soon be supplemented by new ones that authors presently are experimenting with in digital media (internet blogs, forums, etc.), genres that may incorporate audio and visual elements. While much of the literature published online does not differ fundamentally from ‘conventional’ (offline, printed) literature, many texts are different, and many a critic still hesitates to call these ‘literature’. The texts in question are characterized by an even more daring approach to social, political, or religious taboos—enjoying anonymity, their authors do not care any more—and their use of Arabic vernaculars for writing demonstrates a readiness to break with the linguistic and aesthetical norms not only of a time-honoured but also a ‘sacred’ literary language. Speaking out, a certain playfulness, and an oscillation between fact and fiction are some other characteristics, besides their moral and aesthetic nonchalance.
8. Modern Arabic fiction and Islam

Due to its close association with, and its being intrinsically tied to, the overall modernization project, modern Arabic fiction is, by and large, characterized by a “faintness of Islamic inspiration” (CACHIA 1990: chapter titled “In a glass darkly...”). The group of secular nation-builders to which most of the writers belonged tended to experience Islamic religion as part of the bulk of old traditions that needed reform; rather than becoming a source of inspiration, it was often seen as a problem. However, given the fact that Islamic practices always have informed everyday life in the Arab world and that authors of modern Arabic fiction always have seen themselves both as “writers and scribes” (JACQUEMOND 2003/2008, GUTH et al. eds. 1999) whose duty it is to register and archive ‘reality’, Islamic realities have, as a matter of course, always (re-)appeared in fiction too, be it as topics in their own right (e.g., the power of religious leaders, problems of gender segregation and the relation between the sexes in general, Islamist tendencies, etc.); be it as part of the local colour that the adherents of ‘national literature’ regarded as a necessary ingredient of the kind of literature they wanted to create; be it in its philosophical or cultural historical aspects; be it as a natural element of the settings described (AL-MUSAWI 2009). It was however not before the postmodernist turn that writers like al-Ghīṭānī (see above), in search of authenticity in style, recurred to the classical heritage, and among it to Islamic texts, as a source of inspiration with regard also to literary form and that, on the other hand, Islamist movements discovered fiction as a useful vehicle for edification and conveying religious messages and therefore developed theories of a specifically Islamic literature (adab islāmī; cf. SZYSKA 1996, GUTH 2006). Besides that, however, major topics of modern Arabic fiction have been identified (STAGH 1996, FÄHNDRICH 1999) as: the West and East-West relations, including colonialism and/or cultural domination (framing questions of moral values, authenticity, and cultural identity) (WIELANDT 1980, EL-ENANY 2008, HALLAQ et al. eds. 2006); the roles and status of women as well as male/female relationships in general (including the large complex of love and sexuality, gender segregation, marriage) (ALLEN et al. eds. 1995); individual and/versus society (including alienation and estrangement, problems of self-finding and self-expression) (OSTLE ed. 2008, OSTLE et al. eds. 1998, ROOKE 1997); Palestine, the Palestinian question, war (June war 1967, October war 1973, civil war in Lebanon) (STEHLI 1988, COOKE 1988); the discussion of current problems in society has also often been framed by a discussion of the political system (as far as censorship allowed for that), a topic implicitly or explicitly raised also in a number of prison narratives. It goes without saying that the topics just mentioned are only a few axes around which modern Arabic fiction tended to revolve in the past; the spectrum of subjects covered by individual texts and of contemporary issues commented on in fictional ‘disguise’ is of course as rich as life in the modern Arab world itself.

References


