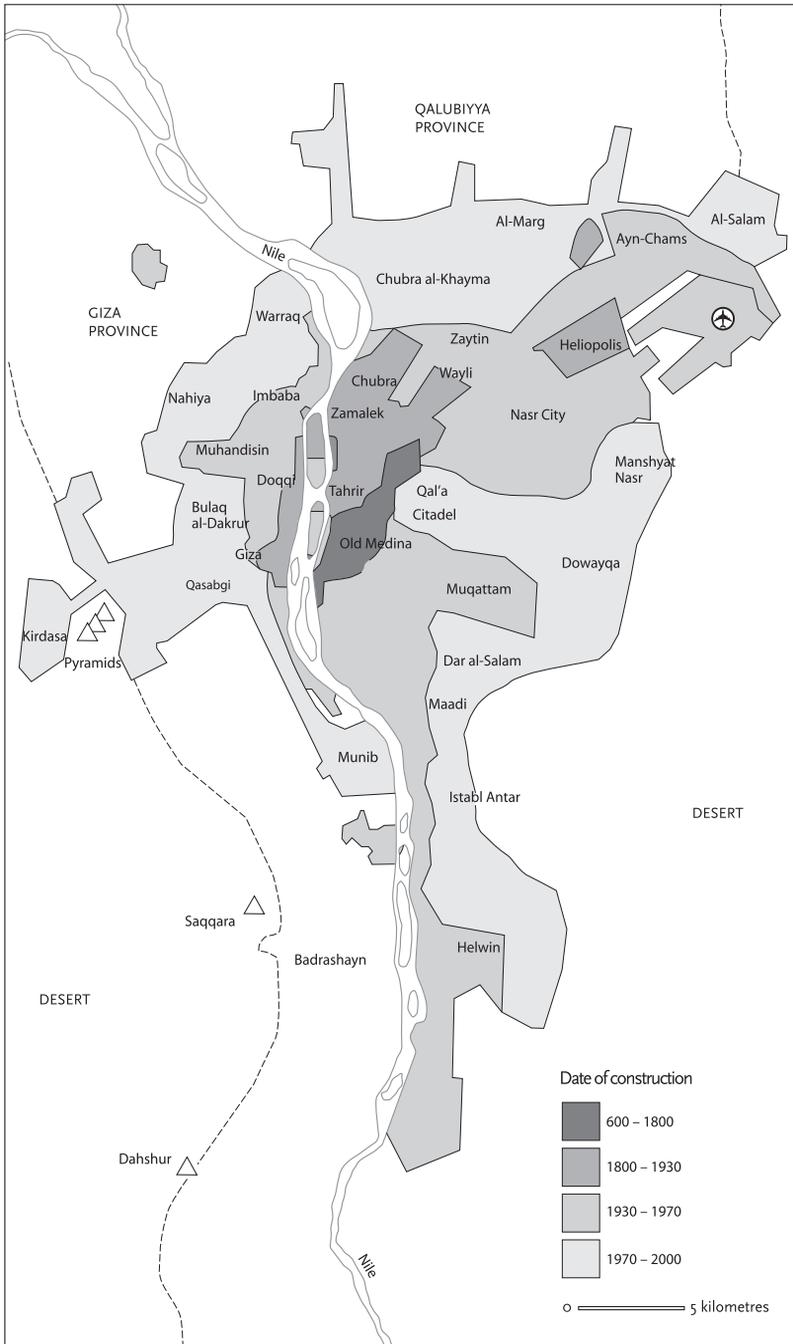


Map of Greater Cairo



THE NEW EGYPTIAN NOVEL

Urban Transformation and Narrative Form

ONCE THE CULTURAL and political beacon of the Arab world, Cairo is now close to becoming the region's social sump. The population of this megalopolis has swollen to an estimated 17 million, more than half of whom live in the sprawling self-built neighbourhoods and shantytowns that ring the ancient heart of the city and its colonial-era quarters. Since the late 1970s, the regime's liberalization policy—*infitah*, or 'open door'—combined with the collapse of the developmentalist model, a deepening agrarian crisis and accelerated rural-urban migration, have produced vast new zones of what the French call 'mushroom city'. The Arabic term for them *al-madun al-'ashwa'iyyah* might be rendered 'haphazard city'; the root means 'chance'. These zones developed after the state had abandoned its role as provider of affordable social housing, leaving the field to the private sector, which concentrated on building middle and upper-middle-class accommodation, yielding higher returns. The poor took the matter into their own hands and, as the saying goes, they did it poorly.

Sixty per cent of Egypt's urban expansion over the last thirty years has consisted of 'haphazard dwellings'. These districts can lack the most basic services, including running water and sewage. Their streets are not wide enough for ambulances or fire engines to enter; in places they are even narrower than the alleyways of the ancient *medina*. The random juxtaposition of buildings has produced a proliferation of cul-de-sacs, while the lack of planning and shortage of land have ensured a complete absence of green spaces or squares. The population density in these areas is extreme, even by slum standards. The over-crowding—seven people per room in some neighbourhoods—has resulted in the collapse

of normal social boundaries. With whole families sharing a single room, incest has become widespread. Previously eradicated diseases such as tuberculosis and smallpox are now epidemic.¹

The generation that has come of age since 1990 has faced a triple crisis: socio-economic, cultural and political. Egypt's population has nearly doubled since 1980, reaching 81 million in 2008, yet there has been no commensurate increase in social spending. Illiteracy rates have risen, with schools starved of funds. In the overcrowded universities, underpaid teaching staff augment their income by extorting funds from students for better marks. Other public services—health, social security, infrastructure and transportation—have fared no better. The plundering of the public sector by the kleptocratic political establishment and its cronies has produced a distorted, dinosaur-shaped social structure: a tiny head—the super-rich—presiding over an ever-growing body of poverty and discontent. At the same time, youth unemployment has been running at over 75 per cent.

The cultural realm, meanwhile, has become an arena for bigoted grandstanding, prey to both official censors—the long-serving Minister of Culture, Farouk Husni, showing the way—and self-appointed ones, in parliament and the broadsheet press.² In the political sphere, the Emergency Law, in place since 1981, has been punctiliously renewed by an almost comically corrupt National Assembly. The notorious Egyptian prison system has been made available to US, British and other European nationals subject to 'extraordinary rendition'. Since Sadat's unilateral agreement with Israel in 1979 a widening gulf has grown between popular sentiment and the collusion of the political establishment with the worst US–Israeli atrocities in the region, and its *de facto* support for their successive

¹ Some 600,000 people are crammed into 2 square kilometres in the Munira quarter of Giza; over 900,000 live in 3 square kilometres in western Giza's Bulaq al-Dakrur and Shurbaji districts—an average of 3 square metres per person; the acceptable norm is 30 square metres. See the seminal study by Abu-Zaid Rajih, 'Al-Insan wa-l-Makan: al-Qahirah Namudhaja' [Man and Space: A Study of Cairo], in *Misr: Nazarāt Nahwa al-Mustaqbal* [Egypt: Future Perspectives], ed. Shukri Muhammad 'Ayyad, Cairo 1999, p. 123. See also André Raymond, *Cairo*, trans. Willard Wood, Cambridge, MA 2000; and Jalila al-Kadi, *L'urbanisation spontanée au Caire*, Tours 1987.

² See Hafez, 'The Novel, Politics and Islam: Haydar Haydar's *Banquet for Seaweed*', NLR 5, Sept–Oct 2000.

wars: invasions of Lebanon, Desert Storm, occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq. Egypt's marginalization as a regional power has only increased the younger generation's sense of despondency and humiliation.

It is within this unpropitious context that a striking new wave of young Egyptian writers has appeared. Their work constitutes a radical departure from established norms and offers a series of sharp insights into Arab culture and society. Formally, the texts are marked by an intense self-questioning, and by a narrative and linguistic fragmentation that serves to reflect an irrational, duplicitous reality, in which everything has been debased. The works are short, rarely more than 150 pages, and tend to focus on isolated individuals, in place of the generation-spanning sagas that characterized the realist Egyptian novel. Their narratives are imbued with a sense of crisis, though the world they depict is often treated with derision. The protagonists are trapped in the present, powerless to effect any change. Principal exponents of the new wave would include Samir Gharib 'Ali, Mahmud Hamid, Wa'il Rajab, Ahmad Gharib, Muntasir al-Qaffash, Atif Sulayman, May al-Tilmisani, Yasser Shaaban, Mustafa Zikri and Nura Amin; but well over a hundred novels of this type have been published to date. From their first appearance around 1995, these writers have been dubbed 'the 1990s generation'.

The Egyptian literary establishment has been virtually unanimous in condemning these works. Led by the influential Cairo newspaper *Al-Akhbar* and its weekly book supplement *Akhbar al-Adab*, its leading lights conducted a sustained campaign against the new writers for a number of years. *Ibda'*, the major literary monthly, initially refused to publish their work. The young writers were accused of poor education, nihilism, loss of direction, lack of interest in public issues and obsessive concentration on the body; of stylistic poverty, weak grammar, inadequate narrative skills and sheer incomprehensibility. Yet there has been little detailed critical scrutiny of this body of work and the new directions it suggests for contemporary Arabic literature; nor sustained attempts to relate it to the broader social and political context from which it has emerged.³

³ Honourable exceptions published in English include Samia Mehrez, *Egypt's Culture Wars: Politics and Practice*, London 2008; and Richard Jacquemond, 'The Shifting Limits of the Sayable in Egyptian Fiction', *MIT Online Journal of Middle East Studies*. See also Jacquemond's *Conscience of the Nation: Writers, State and Society in Modern Egypt*, Cairo 2008.

In what follows I will attempt to illustrate both the range and the commonalities of the new Egyptian novel. It has been argued that this work should be understood outside the limits of genre classification, in terms of a free-floating trans-generic textual space.⁴ Instead, I will suggest that these new novels do indeed share a set of distinct narrative characteristics; these involve both a rupture with earlier realist and modernist forms, and a transformation of the rules of reference by which the text relates to the extrinsic world. I will suggest that, whatever their actual settings, these works share demonstrable formal homologies with the sprawling slums of Cairo itself.⁵

A new genre?

The arrival of this new wave in Egyptian fiction was signalled in 1995 by the publication of a seminal collection of short stories, *Khutut 'al Dawa'ir* [Lines on Circles], from the small independent publishing house, Dar Sharqiyyat, under the direction of Husni Sulayman.⁶ The stories, by Wa'il Rajab, Ahmad Faruq, Haytham al-Wirdani and others, shared an affectless style, much closer to spoken than to written Arabic; and a turn away from 'great issues' to focus on the everyday, the inconsequential. This was followed in 1996 by Samir Gharib 'Ali's first novel *Al-Saqqar* [The Hawker].⁷ Its young anti-hero is Yahya, about to be made redundant as the state-owned factory where he is desultorily employed comes under the hammer of privatization. The backdrop is Egypt's participation in the first Gulf War, and themes of prostitution recur throughout. Yahya's main preoccupation is his insatiable sexual appetite, though his

⁴ This was the approach advocated by Edwar al-Kharrat, who coined the term, *al-kitaba 'abr al-naw'iyya*, or trans-generic writing, in an attempt to free discussion of this body of work from the conventions of narrative criticism.

⁵ I would argue that this new narrative form is a trans-Arab phenomenon; examples can also be found in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Tunisia and Morocco. This study will confine itself to Egypt, in order to provide a detailed picture of the socio-cultural context within which this genre has emerged, and to demonstrate the homologies between the two. To do so for the whole Arab world would be beyond the scope of this essay, but it is to be hoped that a limited case study may nevertheless be able to shed light on what is taking place across the region.

⁶ Other significant sites for the new writing have been the publishing house Dar Merit, founded in 1998 by Muhammad Hashim, and the underground review *Al-Kitaba al-Ukhra* [Other Writing], published between 1991 and 2001 by the poet Hisham Qishta.

⁷ Samir Gharib 'Ali, *Al-Saqqar* [The Hawker], published by al-Hay'ah al-Misriyyah al-'Ammah li-l-Kitab, Cairo 1995.

exploits are tinged with desperation. The short work is densely peopled with uprooted characters—Sudanese and Somalis, political refugees, displaced migrant and white-collar workers—of the same age group. Yahya's friends are all jobless, with no direction or role in life. The dream of getting a position in an oil-rich state—'the country that's named after a family', as Adam, a young Somali, puts it—has evaporated with the Gulf War and the end of the oil-boom. The sharp, cynical outlook of the male characters is belied by their impotence to bring about any change in their situation.

Three powerful female characters suffer asymmetric fates. Mastura, a village girl, has escaped to Cairo after being marked for an honour crime. Yvonne, an educated middle-class Copt, is waiting, haplessly, for news from the US, where her former lover is trying to get a green card. Melinda is a French researcher, investigating the condition of her sex in Egypt. Setting out to 'avenge' the situation of the Arab woman in general, she flaunts her emancipation 'as if Napoleon's fleet is at the gates of Alexandria', according to Yahya, who regales her with scandalous stories about his forbears during their love-making. Yahya moves between Melinda's luxurious apartment in Zamalek, an affluent quarter of Cairo's colonial-era 'second city', and his marginalized friends in the 'third city', *al-madun al-'ashwa'iyyah*, offering a sharp contrast between the adjacent worlds. Yet he is also lost and manipulated in the French girl's spacious flat, while skilfully manoeuvring his way through the maze of poorer streets, where he always knows when to find his friends at home. Mastura shares a room with an old woman, Mama Zizi, on the ground floor of a 'tall thin house in a narrow alley, with balconies extended like dogs' tongues, dripping tar'. Mama Zizi does not speak or move, but 'when I have sex with Mastura, she turns her face to the wall'; outside the broken door, the ground floor neighbours fight and insult each other. The style has a harsh matter-of-factness, endowing—for example—an account of a gang rape at the local police station with the banality of an everyday event: 'Mastura came back at midday, depressed and exhausted. I tried to make her tell me what had happened, but she said nothing. I left her to sleep, and when she woke up I took her in my arms. She started to cry, and told me . . .' There is no attempt to dramatize oppressive relations, as if some other outcome could be possible; simply a recording—'depressed and exhausted'—of their intolerable existence. The use of multiple narrators, repetition—key sentences recurring—and a circular structure establishes a narrative hall of mirrors. The same

action will be perceived in three different timeframes: anticipated by a narrator, imagined by another character, or as related at the moment of its occurrence. The effect is to create a powerful sense of inescapability.

Predictably enough, *The Hawker* came under attack from one of *Al-Ahram's* leading columnists, Fahmi Huwaydi, who denounced it as 'satanic, nihilist writing which ruins everything that is religious—be it Islamic or Christian—and all moral values', and called for the novel to be banned. The publisher, the General Egyptian Book Organization, withdrew the book, and Ali fled to France.⁸ His second novel *Fir'awn* [The Pharaoh], published in 2000, shifted the setting from the city to the country: rural Minufiyya, the most densely populated province of Lower Egypt.⁹ A petty thief, the lame 'Isam, tells the story of his friend and fellow convict Sayyid, whose nickname is the Pharaoh. A village school-teacher driven from his post by the Mabahith, Egypt's political police, the Pharaoh leads the life of a fugitive, without having committed any crime; he is constantly on the run, trying to make ends meet and to feed his hungry dependents. The two men ride on the rooftops of trains, the normal means of transport in Egypt for the very poor, until Sayyid dies in his early thirties, falling onto the track. The narrative is fragmented, self-reflexive; the sense of the marginalized's vulnerability to events is re-enacted in the telling of the tale. Again, the work is crowded with characters, as is Minufiyya itself; rich in what might be called sub-plots, though ironically so, in the absence of a main plotline. It is the picture of a decaying society, reflected in the mirror of its recent past.

A notable characteristic of these works is their concentration on the tangible minutiae of everyday life, on stopped moments of time. Wa'il Rajab's novel in five chapters, *Dakhil Nuqtah Hawa'iyyah* [In an Air Bubble], published in 1996, relates the story of three generations by concentrating on 'the visible part of the iceberg', without resort to the syllogisms of the family saga.¹⁰ Like *The Pharaoh*, it is largely set in rural Egypt. A few events, undramatic and non-sentimental, are subjected to detailed investigation; from these fragments, the reader reconstructs the

⁸ The director general of the EGBO, Samir Sarhan, is an advisor to the influential Wahhabi, Shaikh al-Fasi. *The Hawker* had been published in a series of 'New Writings' (*Kitabat Jadida*), under the editorship of the novelist, Ibrahim Abdel-Meguid.

⁹ Samir Gharib 'Ali, *Fir'awn* [The Pharaoh], published by Dar al-Jamal, Cologne 2000.

¹⁰ Wa'il Rajab, *Dakhil Nuqtah Hawa'iyyah* [In an Air Bubble], published by Dar Sharqiyyat, Cairo 1996.

family's trajectory and the fates of its protagonists. The first chapter is entitled 'The Click of the Camera', suggesting a technique of neutral representation; yet this is laced with implicit sarcasm, and undercut by terse, economical prose. As in Haykal's *Zaynab*, Egypt's first great novel, published in 1912, it opens with the hero, Muhammad Yusuf, waking at dawn. But we soon realize that his world is the opposite of *Zaynab's*, with its open horizons. Muhammad has witnessed the last phase of his father's dreams of progress, but lives the bitter disappointment of Egypt's aspirations; his own son predeceases him. The fragmented narrative becomes a reflection of the family's disintegration, the frustration of its ambitions and of Egyptian hopes for a better future.

Constructed, again, through the complex intersection of different points in time, with multiple narrators, Mahmud Hamid's *Ahlam Muharrama* [Forbidden Dreams], published in 2000, contains a striking examination of the return of the traditional strong man, the *futuwwa*, within the lawless setting of Cairo's 'third city'.¹¹ But whereas the old *futuwwa* was bound by a code of gallantry and magnanimity, the new one is merely a thug, motivated by greed, aggression or religious bigotry. In a chapter entitled 'Sunday, 17 September 1978'—the day of Egypt's signing of the Camp David Accords—Farhah is raped by 'Uways, the *futuwwa* of the Kafr al-Tamma'in quarter; as so often in the Arabic novel, the woman stands in for the country. Farhah's family do not dare to retaliate against the strongman, but instead cleanse their honour by killing the girl herself. The novel's final chapter is set, once again, against the backdrop of the Gulf War. Faris, a young journalist, spends his final evening before returning to his job in the Gulf with some friends in a Cairo bar. As they say goodbye, aspects of his life flood through his mind and he—'you': the narrating 'I' here casts the protagonist in the second person—finds himself throwing up below one of the stone lions on Kasr al-Nil Bridge,

¹¹ Mahmud Hamid, *Ahlam Muharrama* [Forbidden Dreams], published by Qusur al-Thaqafa, Cairo 2000. The '1990s generation' continues to play cat-and-mouse with the censors. Hamid's *Ahlam Muharrama* was one of three new novels targeted for censorship in January 2001 by a newly elected Muslim Brotherhood MP, Gamal Heshmat, soon joined by Culture Minister Husni. The other two novels were Yasser Shaaban's *Abna' al-Khata' al-Rumansi* [Children of the Romantic Error] and Tawfiq 'Abd al-Rahman's *Qabla wa Ba'd* [Before and After]. The three had been published by the General Organization of Cultural Palaces in a series called 'Literary Voices', edited by the writer Muhammad al-Bisati, who was dismissed. The attacks followed the uproar in Cairo in April–May 2000 over the republication of the Syrian novelist Haydar Haydar's *Banquet for Seaweed*.

a relic of British imperialism. A riot-police van pulls up beside them: a congregation of four young men constitutes an illegal gathering under Egypt's permanent Emergency Law. Faris becomes defiant: 'you gasp for air and spit and say: let him do whatever he can!' Another riot-police van arrives, disgoring armed security forces:

You try to insult back those who insult you, but your voice does not come out. The soldiers encircle you all, pointing their guns at your backs, and a high-ranking officer comes out of the car, to be formally greeted by the officer who was beating you. He explains the situation. The high-ranking officer motions to the soldiers. They all start beating you with the butt of their guns. You scream, you all scream and no one . . .

The novel ends. By contrast, the schizoid narrator-protagonist of Ahmad al-'Ayidi's *An Takun 'Abbas al-'Abd* [To Be Abbas al-'Abd] finds himself confronting attempts by other characters to escape from the confines of the narrative altogether.¹² Pursuing a blind date—in fact, two: everything in this world is doubled—set up by his friend or alter ego, Abbas al-'Abd, the narrator finds the instruction 'CALL ME' and al-'Ayidi's actual cell-phone number, 010 64 090 30, scribbled on the Cairo shopping-mall walls. Written in a hybridized street Arabic from which official Egypt has all but disappeared, this mordant work opens with the statement, 'This is not a novel'. Ultimately, its serial duplicities are grounded in those of the national situation. 'Don't believe what you say to the others!', the narrator-protagonist warns his other self. 'Egypt had its Generation of the 1967 Defeat. We're the generation after that—the generation of I've-got-nothing-to-lose.'

Fractured, reflexive narratives predominate in the work of the women writers of this new wave. Somaya Ramadan's remarkable *Awraq al-Narjis* [Leaves of Narcissus] is one of the very few novels of this cohort to treat the once-classic theme of interaction with the West, a central concern in modern Arabic literature since the 19th century.¹³ It is also unusual in dealing with the world of the elite, here perceived through a mosaic of splintered identities, when the vast majority of these works deal with the marginalized middle or lower classes. Equally striking, Nura Amin's first

¹² Ahmad al-'Ayidi, *An Takun 'Abbas al-'Abd* [To Be Abbas al-'Abd], Dar Merit, Cairo 2003.

¹³ Somaya Ramadan, *Awraq al-Narjis* [Leaves of Narcissus], published by Dar Sharqiyat, Cairo 2001; published in English translation as *Leaves of Narcissus*, Cairo 2002.

novel, *Qamis Wardi Farigh* [An Empty Rose Coloured Dress], published in 1997, offered a vivid portrayal of alienated and fragmented selves. Her second, *Al-Nass* [The Text], written in 1998, which I read in manuscript, was too daring and experimental to find a publisher. Her third, *Al-Wafat al-Thaniya Li-Rajul al-Sa'at* [The Second Death of the Watch Collector], which appeared in 2001, is one of the most significant novels of the new generation.¹⁴ It deals with the disintegration of the Egyptian middle class, in a period when a tiny fraction of it was integrated into the new business elite while the majority was left stranded. The central character is 'Abd al-Mut'al Amin, the actual name of the author's father; Nura Amin herself appears as both narrator and daughter, left with only her father's sad collection of wrist watches after his death. The work is composed of four sections: 'Hours' selects five hours from 'Abd al-Mut'al Amin's life, the first from 1970, the last from the late 1990s; 'Minutes' records the moment of his death and the funeral rites. 'Seconds', the longest and most moving section, is Nura's attempt to reconstruct the trajectory of her father's career as a building contractor through the details of his daily life: his cars, from the little Egyptian-made Ramses of the 1970s, to the Fiat of the 80s and the Mercedes of the 90s, which breaks down in the desert; Amin spends the cold winter night stranded by the roadside, while the other cars whizz by. The final section, 'Outside Time', restores the memory of a patriotic family man, dazzled by the get-rich-quick promises of the *infitah* era, but destroyed by its corruption. In one scene, Amin drags his daughter up onto the scaffolding of his biggest construction site, a government office block, where they remain trapped: Nura is afraid to move lest she fall, and resentful of her father for bringing her up there as if she were a boy; Amin is angrily arguing with the workers, who are demanding their wages. His refusal to give kickbacks to those in command means that he never gets paid and, like many projects of the *infitah* period, the building never gets finished.

What common strategies do these varied works deploy? Most obviously, all reject the linear narrative of the realist novel. In its place they offer a juxtaposition of narrative fragments, which co-exist without any controlling hierarchy or unifying plot: Yahya's sexual conquests in *The Hawker*; the meaningless assault of the riot police in *Forbidden*

¹⁴ Nura Amin, *Qamis Wardi Farigh* [An Empty Rose Coloured Dress], Dar Sharqiyyat, Cairo 1997; Nura Amin, *Al-Wafat al-Thaniya Li-Rajul al-Sa'at* [The Second Death of the Watch Collector], 2001.

Dreams.¹⁵ Secondly, the private is no longer in dialectical tension with the public, mediated by the interior lives of the characters, as in the realist or modernist novel. The two are now in direct antagonism, with the fictional space of interior life correspondingly reduced. At the same time, characters typically experience themselves as isolated within social environments. ‘We are a generation of loners, who live under the same roof as strangers who have similar names to ourselves. This is my father, this is my mother, and those are certainly my brothers and sisters. But I move between them as a foreigner meets other lodgers in the same hotel,’ says the narrator of *To Be Abbas al-‘Abd*. Thirdly, these narratives do not pose epistemological questions—how to comprehend the world; how to determine one’s stance within it—nor posit any *a priori* points for departure, as the realist novel did. Instead, the new Arabic novel asks ontological questions: what is this narrative world? What are the modes of existence that the text creates?

Like the modernist novel, this new genre is preoccupied with its own textual deconstruction, seeking to lay bare the internal dynamics of its own artistic process; narrators are fallible, multiple, polyphonic. But unlike most modernist works, these are intransitive narratives, concerned with existence, rather than the effects of deeds. Finally, the erasure of previous novelistic conventions in these texts is not driven by the anticipation of any alternative ordering of reality, but by the desire to strip existing realities of any legitimacy. Stylistically, they re-examine the vocabulary of daily existence in order to demonstrate its emptiness. This has been misinterpreted as a failure to master the intricate rhythms of classical Arabic, with its rhetorical tropes of cohesion and stasis; it should rather be read as an attempt to offer an aesthetics of fragmentation, based on the ruins of what was. These narrative worlds are formed from the

¹⁵ Many other examples could be drawn from the works of ‘Adil ‘Ismat: *Hajjis Mawt* [A Premonition of Death], Cairo 1995, *al-Rajul al-‘Ari* [The Naked Man], Cairo 1998, and *Hayah Mustaqirrah* [A Settled Life], Cairo 2003, all published by Dar Sharqiyyat; of Husni Hasan: *Ism Akhar li-l-Zill* [Another Name for the Shadow], Cairo 1995, and *al-Musarnamun* [The Sleepy Ones], Cairo 1998, both published by Dar Sharqiyyat; of ‘Atif Sulayman, especially in his collection of short stories, *Sahra’ ‘ala Hida* [A Desert on its Own], published by Al-Majlis al-A’la li-l-Thaqafah, Cairo 1995, and his novel, *Isti’rad al-Babiliyyah* [The Spectacle of the Babylonian], Cairo 1998, published by Dar Sharqiyyat; and Ahmad Gharib’s *Sadmat al-Daw’ ‘ind al-Khuruj min al-Nafaq* [The Shock of Light upon Emerging from the Tunnel], Cairo 1996, published by Nawwarah.

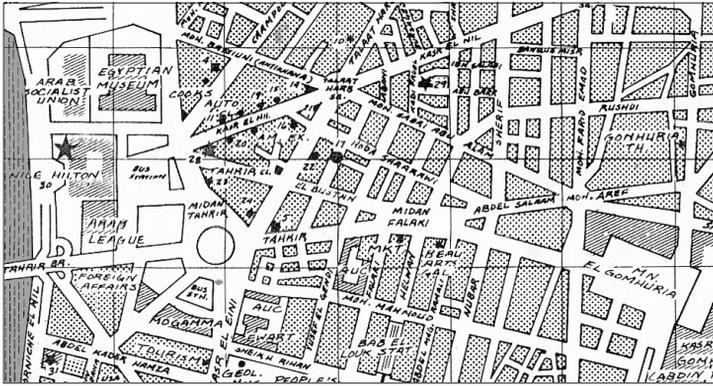
wreckage of official literary discourse. Both the narrators and the protagonists of this new genre find themselves in a state of disorientation, trapped within a duplicitous, illogical order. The words at their disposal are no more coherent than their worlds.

Cities and scribes

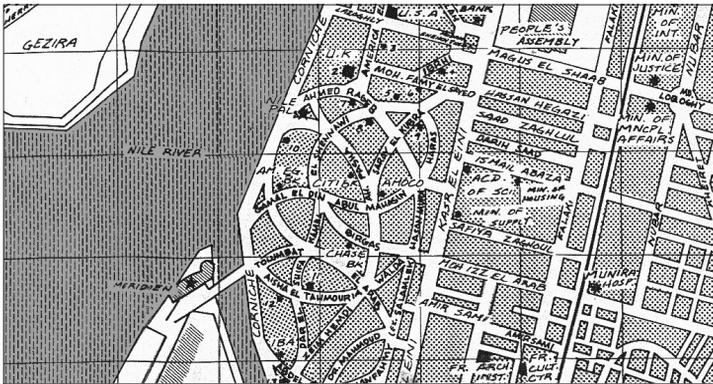
Intermediations between literary forms and social realities are necessarily subtle, indirect and complex. To suggest a series of homologues between the narrative strategies of the Egyptian novel and Cairo's changing urban fabric is not, of course, to posit any one-to-one correspondence between them. Yet it is possible to trace an evolving relationship between the modernizing project inaugurated from the 1870s by the Khedive Isma'il, who had been a student in Paris during Haussmann's re-engineering of the French capital, and the development of the modern Egyptian novel. Isma'il planned and built a new city of wide boulevards and great open thoroughfares, the Opera House and Azbakiyya Park, situated to the north and west of the ancient *medina* or oriental city, which for thirteen centuries had developed by the slow process of in-building; the old Khalij al-Misry Street forming the boundary between the two. The two cities represented distinct world views and modes of operation, the densely populated *medina* retaining its traditional order and conservative-religious outlook, while the 'second city' proclaimed its rulers' faith in ideas of progress, modernity and reason. This was also the vision of Rifa'ah al-Tahtawi and his students, who were deeply influenced by the French Enlightenment. It continued to inform the work of the great modern Egyptian writers, from Muhammad al-Muwailihi, Muhammad Husain Haykal, Taha Husain and Tawfiq al-Hakim to Yahya Haqqi and Naguib Mahfouz. The notion that man can make himself—that 'we are what we choose to be', in Mirandola's words—both individually and collectively, lay at the heart of the modern Arabic novel from the start. The central theme of Haykal's *Zaynab* is the tragedy of Zaynab's failure to be 'what she wanted to be'. This is also the dilemma of Hamidah in Mahfouz's *Middaq Alley*, published in 1947, who also fails to be the modern woman that 'she willed'.

Many of the pioneers of realist narrative fiction in Egypt—Muwailihi, Hakim, Haqqi, Mahfouz—were born and brought up in the old city, but developed their literary talent in the context of the second; they are a product of the passage between the two worlds, with their contrasting

Cairo street plans



Second City, 1870–1900



Garden City, 1900–30



Third City, 1970 to the present

rhythms and visions. The move from *medina* to the new city was not without its price: in *Middaq Alley*, Hamidah becomes a prostitute for the British soldiers when she leaves the protective haven of the alley. Despite their striving, most of the protagonists of Mahfouz's great works of the 1940s and 50s end up where they started, or even worse off than before; the frustration of their hopes forms the substance of the novels. Yet they struggle, nevertheless, to transform their destinies.¹⁶ The power of Mahfouz's *Cairo Trilogy* [1956–57] lies in part in the battle by its hero Kamal to be what he wants to be, rather than what his father wants for him. The assumptions of modernity inherent in this work enable us to interpret its themes of declining patriarchal authority, the rebellion of the son and the free choices of the grandsons, with their individual yet opposing ideologies. These assumptions would underlie the trajectory of the Arabic novel after Mahfouz, from the work of Yusuf Idris, 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sharqawi, Fathi Ghanim and Latifa al-Zayyat, through to the '1960s generation'.¹⁷ I would suggest that there is a homology between the urban structure of the second city, with its wide thoroughfares—in contrast to the narrow alleyways of the *medina*—and the linear structure of the realist novel, the unfolding of its plot conditional upon wider social relations.

In the early decades of the 20th-century Cairo's rulers created a further planned zone, Garden City, to the west of Qasr al-Dubarah. It was designed to act as a buffer between the British colonialists and the angry middle classes of the 'second city', constantly agitating for their departure. The pattern here was not linear but circular and labyrinthine, although clearly based on modern urbanist principles. Interestingly, this deliberately alienating space did not find its literary expression until the post-independence period, when the contradictions of the national-developmental project began to demand more complex and metaphorical forms. This in turn led to the emergence of modernist narrative, with its reflexivity, circular structure and problematization of the narrator's status. Yet the Egyptian novel of the 1960s, though highly critical of the social reality from which it emerged, was still essentially

¹⁶ R. C. Ostle, 'The City in Modern Arabic Literature', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, vol. XLIX, Part I, 1986, p. 199.

¹⁷ Among many outstanding writers who started publishing their work in the 1960s were 'Abd al-Hakim Qasim, Amal Dunqul, Yahya al-Tahir 'Abdullah, Sun'allah Ibrahim, Baha' Tahir, Muhammad al-Bisati, Muhammad 'Afifi Matar, Ibrahim Aslan, Radwa 'Ashur, Khayri Shalabi and Jamal al-Ghitani.

a narrative of rational enlightenment, in which the idea of progress retained its meaning.¹⁸ Again, there was a parallel with urban forms: by the mid-60s, modern Cairo had far outstripped the old *medina*, the relative decline of the traditional city also corresponding to the weakening influence of its norms under the prevailing secularist outlook of Nasser's Egypt.

Turn from the modern

This situation had undergone a radical transformation well before the advent of the 1990s generation. Everything in their experience ran counter to notions of the 'rule of reason' or the epistemological centrality of man. For the marginalized youth of the 1990s and early 2000s, everyday life has become a process of humiliation and symbolic violence. Prolonged unemployment has created a sense that they are unwanted, that their youth is going to waste; this in turn induces an absurd kind of guilt. Naive faith in a better future is not an option; their starting point is cynicism and frustration. The hopes that previous generations had invested in a collective solution are belied by the corruption that has permeated the very marrow of the national culture. In Egypt, the general conditions of post-modernity—the shift from the verbal to the visual, the predominance of commercialized mass media—have been compounded by state censorship, on the one hand, and a glossy, well-funded Wahhabism, on the other. Sadat paid lip-service to freedom of expression while orchestrating what is known in Arabic literature as *manakh tarid*, an atmosphere unpropitious to independent cultural praxis which succeeded in pushing many dissenting intellectuals out of the country; subsequent governments have maintained the same traditions. This coincided with the rise of the oil states, Saudi Arabia in particular, to fill the cultural vacuum caused by the ostracization of Egypt after Camp David and the destruction of Beirut by the Lebanese civil war.

The same dynamics have underlain the rise of the *al-madinah al-'ashwa'iyyah*. Cairo's 'third city' developed randomly, without any overall plan, as a short-sighted reaction to the housing crisis. It reflected a terminal loss of faith in the state's ability to fulfil its citizens' basic needs.

¹⁸ See Hafez, 'The Egyptian Novel of the Sixties', *Journal of Arabic Literature*, VII, 1976, pp. 68–84, and 'The Transformation of Reality and the Arabic Novel's Aesthetic Response', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, LVII, part I, 1994, pp. 93–112.

It was born out of a situation in which the immediate supersedes—indeed, negates—the strategic and long-term. Hence the irrationality of the ‘third city’, full of impasses and dead-ends. The two vast belts of semi-rural dwellings represent a regression from the urban planning of the ‘second city’, though without any of the bucolic beauty of the rural scene; an aimless return to pre-modern forms in housing, as well as in socio-political relations. The chaotic development of the ‘third city’ went hand in hand with the recoil from modernity and the return to traditional, even fundamentalist, stances, as underpinnings for the national ideology; with the deterioration of Egypt’s broader political culture and the emergence of an inverted scale of social and national values.

It is now possible to trace a series of homologies between the formal characteristics of the new Egyptian novel and the haphazard nature of the ‘third city’, as well as the broader impasse this represents. The first homology lies in the paradoxicality of these texts, which ask the reader to treat them as novels while at the same time confounding the aesthetic and generic expectations to which the form gives rise. These works demonstrate their awareness of the deep structures of Arab humiliation and the troubled social context within which they are produced; they assert the importance of their autonomy within it, yet they refuse to waste any energy in resolving its contradictions at the symbolic level. Paradoxicality is not posited as a topic for treatment, but rather as the ontological condition of the text itself. Hence the homology with the power structures of the Arab world, where state authority appears not as a real force, with a free will and independent project, capable of challenging the ‘other’ according to a national logic, but as a travesty of power, a scarecrow. Aware of its lack of legitimacy, it constantly attempts to gloss this over by exaggerating its authority, oscillating between an illusion of power and a sense of inferiority. Over the last three decades, new levels of domestic coercion and repression have been matched by the unprecedented subservience of the Egyptian political establishment to Washington’s diktats, without even enjoying its foreign master’s respect.

The writing ‘I’ of the new novel is acutely aware of its own helplessness, of being trapped in the present with all horizons closed. Its only escape strategy is to establish a narrative world that is ontologically similar to the actually existing world, but which permits a dialogical interaction with it and so constitutes a rupture—a rip in the closed horizon. The new text does not pose an alternative logic to that of existing reality, but

attempts to interrupt its cohesion, creating gaps and discontinuities for the reader to fill. One corollary of this is the use of narrative fragments and juxtapositions, which refuse any all-embracing totality. Another is the treatment of plot: eliminating the middle, the central concern of the conventional novel, the new narrative consists of beginnings and ends, undermining any syllogistic progression. This creates a further disturbance within the narrative world, disorienting the reader's guiding compass and intensifying the ontological dilemma.

Such a strategy also signals, of course, recognition of the narrator's diminished authority; the appeal to the reader—'CALL ME'—knows it is unlikely to receive an answer. If the writing 'I' is no longer able to secure its position as the controlling consciousness of the text, and the author no longer has confidence in his or her narrator, it is because both have become variations of the subaltern self, inhabiting a subaltern country that has lost its independence, its dignity and its regional role. This creates a crisis in which the 'I' is unable to identify with itself, let alone with an 'other' or a cause. Yet it also offers a narrative capable of relating external reality 'from the inside', as if an integral part of it, while at the same time seeing it from the outside, the viewpoint of the marginalized, appropriate to its own insignificance. The new Arabic novel is immersed in the most minute details of its surrounding social reality, yet it is unable to accept it. The 'novel of the closed horizon' is the genre of an intolerable condition.