

Yusuf Idris Goes East: Asia as a Mirror for Egypt

CRISTINA DOZIO

Beyond the East-West Encounter

The encounter with Europe and the creation of a European imaginary were crucial issues in modern Arab culture. A turning point was the French invasion of Egypt in 1789, but all throughout the nineteenth century, Arab intellectuals and cultural institutions engaged with the “Other” with repercussions on the internal debates about identity and reformism. The three main channels of exchange were: educational missions of Arab students sent to Europe, which greatly enriched the tradition of travel writing (*riḥla*); European educational institutions established in the Arab world under the colonial rule; the translation of texts, especially from English, French, and Russian into Arabic, as well as the adaptation of European literary genres. Nevertheless, these East-West encounters did not happen on an equal footing. Said’s groundbreaking study, *Orientalism* (1978), critically examines the politics of defining the European self against an essentialist image of the Other, the exotic and uncivilized East. Subsequent criticism and re-elaborations of Said’s paradigm (Alessandrini 2018) have added valuable insights on the identity formation in relation to the Other.

While the West imagined the East, Arab literature has contributed to crafting a Western imaginary. El-Enany (2006) offers the first comprehensive diachronic

study of this topic, with a focus on nineteenth- and twentieth-century prose. With the aim of presenting, at least in part, a reverse study of Said's *Orientalism*, the author examines how Arab intellectuals saw the West by selecting some works that stage an actual encounter between Eastern and Western characters in one of their respective locations. El-Enany identifies the love story or the sexual encounter as the main literary trope, constructed along the lines of an ambivalent relation of love/hatred and admiration/repulsion toward the West.

Agreeing on the centrality of the European theme and love trope in the Arab novel, Casini (2015) suggests examining these literary representations not as mirrors for reality, but as narrative discourses developed through the novels' themes and style (Casini et al. 2013). This approach is anchored in studies that conceive the West as a narrative construct historically determined in Western and non-Western contexts. Casini mostly agrees with the notion of Occidentalism elaborated in Area Studies (Ketelaar 1991; Chen 1995), which argues that the representations of the West are used by individuals and social groups with strategic aims in the context of their domestic ideological debates. In his analysis of the canonical Egyptian novel, he demonstrates "the strong connections between the 'European theme', the construction of a national imaginary, and the critical reflection on alternative paths to modernisation" (Casini 2015, 196). Moreover, his "research on Egyptian novels published after the 1960s indicates that strategic Occidentalism operates also in the inverse process of critique and deconstruction of the hegemonic national imaginary" (Casini 2015, 197).

Looking at the contemporary production, the East-West literary encounter includes new geographical routes and stylistic innovations to respond to contemporary global debates, for instance about diasporas and forced migration (Sellman 2022). Meanwhile, recent studies are re-addressing or discovering some encounters that were previously overlooked, such as the contribution of Arab American migrant literature to the cultural flourishing at the turn of the twentieth century (Imangulieva 2009),¹ connections with South America (Civantos 2006; Hassan 2024), and the Russian and Soviet influences (Kane et al. 2023). These contexts transcend the binary East-West opposition by adding other historically constructed cultural poles and staging various experiences of modernity along similar or different colonial experiences.

A route that has been less explored—both in the literary output and academic studies—connects the Arab world to Asia. One exception is the Egyptian novel set

¹ This literary movement, known as *adab al-mahjar*, contributed to the Arab cultural and literary renovation (*nahḍa*).

in Uzbekistan *Qamar ‘alā Samarqand* (Moon over Samarqand, 2004) by Muḥammad al-Mansī Qandīl (b. 1949).² In her analysis of this novel, Litvin remarks the peculiar image projected by this encounter with the Asian Other: “Unusually for an Arabic literary work set in the post-Soviet space, *Qamar* expresses no nostalgia for Communist ideals. Instead, it uses Uzbekistan as a double mirror for Nasser- and Sadat-era Egypt, grimly exposing life under authoritarian rule and also, more remarkably, conjuring an alternative humanist Utopia based not in socialism but in the mythopoetic and spiritual resources of the classical Islamic tradition.” (Litvin 2011, 101)

To contribute to the study of Arab Asian encounters, this chapter examines the journalistic travelogue *Iktishāf qārra* [Discovering a Continent] (1972) by Yusuf Idris (Yūsuf Idrīs, 1927–91).³ The famous Egyptian writer was inspired by his journey across India and East Asia in 1970. I argue that the representation of Asian societies in this work is a mirror for Egypt that not only reflects an image but also projects a constructed narrative that the author strategically used in the internal debates of post-colonial Egypt. These encounters allow a triangulation between Asia, Egypt, and the West (Europe and the United States) at the time of the Cold War and Japan in particular is presented as a source of inspiration for the renewal of the Egyptian society. The analysis will illustrate some discursive techniques that range from exoticism when looking at the East and strategic Occidentalism (also in its Asian projections) when looking at the West. These techniques will be explored in two of the travelogue’s chapters based on Idris’s trips to Japan and Berlin, in which he defines his artistic and political positioning through his interaction with the foreign cultural institutions. Before delving into the analysis, the next section overviews the various types of encounters in Idris’s oeuvre and in other Egyptian travelogues to Japan.

An Egyptian in Europe, America, and Japan

Yusuf Idris was a very prolific writer whose literary output cuts across different genres (Allen 1994): short stories, novels—some of which adapted for the cinema—, drama, and journalism. Among his aesthetic innovations is the fictional representation of various social groups whose concerns are expressed

2 This novel is based on the author’s journey to Central Asia to write a travelogue published for the Kuwaiti magazine *al-‘Arabī* (1996), to which he contributed with several travel reportages in the 1990s.

3 I would like to thank my former MA student Nura Emam for drawing my attention to this work.

through Egyptian Arabic as a rich literary language (al-Qiṭṭ 1980; Kurpershoek 1981; Mikhail 1992). While the setting and the social issues are very local, the characters and their language introduce elements of diversity. In parallel, Idris sought to create a uniquely Egyptian dramatic form by inserting Egyptian Arabic and some elements of traditional folk drama and shadow theater in the international dramatic trends (Sibley 2019; Suriano 2019). He shared his ideas in a series of three essays entitled *Naḥw masraḥ miṣrī* [Towards an Egyptian Theatre] (1964) and tried to put them into practice in his own plays, including *al-Farāfir* (1964).

When Idris became an established literary figure in Egypt, he traveled abroad to take part in seminars and literary events. Thanks to his journeys and his knowledge of world literature, the representation of the West is a recurring theme across his literary output, as has been highlighted by El-Enany (1997; 2006). In particular, two of his novellas stage an encounter between an Egyptian male character and a Western female character, in Europe and the United States, respectively: *al-Sayyida Fīyīnā* [Madam Vienna] (1959) and *Niyū Yūrḳ 80* [New York 80] (1980?). The two novellas were later published in a single volume (Idris 2012), with the title of the first one changed into *Vienna 1960*, thus inviting to comparison. The recurring trope of the love story, traditionally blossomed during a study abroad experience, takes the shape of a sexual relation between two ordinary middle-class characters in *Madam Vienna*, whereas in *New York 80* an Egyptian writer and a sex worker who holds a Ph.D. do not have sex, but engage in a heated argument about prostitution.

In her reading of *New York 80*, Hartmann (2002) remarks that Idris's harsh criticism of the United States, in particular its materialism and claim to advancement, is achieved through some stereotypical images of the city and the female Other. In contrast, the author poses a positive Arab male identity by reversing some stereotypical gender roles and conveying a message of third world solidarity. Comparing the two novellas, El-Enany (2006) remarks that Idris moves from staging the challenges of the encounter with the Other, in *Madam Vienna* and other works published in the same period,⁴ to harsh criticism of the West in his late production which includes *New York 80* and his journalistic output.⁵

The travelogue *Iktishāf qārra* examined in this chapter belongs to the latter trend. El-Enany remarks that the United States emerge as the real opponent, an incompatible Other, in a specific historical context: "Written at the height of

4 The works mentioned by El-Enany that stage this kind of encounter are: *al-Bayḍā'* [The White Woman] (1955), *al-Laḥẓa al-ḥarija* [The Critical Moment] (1958), "Sirruhu al-bāti" [The Secret of His Power] (1958), "A-kāna lā-budd an tuḍī'i al-nūr yā Lili?" [Did you have to turn on the light, Li-Li?] (1971).

5 El-Enany mentions: *al-Irāda* [Will-Power] (1977), *An 'amd isma' tasma'* [Listen intently and you will hear] (1974), and the short story "al-Sijār" [The Cigar] (1985).

America's involvement in Vietnam and against a background of its continuing anti-Arab policies with regard to the Palestinian question, or to put it in more general terms, at the height of the Cold War years when to most third world countries America was the symbol of capitalist reaction and neocolonialism working against progressive powers the world over, it is not difficult to understand Idris's anti-American rhetoric." (El-Enany 2002, 176). This rhetoric is expressed not only through a direct attack toward America, but also through a positive encounter with Asia. Therefore, Roussillon (2005, 156–162) places *Iktishāf qārā* among other Egyptian representations of Japan, spanning from the late Ottoman period to the incipient affirmation of nationalism, until post-World War II (WWII) travelogues.⁶

By changing the perspective, other historical references emerge in Roussillon's study: post-colonialism, neo-imperialism, and the 1967 defeat (*naksa*) are complemented with key events of Japanese history, such as the naval victory in the Battle of Tsushima (1905) in the Russo-Japanese War and the "second miracle" after the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (1945). Across this long timespan, Japan is a fruitful term of comparison thanks to its contradictions: alterity *vs* similarity, tradition *vs* modernization, state *vs* population, mores *vs* pleasure (Roussillon 2005, 26). This comparison is strategic in the Egyptian domestic debate about identity and modernity at its various stages, as the metaphor of the mirror suggests: "Miroir inverse, pourrait-on dire, dans la mesure où l'éclatant réussite du Japon a surtout pour effet de manifester crûment les retards et les blocages de la modernisation ottomane ou égyptienne" (Roussillon 2005, 16). Expanding El-Enany's and Roussillon's readings, the next section examines the main discursive strategies employed in this work to construct the image of the Self against multiple Others.

Discovering a Continent

The Other(s): Asia

In 1969, Idris joined the most important Egyptian daily, *al-Abrām*. In the following years, his journalistic output was more abundant than the literary one, to the extent that he took almost a ten-year break before publishing his late literary

6 Roussillon counts about 15 travelogues published between 1950s and 1990s and, besides *Iktishāf qārā*, examines: *Ḥawla al-‘ālam fī 200 yawm* [Around the World in 200 Days] (1963) by the established journalist Anīs Maṣṣūr (1924–2011); *Min aqṣā al-sharq* [From the Far East] (n.d.) by Mamduḥ ‘Abd al-Rāziq, based on his study abroad experience in the early 1960s; and *al-Yābān fī ‘uyūn miṣrī* [Japan in the Eyes of an Egyptian] (1983) by Yaḥyā Zākariyā, based on his study abroad experience in the early 1980s.

works in the 1980s. He wrote his articles about Asia for *al-Abrām* and collected them in the volume *Iktishāf qārā* (1972), originally released in the popular book series *Kitāb al-Hilāl*. Some topics were later tackled in the journalistic collection *al-Ab al-ghā'ib* [The Absent Father] (1987).

Iktishāf qārā consists of seven chapters, one introduction, and one conclusion. The first chapter and the conclusion summarize Idris's attitude and the main issues addressed in his book. In the opening pages, the author explains that after attending the Afro-Asian Writers' Conference in New Delhi (November 1970)⁷ he traveled across India and East Asia. Unlike what one might expect from a travelogue, he does not describe cities, monuments, or food, but records his impressions (*inṭibā'āt*) of an unknown world that receives some coverage only in case of conflicts, famines, and natural disasters.⁸

Idris is impressed by the continent's geographical extension, its big population, and the countries' contradictions in terms of institutional systems, socio-economic conditions, and religions. This diversity, however, is never fully explored since each country is crystallized into its most relevant trait or its role in the Asian scenario. Thus, India stands for spirituality, Korea and Vietnam embody resistance, China is the economic alternative to capitalism, and Japan represents the economic miracle after the defeat:

ومع كل ما رأيت، فإن البلد الذي خلب لبي في آسيا هو الهند؛ الشعب، والحضارة. وفي البطولات ليس أعلى من فيتنام. في التحلل هناك تايلاند وهونج كونج. في الطموح المخيف نرى اليابان. في أي مكان لا بد أن تُعثر على نموذج، والنموذج صارخ، وفي كل مكان تلحظ حركة التاريخ سائرة سريعة، لا يوقفها شيء. في الواقع آسيا كوني، ومهما درت مع أفلاكه، في الشرق والجنوب والشمال، فأني تذهب فستشعر حتماً أن لهذا الكون مركزاً، ثقله من ثقل الشمس، ومكانه الصين. (Idris 2019a, 81–82)

With everything I have seen, the country in Asia that has most impressed me is India with its people and its civilization. For heroism, there is no higher example than Vietnam. For emancipation, Thailand and Hong Kong. For the terrific ambition, Japan. Everywhere you must find a model, and the model is stark, and everywhere you notice the rapid movement of history, unstoppable by anything. Asia is really a universe, and if you orbit its planets in the east, south, or north, wherever you go, you will feel that this universe has a center, its weight equal to the weight of the sun: China.⁹

7 The Afro-Asian Writers' Conferences were a series of gatherings of literary figures from Asia and Africa that took place over two decades, from 1958 in Tashkent till 1979 in Angola. It was inspired by the Afro-Asian Conference held in Bandung in 1955.

8 The writer's considerations about the media coverage of Asia are still valid for the Arab world. On the textual genre, see also Idris (2019b, 7–9).

9 All translations from the Arabic are mine. Henceforward, only the page number will be provided for quotations from *Iktishāf qārā*.

Idris states that his aim is a deeper understanding of the Asian man, his nature, his inclinations, and the role of women in society: this is a journey to the heart of the human being (*riḥla li-qalb al-insān*). The human factor is at the core of the evolution of each civilization (*ḥaḍāra*). So far, the Western civilization—which started from Ancient Egypt—and the Eastern civilization evolved in parallel, but the writer believes that this is the era of Asia (*‘aṣr Āsiyā* or *‘aṣr al-insān al-aṣfar*, lit. “the era of the yellow man”). This means that this continent will play a crucial role in all global issues, including the Palestinian question and the fight between capitalism and socialism. In conclusion, the writer explains that Asia will emerge as a third space among the two Cold War superpowers thanks to its economic boom and technological progress: it will establish equality through diversity, and a new equilibrium based on cultural factors, instead of atomic deterrence, will emerge.

Idris usually resorts to exoticism, stereotypes, and formulas used in the media to refer to the Asian countries (such as “yellow peril” and “red giant”). However, this coherent image and the positive values strategically ascribed to Asia serve to craft a negative image of the West: while the European civilization saw a regression after WWII, American neo-imperialism learned a hard lesson in Korea and Vietnam. The author’s anti-American rhetoric is based on a monolithic Other, a laughable civilization (*ḥaḍāra muḍḥika*) that blocks the progressive current of history and subordinate human beings to technology. This harsh criticism is coupled with anti-Zionism, as will be detailed below.

Asia is the unknown Other, a mystery still to be solved, whereas America is the antagonist Other, whose power construction mechanisms are as clear as day. In between is Egypt, the cradle of the ancient Western civilization and now seeking regeneration in Asia. It is a continent of its own.

The Self: Egypt

It is not easy to define Egypt’s geographical and cultural identity in *Iktishāf qārra*. If Asia is the East, then Egypt belongs to the West, but was colonized by Western powers. It is not an African country since the continent is mentioned only at the very end and Egypt does not seem to be attached to it. Pan-Arabism is also overcome except for the full support for Palestine. Rather, it is a third world country. The main traits of its identity are its pharaonic past and Islam, even if religion has a marginal role in the text and can be criticized.¹⁰

10 In the chapter about life and death in Hinduism, Idris criticizes religion in Egypt since it encourages to look backwards and place one’s destiny in the hands of God.

Almost every aspect of Asian societies discussed in the book serves to craft the Egyptian identity through these strategies: superiority *vs* inferiority, radical difference *vs* similarity, the writer's mediation of exemplary Asian stories, and witty comparisons. As regards the first strategy, Idris admits that he wants to learn from his journey because Egypt is at a dead end (*ma'zaq*). Nevertheless, he never misses the chance to praise his country's luminous past, a golden era that should be reached again; meanwhile, he remarks that the Asian countries that are currently living a boom are smaller, younger, and poorer in natural resources than Egypt. The second strategy consists of inserting some elements of shared knowledge and common experience to reduce the Asian alterity. One example is a romantic poem by Ḥāfiẓ Ibrāhīm (1878–1932) dedicated to a Japanese girl:¹¹

الهند ليست في نظرنا سوى غاندي ونهرو وأنديرا وبضعة أفلام هندية رأيناها. اليابان ليست سوى ضحية أول قنبلتين ذريتين والراديوهات الترانزستور والبضائع التي تُغرق السوق، وبالنسبة لي — على الأقل — قصيدة حفظناها في الثانوي لشاعر النيل حافظ إبراهيم عن غادة يابانية، «صفراء، ذات صفرة تُتسي اليهود الذهب» عشقها — في القصيدة طبعاً — وصارت تحدثه عن وطنها وضرورة خدمته. (10)

In our eyes, India is nothing but Gandhi, Nehru, Indira and a few Indian films we have seen. Japan is nothing but the victim of the first two atomic bombs, the transistor radios, and the goods that flood the market, and for me—at least—a poem that we learnt by heart in high school by the Poet of the Nile Ḥāfiẓ Ibrāhīm about a Japanese girl «[Her skin] so yellow that it makes the Jews forget gold». He loved her—in the poem, of course—and he talked about her homeland and the duty of serving it.

To give another example, Idris states that the Asian men are even more different than what he expected in their behavior, almost another kind of person (*naw' akhar min al-bashar*), but are similar in their physical appearance, since some traits commonly perceived as Egyptian are indeed of Asian origin. What is unique is the shape of the oriental eyes, so beautiful that should not be changed with surgery to conform to Western beauty standards. Examining this passage, Rousillon (2005, 158) identifies a certain degree of exoticism that strategically diverts toward the Other the internal debate about preserving one's identity.

Moving to the third strategy, the writer reports only exemplary stories about the people he meets during his tour: no names or specific circumstances are given, but his mediation as an established writer guarantees the story's accountability. His sources include the bride and the groom at a Hindu wedding ceremony (26–7), an Egyptian friend dating a Japanese girl (34), a hairdresser (45), a Japanese economist (48), a scientist researching about IQ in a British hospital (53), and an

11 This poem is quoted in Idris (2019b, 103).

Indian scientist (75). Their stories bridge between big theories and everyday life. For instance, in Chapter 4, after discussing committed literature to the point of sacrificing one's own life, Idris asks why the Asians are prone to sacrifice and what life means to them. His answer is that life depends on one's own will and having a plan; this is exemplified by the story of a young Japanese hairdresser who achieved her goal to open a hair salon exactly in the time she had planned. Planning (*takhṭīṭ*) requires a good management of time and money, both issues addressed in theoretical and practical terms. All these elements contributed to launching a successful industrial sector in Japan after WWII, which should not be labeled as a miracle (*ma'jaza*), as suggested by a Japanese economist he met.¹² The invention of the transistor radio had a positive repercussion on female employment in Japan and even changed the lives of the Egyptians.¹³ His argument is reinforced by a witty closing remark that compares the two peoples:

إنَّ الفرقَ بيننا أنهم ناس طموحهم الأكبر أن يُنتجوا السيارة من لا شيء لا أن يَمُتلكوها، بينما نحن طموحنا الأول أن نملك السيارة، وبالذات حَيِّدًا لو كانت من إنتاج غيرنا.
والصناعة أولاً وأخيرًا إنسان.
والإنسان أولاً وأخيرًا موقف من الحياة.
وموقف الإنسان الآسيوي — بشكل عام — من الحياة موقف جاد.
وكانت لنا الحقيقة أن موقف إنساننا من الحياة موقف هازل. (50)

The difference between us and them is that their greatest ambition is to produce a car from nothing, not to own it, while our first ambition is to own the car, especially if it is produced by someone else.

Industry first and human beings last.

Human beings first and the attitude towards life last.

The Asian attitude towards life—in general—is serious.

Our real catastrophe is that our attitude towards life is a joke.

Writing Japan: Mishima

As has been seen so far, Japan—viewed through the prism of economy, spirituality, and social mores—is the most emblematic term of comparison in *Iktishāf qārra*. To better understand this country, Idris chooses a shocking event that

¹² See also Idris (2019b, 105–12, 119–23).

¹³ It is implied that, following the Japanese example, the inclusion of women in the work force in Egypt would be desirable. However, women do not play a big role in Idris's travelogue and his approach is usually paternalistic.

happened just a few days before his arrival, the suicide of the Japanese writer Mishima Yukio (1925–70).¹⁴ Three main narratives are intertwined in the chapter about Mishima: the exceptionality of this event and its alterity to Egyptian culture; international literary debates; internal debates about nationalism. All of them reinforce the image of Idris as an engaged writer.

To convey the exceptionality of Mishima's suicide, Idris insists on his heroism and his traditional attributes,¹⁵ as if he were coming from the past:

فهو كاتب، ومخرج سينمائي، وممثل، وبطل مصارعة وركوب خيل، ورياضي، وقائد جيش خاص من صنعه، وذو نهم شديد إلى النساء، وذو ذوق للساكي «النبيذ» الياباني الشهير المصنوع من الأرز، شخصية تكاد تكون أشهر شخصية أدبية في كل شرق آسيا، كان قد أقدم على الانتحار بالطريقة المشهورة «الهيراكيري». (29)

He is a writer, film director, actor, a wrestling and horse-riding champion, athlete, commander of a private army of his own making, a man with an insatiable appetite for women, and a connoisseur of sake, the famous Japanese “wine” made from rice. He is probably the most famous literary figure in all of East Asia. He committed suicide using the famous “harakiri” method.

The Egyptian author first remarks on Mishima's literary merits and later, increasing the suspense, delves into the crude details of his gesture, which were captured in photographs and live recordings, but were probably unknown to the common Egyptian reader. In this respect, Idris acts as a translator, a role that he partly acknowledges in the text: he inserts some Japanese terms in Arabic script and glosses them; he admits that suicide in public is alien to Egyptian culture and wonders how to transfer or translate the same scene in his own country; and, finally, he hopes that Mishima's novels will be translated into Arabic.

However, besides the common reader, Idris addresses his fellow intellectuals to place himself in the global literary scene. He reports that the magazine *Newsweek* published the opinion of some American public figures about this event, including that of the playwright Arthur Miller (1915–2005). Idris harshly criticizes him both as an untalented playwright and as a spokesman of American imperialism since he judges Mishima's suicide without trying to understand it, corroborating the idea of an irrational East. The Egyptian writer, instead, tries to penetrate this

¹⁴ Mishima was the founder of Tatenokai (Shield Society), which aimed to restore the sacredness of the emperor. On November 25, 1970, he and four members of his group entered a military base of the Self-Defense Forces, took the general hostage, and addressed the soldiers from the balcony inviting them to rise and overthrow the 1947 Constitution. Due to the failure of his speech, he committed *seppuku*, a ritualistic suicide by self-disembowelment and beheading (Scott Stokes, Henry 1974; Yamanouchi 1972).

¹⁵ He wears a kimono and carries a sword like the samurai warriors.

mystery by resorting to some notions pertaining to world literature. According to him, Mishima's gesture reminds of "literature-action" and of the "new living theater" in which acting is indiscernible from life.¹⁶ Another international reference is the Nobel Prize that might have consecrated Mishima, had he not taken his life. This is implicitly a wishful thinking, since Idris was nominated for this prize. Finally, Mishima is compared to Don Quixote for his utopian dream.

This literary discourse is functional to tackle issues of national identity and modernity. As a writer who recorded his country's history and his people's values, Mishima embodies Japan. Therefore, his heroism is a lesson to be learned by Egypt in order to wake up from the torpor.¹⁷ This shocking episode invites taking Japanese nationalism as a model even if it is based on different grounds than the Egyptian one: while Egypt has always been open to foreign contacts, Japan was isolated for a long time, an isolation encapsulated by the country's name "land of the short people" (*al-aqzām al-sumr*);¹⁸ the victory in the Russo-Japanese War was followed by the defeat in WWII, but the country was able to recover and direct its nationalism toward the economic boom; its recipe was absorbing work ethics, personal sacrifice, and long-term planning from Asia, while absorbing technology and the industrial know-how from the West. Nevertheless, this recipe leads to a quick modernization that Mishima could not accept:

جيل جديد طاغ مُكتسح نشأ، وسائل حديثة من راديو وتلفزيون وصحافة تُمسح الماضي كله وتُحيل مسرح الكابوكي الشهير إلى المتحف، وتقاليد الجيша العتيبة إلى مركز كمرکز الفنون الشعبية يحتفظ به اليابانيون الأذكياء ليفرّجوا عليه السياح ويذيقوهم جرعة من خمر اليابان القديمة ويلتقطوا معهم الصور والتذكارات. (36)

A new, despotic, usurping generation has arisen, modern means such as the radio, the television, and the press erase the entire past and turn the famous Kabuki theater into a museum and the ancient traditions of the geisha into a center like the Folk Arts Center, all of which the smart Japanese preserve for tourists to enjoy, to taste a dose of the wine of ancient Japan, and to take pictures and souvenirs with them.

16 He refers to happenings organized in Europe and the United States by *The Living Theatre* and other troupes in the 1960s.

17 This is expressed through a wordplay based on the terminology of Arabic grammar.

18 Idris does not give an explanation for this expression nor mentions his sources. The first term to designate Japan in written sources is the Chinese ideogram 倭 (in Chinese: *wō*; in Japanese: *wa*). Expressing the meanings of "short, dwarf," "obedient," or "ugly," this term expressed the disparaging attitude of the Chinese. It was used in Chinese historical sources and appropriated for self-designation until the seventh century. The same sound was rendered with the kanji character 和 (*wa*), that means "harmony" (Miyake 2012).

Idris's recipe for his account of Mishima's suicide is a mixture of exoticism and localism,¹⁹ alterity and proximity, and literary and political considerations. Even if this account is not always accurate (Idris admits that he read his novels after this journey), the coherent image of Japan it crafts reinforces a strong image of Idris as a committed writer. Two decades later, another Japanese author is chosen as a symbol for the Other in one of the few Arab novels with an Oriental reference: *'Azīzī al-sayyid Kawābātā* [Dear Mr. Kawabata] (1995) by Rashīd al-Ḍa'if (b. 1945). Written in the aftermath of the Lebanese Civil War (1975–90), this semi-autobiographical novel is a long letter to the great Japanese Nobel Prize Kawabata Yasunari (1899–1972). In his narratological analysis, Seigneurie (2016) argues that Kawabata is ontologically distant but emotionally engaging for the narrator and implied reader, thus placing the aesthetic concerns of this post-modern novel in a distant but familiar Other. The following quote from this novel summarizes the potential of defamiliarizing the gaze in the triangulation between the Arab world, Japan, and the West examined so far:

by the way, Mr. Kawabata, why did the Western media portray us as if we were some strange specimens of humanity? Why this malice? Why this blindness on the part of people who defend themselves from each other with atomic bombs? How did you look at us in Japan? (Daif 1999, 138)

A Very German Story

While Japan helps an understanding of Egypt in the chapter about Mishima, it also helps an understanding of Germany in the chapter about Idris's journey to Berlin after his Asian tour. While Mishima is a mirror for literary engagement, the cultural institutions based in Berlin are criticized for their subservience to the American and Zionist political plans. With an oversimplification, the Egyptian author does not mention the existence of West and East Germany, nor that Berlin was a divided city; even if I am aware of this historical context, I will employ Idris's categories according to which "Berlin" and "Germany" belong to the Western bloc.

19 An example of exoticism is: "The reason [of the suicide] was strange, and the circumstances were even stranger. Something reminding of the atmosphere of old legends, a whiff of Asian perfume, so mysterious and secret, tickling the nose." (29). Examples of localism are idiomatic expressions, such as "flogging a dead horse" (*yu'adhdhin fī Malta*, lit. "preaching in Malta") and "everybody and his brother" (*al-ḥābil wa-l-nābil*) (34, 36).

The main discursive strategy in this travel account is harsh criticism coupled with the ironic storytelling that characterizes most of his short stories.²⁰ This chapter opens with the writer's invitation to the Festival of Egyptian Culture organized by the Evangelische Akademie zu Berlin, funded in 1951 by the historian Erich Müller-Gangloff. Idris wonders about the reason of this invitation that—in his eyes—clashes with tight surveillance in Berlin and Germany siding with the Jewish community and Israel. Therefore, he ironically depicts this trip as a hurdle course, until a small delegation arrives in Berlin in the middle of the winter and in the middle of nowhere:

مبنى صغير أنيق قابع في آخر الدنيا. هناك على طرف بحيرة «وانزه» التي انتحر على شاطئها شاعر ألماني لا أذكر اسمه ومعه حبيبته.
والمكان فعلاً يُغري بالانتحار؛ فهو وحيد معزول، بعيد جداً عن وسط المدينة، نفس بُعد حلوان عن قلب القاهرة،
التاكسي يأخذ في قطع المسافة بما يوازي ثلاثة جنيهات مصرية. (62)

An elegant small building located at the end of the world. On the shores of Lake Wannsee, where a German poet, whose name I forgot, committed suicide along with his lover. The place really tempts people to commit suicide. It is isolated, very far from the city center, as far as Helwan is from the heart of Cairo. The taxi takes the equivalent of three Egyptian pounds to cover the distance.

Once the Festival begins, the narrative is a push-pull situation between the Egyptian writer and Dr. Müller. The first roundtable is attended by a small audience of academicians of religious background who do not criticize the speakers' bold views about sensitive topics, such as Palestine and socialism. Once again, Idris wonders about the real reason behind the invitation. When he discovers that Uri Avnery is invited as a speaker in Berlin,²¹ he goes on a rampage: are the Arabs just decoration (*dikūr*) for the big media coverage of the Israeli cause? He takes his revenge during his public lecture in which he exposes this farce (*masraḥiyya*) and attacks every German cultural institution, including the leftist ones: "For the first time in my life, I feel I am really suffocating in 'free' Berlin" (70). Everybody remains silent. Only later, the mystery about the invitation is solved: an Egyptian

20 This section's title plays on the title of Idris's short story "Ḥikāya miṣriyya jiddan" [A Very Egyptian Story] (1970) that stages a witty repartee between a taxi driver and a beggar who capitalizes on his severe injury. He makes an agreement with one traffic policeman after the other only to trick them and, at the end of the story, offers a deal to the taxi driver as well.

21 Uri Avnery (1923–2018) was an Israeli journalist and member of Parliament who supported the pacifist movement. However, Idris does not give him any credit because—in his view—even dissident voices support the Zionist project.

friend of Dr. Müller living in Germany was arrested upon his arrival in Egypt and the festival was a deal for his release from prison.

This narrative effectively conveys Idris's critique, but it is overburdened with his polemical rant. For instance, through a naïf psychological analysis, he suggests a parallelism between Germany and Japan whose expansionistic plans failed because of a degeneration of their complex of superiority and inferiority, respectively. After their defeat in WWII, Japan started reconstruction with a critical approach, whereas Germany became a strong economic market thanks to its subservience to America and Israel. He concludes that the Germans pretend to be stupid and act only in their own self-interest. These weak arguments are coupled with the author's usual anti-Americanism and anti-Zionism. It is useless to give space to such ideas here, but they are a recurrent discursive strategy in his travelogue.

Conclusions

This chapter has examined Idris's travelogue *Iktishāf qārra* as an example of his journalistic output to be read in relation with his late-career literary production. While cultural encounters have always been a central issue for this author, *Iktishāf qārra* adds a new pole to the traditional East-West relationship. Asia is a mirror to discuss global political issues of the 1970s, such as the Cold War, the nuclear threat, the non-aligned movement, and the Palestinian question. As Roussillon (2005) and El-Enany (2006) have already noted, Idris is very political and polemical in his approach. The author's impressions are conveyed through some effective discursive strategies, such as exoticism and localism, stereotypes, and references to world literature, as has been analyzed in the section about Mishima. His travelogue clearly betrays some orientalism and oversimplification, but also mediates between distant cultures through storytelling and witty remarks. The linguistic register is journalistic Standard Arabic (except for one sentence in Egyptian Arabic) characterized by some formulas used in the press, idiomatic expressions, and a simple syntax.

In the triangulation between Egypt, Asia, and the West, some internal debates about identity and modernity are strategically projected to Asia through the writer's commentary based on what he saw during his journey: Egyptian nationalism on the eve of economic liberalizations should look at the Japanese model, while third world countries have the chance to fight Western imperialism as demonstrated by the Vietnam War and the Asian economic boom. Which image of

Egypt does this Asian mirror project? According to Idris, in its glorious past Egypt was the cradle of the Western civilization, but should now turn to Asia for spiritual and social regeneration: the anecdotes about the ordinary people he collects suggest that economic success can be achieved if somebody has a strong will, and such success is not prevented by spirituality or nationalism; praising social justice and human empowerment in the Asian countries is an indirect criticism to the Egyptian government; Mishima's suicide and Idris's fight in the Berlin arena encourage engaged intellectuals to speak the truth to power, be it in the global or Egyptian context. All in all, the monolithic images of Asia and the West reinforce Idris's standing as an engaged writer who openly expresses his anti-Americanism.

Since Japan is almost the protagonist in this travelogue, it would be interesting to examine its cultural exchanges with Egypt and identify other references in contemporary Arab novels. Moreover, Idris noted China's cultural influence in Asia, but could not foresee its strong economic interests in Africa and the Arab world. Another pole that is almost absent in the author's journalistic output is the Gulf, where Arab and Asian identities are negotiated nowadays. These axes could be further explored when examining Asian Arab encounters.

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