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# EGYPTIAN SENSE OF HUMOUR: CHARACTERS, STRATEGIES, AND CONTEXT IN THE NOVELS OF MUSTAJĀB, SHALABĪ, AND ABŪ JULAYYIL (1982-2008)

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## ABSTRACT

Questo studio esamina le strategie, i personaggi e i temi dell'umorismo in alcuni romanzi comici egiziani pubblicati a partire dagli anni Ottanta. Proverbiale qualità degli egiziani, la comicità è una valvola di sfogo nella vita quotidiana e una forma espressiva in diverse produzioni culturali. Finora questo fenomeno è stato parzialmente analizzato dalla critica letteraria, che si è concentrata sulla letteratura pre-moderna, aneddoti letterari-folklorici, teatro popolare e stampa satirica. In ambito moderno, la prosa satirica *(adab sākhir)* è relegata ai margini del canone, mentre la comicità viene riconosciuta, tutt'al più, come tratto stilistico in singoli autori.

Alla luce della rivalutazione dei pionieri della prosa satirica moderna e di recenti pubblicazioni dallo stile comico, questa ricerca indaga i rapporti tra comicità, satira e letteratura nel romanzo egiziano contemporaneo. In particolare, individua un sottogenere di romanzi che combinano lo stile comico con qualità estetiche riconducibili alle coeve tendenze letterarie. Gli autori così identificati vanno ad affiancare i maestri della satira e dell'ironia riconosciuti dalla critica: da un lato, i pionieri a cavallo tra Ottocento e Novecento; dall'altro, alcuni scrittori attivi a partire dagli anni Settanta.

A questo scopo, vengono esaminate le strategie comiche in quattro romanzi di Muḥammad Mustajāb (1938-2005), Khayrī Shalabī (1938-2011) e Ḥamdī Abū Julayyil (1968). Questi autori, che contribuiscono al rinnovamento delle forme narrative, hanno recentemente incrementato il loro riconoscimento critico, ma sono ancora poco studiati. Le opere selezionate, che sviluppano l'umorismo a livello tematico, stilistico e meta-narrativo, sono accumunate dall'attenzione per personaggi eccentrici in comunità marginali e offrono una rappresentazione critica della società contemporanea.

Avvalendosi dell'apporto teorico degli *humour studies* e della narratologia, l'analisi testuale di questi romanzi indaga le strategie narrative, la costruzione dei personaggi comici, l'intertestualità e il linguaggio. Inoltre, esamina le affinità tematiche e stilistiche, nonché le funzioni della comicità all'interno di questo filone narrativo. L'attenzione è posta sulla rielaborazione di modelli compositivi tradizionali *(turāth)* e dell'umorismo popolare all'interno dei romanzi.

Il primo capitolo passa in rassegna le principali teorie del comico applicate all'analisi letteraria e alcuni recenti studi sull'umorismo nella letteratura araba. Il secondo capitolo motiva la selezione del corpus, nel contesto del romanzo e della satira egiziana, e illustra le modalità di analisi. I capitoli dal terzo al sesto sono dedicati ciascuno allo studio di un romanzo: *Min al-tārīkh al-sirrī li-Nuʿmān ʿAbd al-Ḥāfiẓ* (1982) di Mustajāb, *Riḥlāt al-ṭurshajī al-ḥalwajī* (1981/83) e *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa* (2000) di Shalabī, e *al-Fāʿil* (2008) di Abū Julayyil. L'ultimo capitolo confronta le strategie comiche e le peculiarità stilistico-tematiche.

Da questa analisi emergono alcune strategie comuni, come la struttura aneddotica, l'attualizzazione di personaggi comici proverbiali e l'accostamento di registri, compreso il dialetto egiziano e il linguaggio gergale. A livello stilistico, ricorrono l'immagine del doppio, ripetizioni e descrizioni fisiche grottesche. A livello tematico, gli autori si concentrano sulla relazione fra città e campagna, l'ingiustizia sociale e la rilettura ironica della storiografia ufficiale.

La molteplicità di forme e personaggi in questo filone comico si inserisce nel rinnovamento del romanzo egiziano, rappresentando in modo giocoso o tragicomico il rapporto fra singolo e collettività.

Parole chiave: letteratura egiziana contemporanea, comicità, *fukāha*, *sukhriyya*, *turāth*, margini.

## ABSTRACT

Our study looks at characters, themes, and strategies in some Egyptian humorous novels published since the 1980s. Known for their proverbial sense of humour, Egyptians resort to comedy as a safety valve in everyday life and as a creative tool in many cultural productions. So far, the study of literary humour has focused on pre-modern literature, literary and folkloric anecdotes, popular drama, and satirical press. Modern satirical writing *(adab sākhir)* is placed at the margins of the canon, whereas humour is analysed as one of the stylistic features of some novelists.

Having considered the re-evaluation of the pioneers of early-modern satire and the recent publication of humorous writings, our study examines the interplay of humour, satire, and literature in contemporary Egyptian novels with a comparative approach. In particular, it identifies a sub-genre which combines sense of humour and aesthetic qualities, which are intertwined with the contemporary literary trends. The novelists of our corpus, thus, join other masters of humour and irony already recognized by criticism: the pioneers of the late 1800s-early 1900s on the one hand, and some writers of the Generation of the Sixties on the other.

To identify this sub-genre, we illustrate the humour-generating strategies in four novels by Muḥammad Mustajāb (1938-2005), Khayrī Shalabī (1938-2011), and Ḥamdī Abū Julayyil (1968). These writers have recently increased their critical recognition, but are still understudied. The novels of our corpus employ humour on a thematic, stylistic, and meta-narrative level. They depict eccentric characters in marginal communities and portray contemporary society with satirical criticism.

Having adopted *humour studies* and narratology as a theoretical background, our textual analysis looks at the narrative strategies, the construction of characters, intertextuality, and literary language. In addition, it outlines the thematic and stylistic similarities, as well as the functions of humour in this literary trend. Our analysis focuses on the appropriation of the Arab cultural heritage *(turāth)* and of popular humour in these comic writings.

The first chapter overviews the main humour theories applied to literary criticism and recent scholarship on humour in Arabic literature. The second chapter illustrates the selection criteria for our corpus, within the context of modern Egyptian fiction and satire, and our analytical framework. Each of the chapters 3-6 is devoted to a case study: *Min al-tārīkh al-sirrī li-Nuʿmān ʿAbd al-Ḥāfiẓ* (1982) by Mustajāb, *Riḥlāt al-ṭurshajī al-ḥalwajī* (1981/83) and *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa* (2000) by Shalabī, and *al-Fāʿil* (2008) by Abū Julayyil. Finally, chapter 7 compares the humour-generating strategies and the thematic and stylistic peculiarities of these novels.

We have identified some common strategies, such as the anecdotic structure, the use of stock characters in a contemporary context, and the juxtaposition of different registers, including Egyptian Colloquial Arabic and jargon. Recurrent stylistic features are the image of the double, repetitions, and grotesque physical descriptions. On a thematic level, these novels focus on the rural-urban relation, social injustice, and a re-reading of official historiography.

With its variety of forms and characters, this humorous sub-genre fits into the innovation of contemporary Egyptian fiction, by portraying the relation between the self and the community in a playful or tragicomic way.

# NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION AND TRANSLATION

### Transliteration of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA)

I use the standard of *IJMES* (International Journal of Middle East Studies) for transliterating Modern Standard Arabic. Initial *hamza* is not transliterated and no distinction is made between ā from *alif* or *alif maqṣūra*.

Familiar geographical names such as Iraq, Mecca, and Baghdad are given in their common English spelling; other geographical names are transliterated.

The names of renowned public figures are given in their common English spelling but, when first referred to, the transliteration from Arabic is also given. For instance, Nasser (Jamāl ʿAbd al-Nāṣir).

### Transliteration of Egyptian Colloquial Arabic (ECA)

For the transliteration of colloquial texts, I follow Marylin Booth, *Bayram al-Tunisi's Egypt: Social Criticism and Narrative Strategies*. London: Ithaca Press, 1990.

The main variations from transliteration of MSA are:

– The definite article *al-* in MSA becomes *il-* in ECA; it is assimilated where appropriate to what precedes (*l-*) and/or follows (*[i]s-s*).

– *Tāʾ marbūṭa* in construct *-at* in MSA becomes *-it* in ECA.

– *Jīm* in MSA becomes *gīm* in ECA or, in the cases where reproduction of Delta or Ṣaʿīdī pronunciation is intended, *jīm* (to distinguish it from reproduction of *qāf* as *gīm* in the same context).

– Diphthongs *ay* and *aw* in MSA become *ē* and *ō* respectively in ECA. Where *ū* is pronounced as *ō* (as in *rōḥ*), the latter is also used.

### Bibliographic reference for novels

When first referred to, the Arabic title of a novel will be followed by the year of its first publication, the title, and date of its published English translation (when available). Subsequent citations will include only the Arabic title or its first part if the novel is mentioned frequently. For instance, *Riḥlāt al-ṭurshajī al-ḥalwajī* (1981/1983; *The Time-Travels of the Man Who Sold Pickles and Sweets*, 2010), shortened as *Riḥlāt* in subsequent citations.

When no English translation is available, the Arabic title will be followed by my translation. For instance, *Isṭāsiyya* (2010, Ecstasy).

## Quotations

When quoting from the novels of the corpus (in the chapter where each of them is analysed as a case study), I give a number referring to the page/s of the English translation, followed by a number referring to the Arabic edition used. When quoting from these novels in other chapters, the numbers are preceded by the shortened version of the title. For instance, (*al-Fāʿil* 5/13) in ch. 2, but (5/13) in ch. 6.

When quoting from novels closely related to the corpus, I adopt the same referring system and add the shortened version of the title. For instance, (*Luṣūṣ* 53/56) both in ch. 2 and ch. 6.

When quoting from other novels, I provide the full reference of the original Arabic and English translation in a footnote.

When quoting from a novel, I refer to the published English translation, maintaining its chosen transliteration principle. When I disagree on the translation of a term or passage, I provide my own version. To highlight a significant term or passage, I put the transliteration of the original Arabic in square brackets.

# INTRODUCTION

Egyptians are known among the Arabs as *awlād al-nukta* (sons of the joke) for their passion for jokes and their ability to laugh even in hard times. Their proverbial sense of humour tackles political issues and is exploited in cultural productions such as comedy films, theatre, and cartoons. Recent studies have employed humour as a critical lens to explore some social phenomena and literary trends in contemporary Egypt: political humour is seen as a form of creative resistance in the 2011 revolution and its aftermath, whereas slapstick verbal humour characterizes satirical prose published after 2005.

As regards the first aspect, political humour played a significant role in the mass protests of Maydān al-Taḥrīr. It was expressed in slogans, chants, stand-up comedy, placards, and jokes circulating in the square and on social media; in the following weeks, it informed the production of graffiti, videos, TV shows, and cartoons.

The Egyptian poet Īmān Mirsāl (b. 1966) defined the demonstrators' sense of humour as 'revolutionary humour', which created a sense of solidarity in the square and challenged the official discourse with its collective creativity.[1] Scholars in various fields (sociology, psychology, media studies, linguistics, translation, and popular culture) have monitored the evolution of humour after 2011, since it commented on, and was exposed to, the changes in the political scenario. These studies point at the variety of cultural productions employing humour, the involvement of the audience, and the impact of the new media.[2]

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[1] Iman Mersal, 'Revolutionary Humor', *Globalizations* 8, no. 5 (October 2011): 669–74.

[2] Randa Aboubakr has focused on the new media and parodic translation, see: Randa Aboubakr, 'The Role of New Media in the Egyptian Revolution of 2011. Visuality as an Agent of Change', in *Popular Culture in the Middle East and North Africa: A Postcolonial Outlook*, ed. Walid El Hamamsy and Mounira Soliman, Routledge (New York, 2013), 231–45; and Id., 'Mock Translation in the Blogosphere: The Creation of an Alternative Discourse' (Paper presented at the workshop 'Researching Translation in the Context of Popular Culture: Theoretical and Methodological Perspectives', University of Manchester, 13 February 2015).

Amongst the cultural productions which have been extensively studied are political jokes, cartoons, and satirical TV shows, like *il-Barnāmag* by Bāsim Yūsuf (b. 1974). See below, 1.3.7 and 1.4.

The central role of humour in the Egyptian uprisings challenges two wide-spread misconceptions, *i.e.* that the Arabs do not express any political dissent and that they are void of sense of humour. The latter issue was debated after the publication of cartoons depicting prophet Muḥammad on a Danish newspaper in 2005 and after the killing of the editors of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* on January 7, 2015. It was somehow unexpected for Western media that Arab cartoonists, like their international colleagues, drew vignettes in memory of the victims and in defence of freedom of speech.[3] In addition, the working practice of cartoonists in the Arab world suggests that the boundaries of legitimate satire are constantly shifting and are not confined to religious extremism.

As for the second object of recent research, popular humour in Egypt functions as political commentary both in times of revolt and oppression. Some years before the 2011 revolution, when oppression intensified the population's discontent, satirical writings criticizing socio-political issues and portraying everyday life with humour became popular. According to Jacquemond, these texts have revived the genre of *adab sākhir* (satirical literature), developed by the pioneers of modern Egyptian literature at the turn of the 20th century in satirical magazines, fictionalized essays, and early realist fiction.[4]

This new generation of satirical writers came mainly from the field of journalism, scriptwriting, and blogging. They either published satirical books or collected their columns and fictionalized essays in book form, usually under the label of *adab sākhir* to make them recognizable. These publications had high sales rates, for instance at Cairo Book Fair 2009 and 2010, and still circulate online.[5]

As it happened with their antecedents, critics have questioned the literary status of these texts because of their popular publication venues, confusion between fact and

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[3] Ian Black, 'Arab Cartoonists Pen Their Response to Charlie Hebdo Affair', *The Guardian*, 15 January 2015; Caterina Pinto, 'I vignettisti arabi stanno con Charlie Hebdo', *Arab Media Report*, 9 January 2015.

[4] Richard Jacquemond, '*The Yacoubian Building* and Its Sisters: Reflections on Readership and Written Culture in Modern Egypt', in *Popular Culture*, 144–61.

[5] Marcia Lynx Qualey, 'The Rise of Egyptian Satiric Literature: Good, Bad, Indifferent?', *Arabic Literature (in English)*, 14 October 2010.

fiction, and mixture of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), Egyptian Colloquial Arabic (ECA), and slang.[6]

Like popular jokelore and other forms of political humour, these writings offer a satirical commentary of the Egyptian socio-political landscape in years of significant changes and are affected by the shifting red lines of freedom of expression: while this cultural outlet represented a limited threat for the state before 2011, the situation has changed with the counter-revolution.

At the same time, scholarly interest in these writings is increasing. Perhaps this is due to their affinity with other genres in the most recent literary production, the evolution of the political scenario, and a broader interest in popular culture. Besides Jacquemond's examination of the bestsellers phenomenon, linguistic studies explore the multiple linguistic registers of these texts. In addition, the 12th Euramal conference (University of Oslo, 2016) has included *adab sākhir* among those literary trends which uphold humanity in a world characterized by socio-political collapse and community disintegration. The conference's organizers, who translate *adab sākhir* as carnivalesque or subversive literature, suggest that this genre breaks literary conventions while offering a non-serious, often satirical, form of resistance to reality.[7]


This attention to the comic subversive dimension of recent social phenomena and cultural productions has led us to considering the interplay of humour, satirical criticism, and literature in Egypt. On a broad level, we are interested in identifying how the Egyptian proverbial sense of humour is employed in recognized fictional writings and which analytical framework is suitable for their study. Another concern is the critical reception of texts combining humour and literature, satirical criticism and aesthetic value.

The reception of a very recent Egyptian novel, *Nisāʾ al-Karantīnā* (2013; *Women of Karantina*, 2014) by Nāʾil al-Ṭūkhī (b. 1978), has raised some points worth of consideration for our field of interest. Set in the near future (from 2064 back to 2006), *Nisāʾ al-Karantīnā* reconstructs the criminal history of Alexandria over three generation

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[6] This debates, involving publishers, satirists, and novelists, are found in Egyptian dailies. See, e.g., Shaimaa Fayed, 'Oppression, Wealth Gaps Spurs Satire in Egypt', *Reuters Africa*, 13 October 2010.

[7] *12th Euramal Conference*, 'Upholding Humanity in a Post-Human World? Arabic Literature after the "Arab Spring"' (website).

of gangsters, using a maddening logic, epic tone, and humour. The novel was soon translated into English and longlisted for the *FT/Oppenheimer Funds Emerging Voices Award* (2015). It was a commercial success and attracted great attention among Arab and Western reviewers.

These reviews point at the novel's stylistic innovations and its sarcastic sense of humour. For instance, the Egyptian novelist Maḥmūd al-Wardānī (b. 1950) defines *Nisāʾ al-Karantīnā* "a new twist in the evolution of the form of the Egyptian novel itself" and suggests that "humour marks an essential anchor for the novel, giving it additional glamour";[8] whereas Paul Starkey argues that a sarcastic brand of humour suffuses the whole account in this "exciting and original work, which represents an important contribution to contemporary Egyptian and Arab literature".[9]

In a book launch, al-Ṭūkhī was asked why his novel is described as a literary innovation. He answered that the novelty lies in his choice to use sense of humour in an artistic work, while humorous books – especially those defined as sarcastic or satirical – are usually seen as a second-rate distinct genre in Egyptian literature.[10] Al-Ṭūkhī mentioned the novels of the Palestinian Imīl Ḥabībī (1922-1996) and the Egyptian Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm (b. 1937) as literary works that have previously used humour.

Like al-Ṭūkhī, we are aware of the partially negative reception of *adab sākhir*, even though we also see an increasing interest, confirmed by the afore-mentioned Euramal conference and recent scholarship re-examining early modern satirical literature. Recent studies, in fact, have shed light on the literary qualities of the works of the pioneers: while satire responds to the political context, it is also integrated with the thematic focus, narrative and linguistic strategies. This re-evaluation is the background for the study of other possible combinations of literature and humour.

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[8] Mahmoud El-Wardani, 'Book Review: The Secret World of Alexandria', *Ahram Online*, 26 May 2013.

[9] Paul Starkey, 'Book Reviews - Women of Karantina', *Banipal*, no. 53 (2016).

Other reviews are: Muḥammad Faraj, 'Malḥama "Nisāʾ al-Karantīnā" al-sākhira', *Al-Mudun*, 5 May 2013; Muḥammad Khayr, 'Nisāʾ al-Karantīnā.. al-sukhriyya min al-mustaqbal', *Al-Taḥrīr*, 8 June 2013; and Aḥmad Nadā, 'Nisāʾ al-Karantīnā.. al-wuṣūl ilā l-malḥama', *Akhbār al-adab*, 5 October 2013; Marcia Lynx Qualey, 'Discussing "Women of Karantina": A Savage Comic Epic, Relentlessly Ironic, Uncompromisingly Rude, Profoundly Moral, Totally True', *Arabic Literature (in English)*, 13 October 2014.

[10] Nael Eltoukhy interviewed by AUC Press, *The man behind 'Women of Karantina'*, 3 December 2014 (video). See also: Nael Eltoukhy interviewed by Nataša Ďurovičová, *On the Map 2015: Nael Eltoukhy*, Interviews with Writers in Residence (The University of Iowa), 16 February 2016 (video).

In contrast with the critical attitude towards *adab sākhir*, al-Ṭūkhī explains the positive recognition of his novel with its innovative compositional method (combining sense of humour and literary quality). His claim for innovation is justified by the little critical attention to this compositional method in previous novels. Our study will investigate the literary context in which *Nisāʾ al-Karantīnā* emerges: in other words, we shall ask whether it appears in a vacuum or belongs to a fictional sub-genre. In our attempt to reconstruct this background, al-Ṭūkhī guides us by mentioning two established writers such as Ḥabībī and Ibrāhīm.

This literary debate has inspired us to look at contemporary Egyptian fiction to identify a sub-genre of humorous novels anticipating the interplay of humour and literature of *Nisāʾ al-Karantīnā*. Our purpose is going beyond the labels of satire, sarcasm, irony, cynicism found in reviews to study some common strategies which produce the overall humorous effect in these writings. Furthermore, we wish to add other masters of humour to the afore-mentioned pioneers of the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Ḥabībī, and Ibrāhīm.


To this aim, the present study examines literary humour in selected novels published from the 1980s till the 2000s by Muḥammad Mustajāb (1938-2005), Khayrī Shalabī (1938-2011), and Ḥamdī Abū Julayyil (b. 1968). Our starting assumption is that humour is a key feature in these works, both on a thematic and stylistic level. It is not limited to ironic asides and laughable episodes, but constructs the fictional world upon a playful logic and tackles serious issues in an amusing way. In this sense, the examined works can be defined as humorous novel: they maintain a recurring comic effect (opposed to a serious purport) generated by the series of adventures and misadventures of the characters.

As regards the time span of our study, we have chosen three decades in which Egyptian fiction moves away from the realist paradigm of representation by introducing multiple formal experimentations. Mustajāb and Shalabī belong to the so-called Generation of the Sixties, whereas Abū Julayyil belongs to the Generation of the Nineties. Both generations have developed formal innovations employing humour-related phenomena, such as ironic distance, ambiguity, parody, and the absurd.

This evolution of the Egyptian novel starting in the 1970s-1980s has been extensively studied. In addition, ironic distance has been examined as the main compositional

principle in some of the most acclaimed novels published in these decades, such as *al-Lajna* (1981; *The Committee*, 2002) by Ibrāhīm and *al-Zaynī Barakāt* (1971; *Zayni Barakat*, 1988) by Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī (1945-2015).

Keeping in mind this context, our purpose is to contribute to the study of the Egyptian novel since the 1980s by identifying a sub-genre which combines literary innovations and humorous style. By focusing on this period, we also aim at filling the gaps in the canon of Egyptian literary humour, which starts with re-discovered pioneers of satirical writing and continues till recent publications, acclaimed or criticized for the way they activate sense of humour.

In doing so, we hope to challenge the canonized approach to humorous fiction. While humour has been examined so far as one of the stylistic features of some writers, presented almost as exceptions, we adopt a comparative approach to identify a literary trend and compare humour-generating strategies in multiple texts. In addition, we focus on writers who are not placed outside the canon, but on its periphery: Mustajāb, Shalabī, and Abū Julayyil are established novelists, who have recently increased their critical recognition, but are still understudied in comparison to their contemporaries.

While looking at the periphery of the canon, we have noted a connection between the depiction of marginal communities in liminal spaces and an intense production of humour. We shall investigate which characters, themes, and linguistic choices render this local sense of humour in an artistic way.

Finally, the study of literary humour combines a local and a cross-cultural dimension, since wordplay and cultural references are usually highly local, while some humour-generating strategies and characters are recurrent across literatures. In this respect, literary criticism often looks at the external influences (Western literary genres and concepts) on the development of trends and sub-genres in Arabic fiction. Our study, instead, focuses on the internal influences. We shall illustrate how these humorous novels belong to the Egyptian canon and how they interact with the rich tradition of Arab literary and popular humour. Still, Mustajāb, Shalabī, and Abū Julayyil, like other Arab novelists, are influenced by multiple readings and consciously belong to the Egyptian and international literary scenes.

In order to satisfy our two-fold purpose, we combine the contextual study of the Egyptian literary field with a close reading of the four selected novels. Our theoretical background is placed at the intersection of humour studies and literary criticism. After looking at the main humour theories to understand the mechanisms of verbal humour, we apply these mechanisms to narratological categories, themes, and style.

Our contextual and textual analysis aims at investigating the following issues:

1. identify the authors of Egyptian humorous novels since the 1980s; the connections between them; recurrent themes and forms in their literary output; the critical recognition (or lack of recognition) of their contribution to literary humour;

2. the narrative strategies generating humour on the macro-level of structure; the rhetorical strategies generating humour on the micro-level of comical episodes;

3. the main features of humorous characters; strategies to construct them; re-elaboration of stock characters of Arabic literature and folklore;

4. the themes tackled in a playful way and the targets of satire;

5. the depiction of marginal spaces and communities to generate humorous effects; the culture of laughter in these groups;

6. the elements of the Arab cultural heritage *(turāth)* revived to generate humour;

7. the references to popular humour inserted in literary texts to generate humour;

8. the functions of humour in the selected novels;

9. the similarities and differences in these author's strategies; the thematic and stylistic evolution in humorous novels over the three decades.

In order to answer these questions, the present study is structured as follows.

CHAPTER 1 defines literary humour and its terminology. Then, it illustrates our theoretical background in humour studies: we look at the main aesthetic-philosophical (incongruity, superiority, and relief) and linguistic theories (General Theory of Verbal Humour, GTVH) in their application to literary texts. Despite their different approaches, all theories identify two axes for the creation of humour: a cognitive mechanism and an attitudinal positioning. From the adaptation of GTVH for the study of literary texts, we draw the concept of humour enhancers, *i.e.* those strategies which are not humorous in themselves but increase the pleasure of reading and the experience of humour.

The third part of this chapter reviews recent scholarship about humour in Arabic literature, which focuses mainly on pre-modern literature, popular drama, and satirical journalism in the late Ottoman Empire. Finally, the last part of this chapter examines Egyptian political jokes to exemplify what Egyptians laugh at and how multiple approaches (sociological, content-based, linguistic, translation studies) can be combined in the study of verbal humour.

CHAPTER 2 illustrates the status of humorous writings in the canon of Egyptian fiction and outlines the selection criteria of our corpus. Beside the chronological criterion, all four novels have an overall humorous effect, feature funny characters, and contain comic performances. These peculiarities are recognized in reviews and partially in previous studies. We have also restricted our corpus according to a thematic criterion, *i.e.* the experience of humour of eccentric characters in marginal environments.

The second part of this chapter reconstructs the biographical profile and literary output of Mustajāb, Shalabī, and Abū Julayyil. This corpus can be seen as homogeneous not only for the thematic overlap, but also for some biographical affinities and dynamics of critical reception. In fact, Mustajāb and Shalabī have increased their recognition at the turn of the millennium, when Abū Julayyil reached his early-maturity. Their novels were awarded and translated into English almost in the same years, after 2005.

CHAPTERS 3-6 present the four novels of our corpus as case studies. We have selected two novels by Shalabī because he was a very prolific author, whose novels published in the 1990s-2000s represent the linking chain between old and new generations of writers and readers.

After a summary of the plot, each chapter illustrates the structure of the novel and the features of the narrating voice. The second part tackles the thematic focus and writing conventions, providing the context(s) for our study of humour: the socio-political context as portrayed in the book; the internal context, *i.e.* the thematic threads to which humour is attached; and the literary context, which includes writing conventions and models for each type of narrative.

In this sense, the titles of ch. 3-6 do not classify the type of humour (for instance, comedy, satire of mores, sarcasm, dark humour) but refer to the type of narrative: biography and folk tale in *Min al-tārīkh al-sirrī li-Nuʿmān ʿAbd al-Ḥāfiẓ* (1982; *The Secret History of Nu'man Abd al-Hafiz*, 2008) by Mustajāb; time-travelling in *Riḥlāt al-*

*ṭurshajī al-ḥalwajī* (1981/1983; *The Time-Travels of the Man Who Sold Pickles and Sweets*, 2010) by Shalabī; the neo-realistic representation of a sub-culture in *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa* (2000; *The Hashish Waiter*, 2011) also by Shalabī; and finally, the migration tale in *al-Fāʿil* (2008; *A Dog with No Tail*, 2009) by Abū Julayyil. This choice reflects our interest in the way humour plays with and partly subverts these writing conventions.

The published translations of all four novels have been an invaluable resource for rendering the quotations into idiomatic English and preserving the comic effect. In our analysis, we have referred to the original Arabic, but we quote from the published English translations. Cross-referring the quotations has made us familiar with multiple strategies for transferring humour across texts and cultures. Furthermore, the translators' notes and interviews have guided us in the appreciation of humour.

The third and last part of each case study is devoted to the analysis of humorous strategies and episodes, with a focus on characters, intertextuality, and language.

The close reading of the four novels reveals a set of humour generating strategies, which are compared in CHAPTER 7.

# Chapter 1

# HUMOUR IN ARABIC LITERATURE

This chapter looks at the study of humour in literary texts, with a focus on the Arabic literary tradition. It defines the peculiarities of literary humour within humour studies and suggests that it is related to other phenomena like satire, irony, and parody. This complexity is reflected by the terminology and the criteria for identifying humorous literary texts.

For the analysis of these texts, this chapter illustrates the main philosophical-aesthetic and linguistic humour theories. An integrated model allows to identify the cognitive mechanism and attitudinal positioning that generate humour, when they are combined with the formal aspects of the texts. In other words, how does a text make the audience laugh? The so-called humour enhancers increase the pleasure of reading and make the experience of humour smoother and more effective.

One of the humour enhancers is familiarity with the humorous tradition in a certain culture. Therefore, the second part of this chapter provides a historical overview of the notion of the comic, its forms, and stock characters in the Arabic literary tradition on the basis of three recent edited volumes. Our focus is more on prose narratives than poetry and drama to provide a background for our analysis of contemporary novels.

This overview suggests that the study of humour in contemporary literature is often intertwined with socio-political satire and popular humour. Political humour is exemplified by the Egyptian jokes examined in the last part of this chapter. They allow us to look at the Egyptian context, the circulation of humour, and its functions in contemporary society. Jokes, as an example of popular humour, and the comic literary tradition represent the cultural references for modern humorous writers.

# 1.1 Literary humour

Humour is broadly defined as a human activity that functions as a powerful social tool, able to ease tension and create affinity. In everyday life, we encounter different forms of humour expressed through verbal, non-verbal or mimical, written, and graphic channels.

Some types of humour are circulated by the media. This category includes television sitcoms, stand-up comedies, humorous advertisement, film and theatrical production of comedies, cartoons, comics, political satire, and humorous literary compositions. In other occasions, humour is deliberately employed as a rhetorical tool in communication, for example in political speeches and religious sermons. Furthermore, it is present in everyday social intercourse, in formal and informal interactions.

According to R.A. Martin, interpersonal humour can be divided into three types: intentional verbal humour when telling jokes and amusing anecdotes; spontaneous conversational humour, which can be verbal (for example, ironic comments and witty repartees) and non-verbal; and accidental or unintentional humour. The latter can be linguistic (the so called Freudian slips) or physical (for example, slipping on a banana peel).[11]

In all the examples illustrated above, humour entails a relevant communicative dimension: utterances or actions are not humorous in themselves, but somebody should perceive them as funny and have a positive reaction. This communicative dimension implies the relevance of the context. For example, slipping on a banana peel can generate different reactions according to the status of the victim, his or her ability to take things not too seriously, and the context in which the incident happens.

Communication and context are important for our analysis of humour in literature. This section defines literary humour, describes this field, and the related terminology.

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[11] Rod A. Martin, *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach* (Burlington, MA: Elsevier Academic Press, 2007), 10-15.

## 1.1.1 Definition of the field

Humour is studied by several different disciplines, including philosophy, psychology, anthropology, folklore, and history of religions. Scholars agree that it is difficult to give a comprehensive definition because of its various functions and forms, as well as its proximity to other related phenomena, such as comedy, irony, satire, and sarcasm.

In the common use, humour is defined as something funny and light-hearted that makes people laugh or smile. Scholars have tried to narrow down this concept according to their respective approaches. We shall compare two scholarly definitions, taken from the fields of psychology and literary criticism respectively:

> [H]umor is essentially an emotional response of mirth invoked in a social context that is elicited by the perception of playful incongruity and is expressed through smiling and laughter.[12]

> In a broad sense, humor is connected to the deviation from the ordinary and conventional, which causes relief from the psychological and social restrictions imposed on men, whereas the relief is expressed through smile or laughter.[13]

Both definitions identify the physical reaction to humour, ranging from smile to laughter; its positive emotional effect, either in terms of mirth or relief; and the causes that produce humour, mentioning incongruity and deviation from the ordinary.

Humour theories have elaborated these definitions' key-concepts, *i.e.* the cognitive-perceptual process and the emotional response, in order to answer the following questions: what is funny? How does humour occur? These theoretical approaches will be illustrated in 1.2. For now, the afore-mentioned general definitions are sufficient for focusing on the peculiarities of literary humour.

Literary critics acknowledge the difference between experiencing humour and reading about it on paper: the latter may seem a dry and dead record of what it is in social interactions. However, it becomes less ephemeral and circulates in a different way among different audiences; furthermore, its aesthetic value is increased by the complexities of the literary composition.

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[12] Ibid., 10. Martin's definition contains the four essential components of the humour process viewed from a psychological perspective: a social context, a cognitive-perceptual process, an emotional response, and the vocal-behavioural expression of laughter. Martin examines each of them at pp. 5-10.

[13] Georges Tamer, 'Introduction', in *Humor in der arabischen Kultur / Humor in Arabic Culture*, ed. Id. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009), xi.

Studies in this field have looked at single authors, national literary traditions, ethnic and gender-based humour, specific genres such as young-adult fiction, scatological humour, and hate jokes. The literary representation of laughter and smile, in their degrees of intensity, has attracted less attention.

A preliminary issue is the definition of literary humour and the texts suitable for the analysis. Triezenberg provides an inclusive definition: "'literary humor' shall be defined as anything funny inside any piece of fiction, drama or narrative. What is and is not 'funny' depends on what theory of humor is being subscribed to."[14] Larkin Galiñanes, instead, adopts "the overall humorous effect" (opposed to the serious purport) as the main criteria to select the humorous novels of her study.[15]

These considerations raise a relevant question: are sitcoms, short anecdotes told in commercials, and satirical newspaper columns with a narrative structure suitable for literary analysis?[16] In other words, what is a humorous literary text?

If we transpose these questions to the context of Arabic literature, we find that the categories of *adab hazlī* (jocular literature) and *adab sākhir* (satirical literature) gather various texts with a clearly entertaining aim. This aim, together with the thematic focus and the language use in these texts, has determined the canonical distinction from high literature with a serious purport.

The existence of specific categories (*hazlī* and *sākhir*) makes one wonder whether the analysis of literary humour should be confined to texts with a pervasive presence of humour or may include narratives tackling serious issues. At the same time, the term *adab* (literature) drives the attention to the qualities that humorous texts should possess to be qualified as literary, which vary according to the cultural context and canon formation. This issues will be discussed in relation to the contemporary Egyptian literature when outlining the selection guidelines for our corpus.

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[14] Katrina E. Triezenberg, 'Humor in Literature', in *The Primer of Humor Research*, ed. Victor Raskin (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2008), 524.

[15] Cristina Larkin Galiñanes, 'Narrative Structure in Humorous Novels: The Case of Lucky Jim', *Babel afial: Aspectos de filología inglesa y alemana*, no. 1 Extra (2002): 141–70.

[16] The example of satirical columns with a narrative structure is suitable also for the Egyptian context, where these writings – abundant in periods of political oppression – are seen at the intersection between fiction and non-fiction.

The study of literary humour is placed at the convergence of humour studies and literary criticism. As Nilsen and Nilsen suggest, these two fields look at certain textual aspects and the figurative use of the language:

> This means that literary humor scholars have much in common with critics of literature in general because of the extensive overlap between what humor scholars describe as the most common features of humor and the characteristics that literary critics look for in narratives including ambiguity, exaggeration, hostility, irony, superiority, surprise, shock, word play, incongruity and incongruity resolution.[17]

In the present research, humour is the lens allowing to explore the formal and stylistic features of selected literary texts, with a focus on the characters, narrative techniques generating ambiguity, language use, and intertextuality. Conversely, the instance of a joke and the construction of characters in literary writings may confirm something about the general mechanisms of humour.

In this respect, one common feature of literary and non-literary humour is transferability. It is defined as the possibility of laughing at the same joke in different contexts. Even though humour is considered a universal phenomenon, it varies with the cultural context, which changes synchronically from one place to another and diachronically with historical (socio-political, cultural, and aesthetic) circumstances.

The diachronic perspective reveals the ephemeral nature of humour. When classical literary texts of the Western and Arabic traditions are read by today's audience, the experience of humour is different. The reader may miss some cultural references or the whole conception of what is funny has changed, as remarked by Triezenberg and Tamer respectively:

> Shakespeare's comedies are also usually funny, but unlike the Greek bawdy plays and satires, their humour lies in word play – puns, allusions, and double-entendres that are very often lost on today's audience. Careful perusal of an annotated version of *Love's Labours Lost* or *All's Well That Ends Well* will reveal the surprising density of jokes in these plays, which are supposed to have had Elizabethan audiences roaring with laughter.[18]

> When I read jokes and amusing anecdotes of court jesters from the Abbasid period, I cannot always laugh at every joke. I regard some of them as even contemptuous and tasteless. My impression of the joke will not change even when I read how the caliph laughed until he nearly died.[19]

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[17] Alleen Nilsen and Don Nilsen, 'Literature and Humor', in *Primer*, 246.
[18] Triezenberg, 'Humor in Literature', 527.
[19] Tamer, 'Introduction', xii. See also Id., 'Arabic culture, humor in', in *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*, ed. Salvatore Attardo (SAGE, 2014), 55. Here, Tamer quotes a phrase used in pre-modern Arabic literature

As a culturally bound phenomenon, humour demands to be examined with reference to its historical framework; in turn, it provides valuable insights about those who produce, consume, and disseminate it in a certain society. Moreover, as a culturally bound phenomenon based on communication, humour can go beyond borders through translation. Translation struggles to make humour accessible in the target language and culture using creative strategies and accepting inevitable losses.

Chelala applies translation studies to compare two American and two Arab modern authors (M. Twain, E.A. Poe, M. Naʿīma, and I. Ḥabībī).[20] She argues that the humorous effect of the examined short stories is preserved in translation because these narratives share similar cross-cultural humour-generating techniques. Another form of translation, or better said transfer, consists in adapting similar jocular scripts and comic types to different cultures.

Besides these affinities between verbal and literary humour, scholars point out some differences. The first difference is length. Interpersonal humour and some forms of media humour are based on short texts, like jokes and witty comebacks, while humour in literature is examined in full length novels or plays, shorter writings like poems, essays, and short stories.

Length is linked to the second difference. Longer texts with aesthetic qualities entail more complexities and generate higher expectations, as Nilsen and Nilsen suggest:

> Among the reasons that comic novels and essays can more easily qualify as "literature" than can stand-up comedy is that the authors have space to include smart allusions and to tie them together. Because of lack of space, jokes and cartoons are necessarily filled with stereotypes, while more sophisticated literary pieces are lexically packed, meaning that several strands of humor are being developed simultaneously. In addition to using such surface structure techniques as puns and word play, authors of fuller pieces make use of such deep structure tropes as metaphors, similes, irony, and synecdoche. They have space to develop truly humorous characters and to establish and break patterns.[21]

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to describe the laughter-related reaction of the audience: "jokes that caused caliphs to fall on their backs from laughing." This phrase is found in Shalabī's novel *Riḥlāt*, which will be analysed in ch.4.

[20] Rania Chelala, 'Border-Crossing Laughter: Humor in the Short Fiction of Mark Twain, Mikhail Naimy, Edgar Allan Poe, and Emile Habiby' (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 2010).

[21] Nilsen and Nilsen, 'Literature and Humor', 245.

To be sure, the analysis of humour in a novel reveals how multiple strands and techniques are tied together to create an amusing effect. This type of study involves different narratological elements: the narrating voice, analysed in terms of narrative distance and polyphony; the fragmented or linear structure; characters, who evolve during the story and are usually more psychologically complex than in jokes and satirical columns; the language use, including figures of speech, variety of registers, and ironical echoes of the official discourse and literary conventions.

However, it may be objected that this choice, simply in terms of length and complexity, does not account for the influence of the literary canon. In the Western and the Arab traditions, the novel has emerged as the literary form that better represents the complexities and contradictions of modern reality. Thus, literary critics examine how the absurdities of life are represented with irony, satire, and sarcasm in the novels.

Anecdotes, published in newspapers and online, and funny stories circulating orally may entail a high degree of humour because of their succinct and repetitive structure. They receive attention mainly from folklore and communication studies, but not strictly from literary criticism. When jokes, anecdotes, and stock characters are inserted into a novel, they can be examined as humour-generating techniques.

Before looking at the study of humour in the Arabic literary tradition, we shall illustrate the terminology related to humour and its equivalents in Arabic.

## 1.1.2 Terminology

The Arabic term commonly used as equivalent to humour is *fukāha*. From the same root, the noun *fakīh* (humourist) is derived, to denote people known for their sense of humour and inclined to make witty remarks or tell funny stories. Something laughable is called *muḍḥik*, a word deriving from the verb *aḍḥaka* (to cause laughter).

It is hard to distinguish humour from other related phenomena, like irony, satire, and sarcasm. This situation is complicated by the imperfect correspondence of such concepts in the Anglophone and Arabophone traditions, and by multiple Arabic equivalents for the English terms. In this study, we shall follow ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd's guideline for Arabic-

English equivalents: *fukāha* for humour, *daʿāba* for wit, *nukta* for joke, *sukhriyya* for satire, *hijāʾ* for sarcasm, *ḥass al-fukāha* for sense of humour, and *tawriyya* for pun.[22]

The privileged form of humorous prose narrative is the anecdote, usually short and self-contained. The most common Arabic terms for anecdote are *nādira* and *laṭīfa*, but other words point out one aspect or another of these narratives, as Marzolph explains:

> *nādira* denotes a short, witty, subtle and amusing anecdote; *laṭīfa* for an elegant, pointed anecdote; *mulḥa* a 'salty', e.g. pleasant, witty anecdote (in contrast to *bārid*, 'cold', dull); *fukāha* (funny, humorous anecdote) and *muḍḥika* (anecdote making somebody laugh) are relatively modern terms. The term *al-adab al-hazlī* might serve best as general denomination.[23]

Since *al-adab al-hazlī* is considered the best general denomination, it is necessary to examine the key-concept of *hazl*, synonymous with *muzāḥ*. It refers to something said in jest, as the antithesis of seriousness *(jidd)*. Van Gelder's definition of *hazl* illustrates the proximity with other humour related phenomena: "*[al-hazl]* is not identical with 'humour', 'joking', or 'the comical', nor with 'nonsense', 'folly', or 'playfulness', even though there is a considerable overlap with all these."[24]

*Al-jidd wa-l-hazl* was a common expression and a literary *topos* in pre-modern Arabic literature. Nevertheless, there was not a perfect symmetry between the two elements of the couple, with *al-hazl* being the less prominent.

As Kishtainy notes, the etymology of these is linked to food: "*fukāha* (humour) is a derivative of *fākiha* (fruit), *mulḥa* (anecdote) is a derivative of *milḥ* (salt), *nukta* (joke) is associated with *nukat* (ripened dates), *hazl* (jest) means also leanness and *ẓarf* (refined wit) is the vessel used to bring food presents."[25] This etymological remark suggests, according to De Angelis, that Arabic culture needs humour in everyday life and attributes a life-giving power to it.[26]

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[22] Shākir ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd, *Al-fukāha wa-l-ḍaḥk: ruʾya jadīda* (Kuwayt: National Council for Culture, Arts and Literature, 2003) translated in Shahe S. Kazarian, 'Humor in the Collectivist Arab Middle East: The Case of Lebanon', *Humor – International Journal of Humor Research* 24, no. 3 (2011), 332. See also: Ibrāhīm Fatḥī, *Muʿjam al-muṣṭalaḥāt al-adabiyya* [Arabic-English Dictionary of Literary Terms] (s.l.: al-Muʾassasa al-ʿarabiyya li-l-nāshirīn al-muttaḥidīn, 1986).

[23] Ulrich Marzolph, 'humour', in *EAL*, 294. Cf. Tamer, 'Arabic culture, humor in'. Tamer suggests a similar classification, but substitutes *laṭīfa* with *ṭurfa*.

[24] Geert J. van Gelder, 'Mixtures of Jest and Earnest in Classical Arabic Literature. Part I', *Journal of Arabic Literature* 23, no. 2 (1992), 86.

[25] Khalid Kishtainy, *Arab Political Humour* (London: Quartet Books, 1985), 19-20.

[26] Francesco De Angelis, 'Graphic Novels and Comic Books in Post-Revolutionary Egypt: Some Remarks', *La Rivista di Arablit* V, no. 9–10 (December 2015), 34.

Another etymological interpretation suggests that effective jokes are something unique, different from the ordinary, providing pleasure. In this sense, Kishtainy points out that *nādira* derives from *nādir* (rare), whereas Kazarian argues that *fakiha* (fruit), a rarity in the desert, originally meant sweets.[27]

A discourse mode that makes use of humour is satire *(sukhriyya, tahakkum)*. It is hard to provide a clear definition, but Nilsen and Nilsen summarize the satirical mechanism in literature and its relation to humour:

> [the satirists'] goal is to portray life in such a way that readers will be shocked into a new way of thinking and will then take steps to correct the current wrongs of the world. Writers of satires can be deadly serious, but they often entice readers or listeners to stay with them through using sarcasm, and wit, along with humor that makes people feel wiser than the characters they are reading about.[28]

In other words, satire implies a moral standard, thus things are presented as right or wrong. It is grounded in reality, but this reality is distorted by means of exaggeration or fantasy, and is perceived as grotesque. Satire aims at showing and correcting the shortcomings of individuals, groups and society, whereas humour is based on a sense of superiority (in the afore-mentioned quote, the superiority consists of the reader's greater knowledge).

Black humour *(kūmīdyā sawdāʾ)* and its close relatives of absurdist humour and gallows humour derive from satire, although lacking its moralizing dimension. Black humour deals "with subjects that are usually too serious to be funny, such as war, death, and plague",[29] and bounces the readers back and forth between laughter and tears.

This capacity to laugh in face of tragedies is found in traditional folk humour about death and when humour is used as a resistance weapon in times of wars, including conflicts in Arab countries. Literary criticism traces black humour back to the feeling of helplessness expressed by some Western authors since the 1960s. In their works "black humor is a testament to the human spirit and its ability to survive and to laugh in the midst of chaos and destruction."[30] In this sense, it is linked to the philosophical concept of absurd.

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[27] Kishtainy, *Arab Political Humour*. Kazarian, 'Humor', 332.
[28] Nilsen and Nilsen, 'Literature and Humor', 248-49.
[29] Triezenberg, 'Humor in Literature', 531.
[30] Nilsen and Nilsen, 'Literature and Humor', 249.

As in the case of humour, there is no exact equivalent in Arabic for satire, especially if we refer to modes and genres of classical Arabic literature. Satire is rendered as *hijāʾ*, synonymous with *hajw*, which means invective and is normally restricted to poetry. As van Gelder notes,

> [m]uch invective poetry aims at ridicule, contempt and scorn, yet lacks a moral dimension which is the hallmark of true satire; conversely, there is a moralistic type of poetry that is called *hijāʾ* or *dhamm* ('blame') because it condemns or polemicizes, but which lacks the wit or sparkle usually associated with satire.[31]

Invective poetry was a central element of pre-Islamic poetry, in which poets of one Bedouin tribe or clan ridiculed the opposing tribe, at the same time reinforcing the ties within their own group. It was usually combined with vaunting *(fakhr)*. Moving from the scenario of nomadic life to the Umayyad court, poets like al-Akhṭal (d. *ca.* 710), al-Farazdaq (d. 728) and Jarīr (d. 729) were famous for exchanging flytings *(naqāʾiḍ)*. In Abbasid poetry, *hijāʾ* could serve to exalt the qualities of the patron in face of the defects of his opponents. A genre considered particularly suitable for this mode was the epigram, effective for its brevity.[32]

In pre-modern prose narratives, satire is found in anecdotes, the *maqāma*, treatises, and occasionally in catalogues listing bad manners and foibles. In performative arts, it was exploited in the language of mimes, live performances, and shadow theatre *(khayāl al-ẓill)*. Both the narrative and dramatic traditions have provided material for the evolution of satire in the modern and contemporary context, with its different socio-political conditions, targets, and modes of production.

## 1.2 Theoretical background

Humour in Arabic culture abounds in proverbs, sayings, jokes, and anecdotes, all of which scholars have attempted to collect. These collections often adopt a descriptive approach, since they select, arrange, and translate humorous texts according to their subject or historical period.

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[31] Geert J. van Gelder, 'satire, medieval', in *EAL*, 693.
[32] Geert J. van Gelder, '*hijāʾ*', in *EAL*, 284–85. See also: Id., *The Bad and the Ugly. Attitudes Towards Invective Poetry* (Hijāʾ) *in Classical Arabic Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1988).

These collections may have a general audience in mind, to which they present humour as a key element in Arabic culture, also rejecting the common idea that Arabs or Muslims have no sense of humour.[33] When these collections have a scholarly purpose, the descriptive approach leads to focus on the preservation of anecdotes, their translation, and commentary.[34] To this, they add some remarks on the peculiarities of humour in Arabic culture, as well as classical thinkers' theories on the nature and acceptability of laughter.

These descriptive studies rely on Western humour theories only for general definitions, but overlook the analysis of humour-generating techniques in the texts they collect. As Malti-Douglas notes, they do not ask themselves: "what elements of the anecdotal narrative make us laugh and why?"[35]

Malti-Douglas adopts a conscious theoretical approach for her textual analysis. We shall start from her model to illustrate the main humour theories elaborated between the end of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century, which are generally applied in the study of literary humour.

The second part of this section will focus on an influential linguistic humour theory: the General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH) by Attardo and Ruskin. Originally designed to explain the mechanisms of jokes, it has been modified for the analysis of longer narratives and full-length humorous literary texts.

## 1.2.1 Literature: an integrated model

### 1.2.1.1 Humour theories

Malti-Douglas illustrates the main features of Koestler's (1964), Bergson's (1901) and Freud's (1905) humour theories. She chooses these theories for their cultural relevance and application to literary studies, among a wide array of early humour conceptions elaborated by philosophers and literary critics in the last two centuries.

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[33] See, e.g., Paolo Branca, Barbara De Poli, and Patrizia Zanelli, *Il sorriso della mezzaluna. Umorismo, ironia e satira nella cultura araba* (Roma: Carocci, 2011) and Devin Stewart, 'Humor', in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Arab Culture*, ed. Dwight F. Reynolds (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 224–48.

[34] See, e.g., Franz Rosenthal, *Humor in Early Islam*, with an introduction by Geert J. van Gelder (Leiden: Brill, 2011) and Jean-Jacques Schmidt, *Le Livre de l'humour arabe* (Arles: Babel/Actes Sud, 2013).

[35] Fedwa Malti-Douglas, 'Humor and Structure in Two "Buḫalāʾ" Anecdotes: Al-Ǧāḥiẓ and Al-Ḫaṭīb Al-Baghdādī', *Arabica* XXVII, no. 3 (1980), 300. In note 1, p. 300, Malti-Douglas refers to studies conducted in the first half of the 20th century by Pellat, Margoliouth and Rosenthal.

Such early conceptions are usually grouped in conventional classification schemes. We rely on one of these schemes to highlight the connections and differences between these theories.[36]

Keith-Spiegel's classification scheme lists eight categories (biological, instinct, and evolution; superiority; incongruity; surprise; ambivalence; release and relief; configurational; and psychoanalytic). These can fall into three main classes of theories: hostility, incongruity and release/relief theories.[37]

Hostility theories, "whose roots lie in classical Greek and Roman rhetorical theory, include those theories of humor based on malice, hostility, derision, aggression, disparagement, and/or superiority."[38] They observe that we laugh in the face of other people's deficiencies, particularly those of our enemies. Bergson's theory shares this attitude, as he views laughter as a humiliation, directed against someone who does not elicit sympathy. Laughter is intended as a social corrective.[39]

The concepts of superiority and hostility emerge also in biological theories, that see humour and laughter as built-in to human nature. Bergson and other critics simply underline that laughter is restricted to the realm of the human. Some superiority theories forth an evolutionist claim that laughter is the expression of superior adaptation, whereas others argue that laughter functions as a substitute for a brutal reaction or aggression.

Incongruity theories argue that humour is caused by the incongruity in pairings of ideas or situations, as well as the perception of something outside the normal. Similarly, surprise theories insist on the surprise or shock in resolving such incongruity.

Both Bergson and Koestler locate the stimulus for humour in incongruity. Bergson thinks that humour is produced by the insertion of the mechanical upon the living *(du*

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[36] For a comprehensive study of humour theories, see, e.g., Giulio Ferroni, *Il comico nelle teorie contemporanee* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1974). For a detailed bibliography, see Amy Carrell, 'Historical Views of Humour', in *Primer*, 303–32. For a discussion of the established humour theories with many examples from literature, folklore, and social interaction, see: Vladimir Propp, *On the Comic and Laughter* (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 2009 [or. ed. 1976]).

[37] Patricia Keith-Spiegel, 'Early Conceptions of Humor: Variety and Issues', in *Psychology of Humor. Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Issues*, ed. Jeffrey H. Goldstein and Paul E. McGhee (New York and London: Academic Press, 1972), 4-13. Keith-Spiegel admits the conventional nature of classification schemes, as some theories can fall into more than one category, while others resist classification. Keith-Spiegel's scheme is mentioned by Malti-Douglas, 'Humour and structure', 301, note 5.

[38] Carrell, 'Historical Views', 313.

[39] Henri Bergson, *Le rire: essai sur la signification du comique* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1985 [1901]). Italian translation: Henri Bergson, *Il riso: saggio sul significato del comico* (Roma: Laterza, 1994).

*mécanique plaque sur du vivant)*. A person that behaves in an automatic or rigid manner is laughable.

Furthermore, "a situation is invariably comic when it belongs simultaneously to two altogether independent series of events and is capable of being interpreted in two entirely different meanings at the same time."[40] Koestler has coined the expression 'bisociation of matrices of thought or behavior', "that is, association at the same time of two elements not normally found together, generally because they belong to two different patterns of thought."[41]

Finally, release/relief theories perceive humour as a release of excess tension and a relief from social constraints. Freud's theory is usually framed within this class because he speaks of the release of comic pleasure that arises from the economy or condensation in the expenditure of psychic energy.[42] Such condensation is achieved by "juxtaposing and substituting words from different spheres," a mechanism that might remind of incongruity.[43]

### 1.2.1.2 Application to textual analysis

Malti-Douglas argues that the afore-mentioned conceptions provide categories which are either too broad (they may work for non-humorous texts as well) or too restrictive (they may leave out some forms of humour), when they are applied to literature singularly. Considered together, instead, they offer a set of causes or influences eliciting laughter, whose interaction should be made explicit when designing an integrated model.

In her model, she identifies two types of influences acting simultaneously, but from different directions which she represents as an horizontal and a vertical axis. The first type of influences are the techniques of joke formation, including: Koestler's bisociation, Freud's condensation and substitution, Bergson's reversal of the interaction roles in a given situation, incongruity and its resolution, surprise and exaggeration. The second type

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[40] Mentioned in Keith-Spiegel, 'Early Conceptions', 8.

[41] Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (New York: Macmillan, 1975 [1964]), 33-34.

[42] Sigmund Freud, *Der Witz und seine Bezieung zum Unbewussten* (Leipzig/Vienna: Deuticke, 1905). English translation: Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. J. Strachey (New York: Norton & Company, 1960. Italian translation: Sigmund Freud, *Il motto di spirito e la sua relazione con l'inconscio* (Torino: Boringhieri, 1975).

[43] Malti-Douglas, 'Humor and Structure', 302.

of influences are the psychological or attitudinal states necessary for the mechanical techniques to produce humour, including: superiority, aggression, *Schadenfreude*, Bergon's absence of sympathy with the subject, pleasure produced by the solution of ambiguity and by exerting power on the other, the appeal of subjects like the sexually or scatologically obscene.

These psychological states, which are more subject to variation in different cultures than the mechanical techniques, emerge in a dynamic interaction between the text and the reader. The focal points where the two axes encounter are the punchlines, which usually revolve around the main themes of the anecdote, thus providing thematic and organizational unit.


Malti-Douglas combines the afore-mentioned model with a structuralist prospective. She applies this two-folded methodology to the analysis of humour-generating techniques in jocular anecdotes revolving around avarice *(bukhl)*, a favoured comical topic in pre-modern Arabic literature. The two most famous collections of *bukhl* anecdotes are *Kitāb al-bukhalāʾ* (The Book of Misers) by al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 868-9) and al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (d. 1071) respectively.

Being micropoetic, the structuralist approach allows to isolate literary micro-units, in this case the stories revolving around *bukhl*, within the broader text.[44] Once identified, these anecdotes are associated with morphological categories on the basis of function-generating actions.

"Particular morphological categories are, to a limited extent at least, related to particular humour-generating tendencies, which are derived directly or indirectly from the nature of the narrative."[45] For Malti-Douglas's case studies, these associations are summarized by our table:

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[44] The structuralist approach seems particularly effective with pre-modern Arabic prose texts, whose basic building block is the *khabar* (a self-contained narrative containing the record of facts or specimens of oratory ascribed to a chain of transmitters).

[45] Malti-Douglas, 'Humor and Structure', 311. The concepts of morphological categories and functions are taken from Propp's narratology, further elaborated by Greimas.

| Action | Functions | Morphological category[46] | Humour-generating tendencies |
|---|---|---|---|
| The *bakhīl* is an agent | 1) demand of hospitality vs. 2) avoidance of the demand | hospitality | 1) stratagem to avoid the demand (suspense, surprise) 2) non-sympathy |
| The *bakhīl* is a patient | 1) the *bakhīl* is victim of an action → 2) he reacts with displeasure | *bakhīl*-victim | 1) non-sympathy 2) inversion of the *bakhīl*'s role, from agent to victim |

The first level of analysis examines the anecdote's structure to see how the humour-generating tendencies related to morphology build the narrative. In other words, it finds where in the story the expected tendencies manifest themselves. The second level of analysis moves to the semantic, syntactic, and rhetorical level within each narrative phase, to see how the two axes of influences interact in releasing tension and generating an explosion of humour.

These two levels illustrate that the object of humour is not simply the subject of a text (a person in real life and a character in literary texts), but the text itself.

Malti-Douglas places the analysis of humour in Arabic literary texts within a clear theoretical framework. Humour theories and narratological studies, elaborated by Western scholars, can be applied to multiple literary traditions, keeping in mind their cultural and linguistic specificities.

This model integrates the main humour theories, combining considerations about the cognitive processing and the attitudinal positioning. Both aspects influence the structure of the anecdotes and are visible in the semantic, syntactic, and rhetorical choices.

A similar approach is adopted by Larkin Galiñanes in the study of a contemporary American novel.[47] She summarizes the main theories related to the cognitive processing and the attitudinal positioning in order to see their implications for the structure, characters, plot, and narrating voice in humorous novels. She also proposes two levels of analysis that respectively look at the story (defined as the events and the characters'

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[46] If different morphological categories are combined in a single anecdote, there is a hesitation of roles that increases the tension and suspense.
[47] Larkin Galiñanes, 'Narrative Structure'.

interaction) and the discourse (how the narrator reports the events, which implies the communication between the narrator and the reader, as well as the reader's encyclopaedic knowledge of the world applied to the text).

## 1.2.2 Linguistics: GTVH applied to literary texts

Malti-Douglas applies structuralist narratological categories. Moving to the field of linguistics, the structuralist model (later called by Attardo 'isotopy-disjunction model') sees humour as the disjunction or passage from one isotopy to another. [48] Isotopy is a concept associated with Greimas's semantics, that Attardo suggests to interpret essentially as a sense of the text. Thus, isotopy-disjunction formulates incongruity theory with more specific linguistic terminology. This model relies also on narrative functions, introduced in humour research by Violette Morin. Attardo considers it too loose, since it does not apply exclusively to humorous narratives.

The linguistic study of humour initially focused on the taxonomy of puns, till Raskin marked an innovation with his Semantic-Script Theory of Humour (SSTH, 1985), to which the semantic-pragmatic dimension is central.

SSTH is based on the concept of the script, defined as "an enriched, structured chunk of semantic information, associated with word meaning and evoked by specific words."[49] In every joke two distinct scripts, opposed in a special way, fully or partially overlap. The punchline triggers the switch from one script to the other. At that point, the reader resolves the script-opposition as an unexpected reversal that elicits humour.

Scripts may be manifested as oppositions between 1) actual and non-actual (reality/unreality), 2) expected and unexpected, 3) possible and impossible situations. They usually involve binary categories essential to human life, such as real/unreal, true/false, good/bad, death/life, obscene/decent, rich/poor.

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[48] Salvatore Attardo, 'A Primer for the Linguistics of Humor', in *Primer*, 106-7.
[49] Victor Raskin, *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1985), 99.

Attardo and Raskin expanded SSTH into the General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH, 1991),[50] which identifies six dimensions in jokes, known as Knowledge Resources (KR). This model postulates a hierarchical dependence across the KRs:

1) Script Opposition (SO);

2) Logical Mechanism (LM) by which SO is resolved;

3) Situation (SI) in which the joke is set;

4) Target (TA), known as the butt of the joke, which is not always present;

5) Narrative Strategy (NS), that is the rhetorical structure of the text, or the joke's genre or micro-genre (for example, riddles, question and answer, and "crossing" jokes);

6) Language (LA) or diction, used to tell the joke, with its lexical, syntactic, and phonological choices.

Like SSTH, GTVH focuses exclusively on jokes; unlike the previous theory, it has an interest for social and narratological issues illustrated by three KRs (Situation, Narrative Strategy, and Language). These dimensions are not restricted to jokes, but are found in other narratives as well.

Due to this interest, Attardo expanded and adapted of GTVH for the analysis of longer humorous texts.[51] He suggests to read the text as a vector (only in one direction), along which it is possible to find instances of humour to be analysed as per the GTVH. Such instances of humour may appear in different positions in the text: punchlines are found at the end of the text, whereas jab lines are found anywhere else. Charting these lines allows to identify the thematic or formal connections between them and graph their patterns of occurrence in the text.

Triezenberg argues that GTVH and its expansion are necessary but not sufficient to describe humour in longer literary texts.[52] She points out that "[t]he script opposition structure works very well to describe an individual joke, and pretty well to describe a

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[50] Salvatore Attardo and Victor Raskin, 'Script Theory Revis(it)ed: Joke Similarity and Joke Representation Model', *Humor - International Journal of Humor Research* 4, no. 3–4 (1991): 293–348.

[51] Salvatore Attardo, *Humorous Texts: A Semantic and Pragmatic Analysis* (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2001) and Salvatore Attardo, Christian F. Hempelmann, and Sara Di Maio, 'Script Oppositions and Logical Mechanisms: Modeling Incongruities and Their Resolutions', *Humor - International Journal of Humor Research* 15, no. 1 (2002): 3–46.

[52] Triezenberg, 'Humor in literature', 537-39 and Id., 'Humor Enhancers in the Study of Humorous Literature', *Humor - International Journal of Humor Research* 17, no. 4 (2004): 411–18.

piece of humorous literature that depends on one big punch line near the end [...]. It works less well to describe the overall structure of a piece that is primary literature and, secondarily, funny."[53]

In these case, Triezenberg suggests to supplement the linguistic method with a literary method that should include humour enhancers. She defines humour enhancers as narrative techniques that are not funny in themselves, since they do not contain any discernible script opposition, but condition the audience for humour reception. These techniques increase the readers' experience of humour in the text by adding pleasure to the reading experience, lowering their efforts and defences, and connecting them with the author.

Triezenberg classifies humour enhancers as follows:

1) *Word choice or diction*

It is one of the six KRs in GTVH, where it is restricted to lists of rhetorical devices, such as alliteration, repetition, quotations, idioms, etc. It is considered a humour enhancer, because words are carefully chosen to activate a script in the minds of the audience. For example, "a joke about lawyers will benefit from being prefaced by legal jargon, and a joke about farmers will benefit from being prefaced by rustic idioms."[54]

2) *Shared stereotypes*

They are pieces of shared knowledge, or a known script, about the target. This makes the joke less painstaking to understand, thus increasing the experience of humour.

Stereotypes magnify some features that the reader half-consciously notices; they create a normal/abnormal opposition. Furthermore, humourists should make sure of choosing stereotypes that are not likely to offend the audience, unless this is their aim.

This strategy includes the use of stock characters, which are convenient for the author because the reader already knows them (with their peculiarities, contradictions, and foibles) and feel a pleasant expectation of humour to come.

3) *Cultural factors*

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[53] Triezenberg, 'Humor in literature', 539.
[54] Ibid.

Stereotypes, stock characters, and humour in general are culturally bound. Successful humorous writers are well-versed in the prejudices, hang-ups, and taboos of the intended audience, as well as the history of humour in that audience's culture.

4) *Familiarity of the issues*

It refers to two aspects: issues that are close to the reader's experience; and issues that have been tackled before, but are presenting in a fresh and original way. The reader recognizes humour with less effort, is more relaxed and self-confident, and laughs along.

5) *Repetition and variation*

It may be interpreted as an actual script opposition because normal language strives to avoid repetition. Furthermore, the same event happening over and over defies or exaggerates reality. Therefore, repetition activates the *expected/unexpected* script opposition.

Repetition influences the reader's expectations, while variation introduces something unexpected. Furthermore, humour is enhanced by the escalation of the situation and the admiration for the author's mastery at variation.

## 1.3 Modern scholarship on the Arabic humorous tradition

Humour enhancers highlight the culturally bound nature of humour. In the novels of our corpus, we shall examine repetition, stereotypes, and stock characters. Contemporary Egyptian writers recall and reinterpret the humorous tradition, drawing both from literary texts and folklore. These references activate the shared knowledge with the intended audience and represent a challenge for translators.

To grasp the richness of this tradition, this section provides an overview of the key concepts, literary tendencies, writers, themes, and characters of humour in the history of Arabic literature. It is based on three recent works edited by Fenoglio and Georgeon,

Tamer, and Parviz Brookshaw.[55] They systematize previous research (with the awareness that not all the authors and trends could be covered) and suggest an increasing interest in this subject.

*Humor in Arabic Culture* covers the longer historical spectrum, from the early literary sources (the Qurʾān and *ḥadīth*) till contemporary fiction and theatre. *Ruse and Wit* deals with classical Arabic and Persian literature, focusing on lesser studied topic. Its second part looks at satire in the 19th and early 20th century in Iran, the Ottoman empire, and cross-cultural contexts. Finally, *L'humour en Orient* covers several artistic and cultural productions in the modern and contemporary period: literary texts which do not belong to highbrow literature, satirical press, cinema, cartoons, and jokes. It illustrates the vitality of traditional humorous narratives and looks at the Ottoman empire as a fertile context for the birth of the modern satire.

All three volumes point at the cross-cultural nature of humour. Part 2 in *Humor in Arabic Culture* is devoted to this specific subject: it illustrates the circulation of the humorous tradition of classical Mediterranean cultures (including the Greek and Jewish) and is the interplay between oral and written materials. In *Ruse and Wit*, the cross-cultural nature lies in the comparison of three literary and cultural traditions of the Islamic world (Arabic, Persian, and Turkish) and the encounter with Europe. *L'humour en Orient* looks at the circulation of comic themes, types, and media across the Mediterranean.

## 1.3.1 Religion

Part 1 in *Humor in Arabic Culture* explores the relation between humour and religion in the three monotheisms, whose Holy Scriptures are often considered devoid of humour. In the chapter dedicated to the Qurʾān, Tamer starts with some examples of the seriousness of God's words, but then examines various statements and situations contained Holy Book that reflect humour and related phenomena, such as laughter and mockery.[56]

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[55] Tamer, ed., *Humor in Arabic Culture*; Irène Fenoglio and François Georgeon, eds., *L'humour en Orient, Revue du monde musulman et de la Méditerranée*, no. 77–78 (1997); and Dominic Parviz Brookshaw, ed., *Ruse and Wit: The Humorous in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish Narrative* (Boston and Washington: Ilex Foundation and the Center for Hellenic Studies, 2012).

[56] Georges Tamer, 'The Qurʾān and Humor', in *Humor in Arabic Culture*, 3-28.

Firstly, he comments on an early Meccan passage (Q 53:43-46) concerning the theological theme that everything in human life is under God's control: it is the Lord who causes man to laugh and to cry, to live and to die, and created the pair, the male and the female, from an emitted sperm. As regards humour in the broad sense, laughter owes its creation to God and the parallelism implies that laughing and weeping are inseparable constituents of human life. Therefore, this passage was often quoted by Medieval Muslim thinkers to legitimize laughter.

Secondly, Tamer suggests that humour in the Qurʾān is informed by a sense of superiority or aggression, both when tackling theological and eschatological issues (for example, the rejection of the polytheistic belief of God having daughters and the Final Judgement) and when confronting with the unbelievers, the Jews, and the community's opponents.

The *ḥadīth* provide a double image of the Prophet Muḥammad: some traditions describe him as serious, whereas other traditions portray him in amusing behaviours, like playing with children or talking in jest to some women. This attitude does not exceed the sense of measure: a tradition reports that the prophet used to laugh until his molar teeth became visible.

Tamer concludes that Islamic jurisprudence does not exclude humour, but poses certain restraints on laughter under the concept of dignity and measure *(ḥilm)*: "Everything that leads to sociability and temporary rest from work is recommended, whereas everything that breaks the rules of sincerity, chastity and temperance is prohibited."[57]

Such restrictions defined the clear boundaries within which the Qurʾān and religious practice could become the subject of humour in Arabic jocular anecdotes, compiled ever since the 9th century.

Tamer argues that this literature does not ridicule the Holy Book and does not challenge the claim of the revelation. Instead, it makes fun of certain categories of people

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[57] Tamer, 'Arabic culture, humour in', 58.

because of the way they perform the religious practices. In these case, Qurʾānic quotations may be inserted to generate the comic effect.[58]

For example, Qur'anic verses are applied to alien contexts or intentionally misquoted (with some words substituted and different verses combined) to serve the amusing purposes of the anecdotes' protagonists. Other tales feature false prophets who quote or parody Qurʾānic verses to justify themselves and escape a difficult situation. Finally, humour is directed against: the religious authorities, such as incapable judges or mystics; the Bedouin, who break the basic religious rules of praying and fasting; and stupid people who take the Qurʾānic verses literally.

## 1.3.2 Pre-modern literature

The legitimacy of tackling certain topics in a humorous way leads us to pre-modern Arabic literature, which holds a vast amount of humorous poetry and jocular anecdotes.

Humour is usually associated to invective or wine poetry, for example by Abū Nuwās (d. 814). Two essays in *Humor in Arabic Culture* examine two understudied case studies, *i.e.* the Umayyad love poet ʿUmar Ibn Abī Rabīʿa (d. *ca.* 712) and the Abbasid poet al-Ṣanawbarī (d. 945).

To be sure, humour in narrative forms has received more attention.[59] Critics have focused on: jocular anecdotes *(nawādir)*, *i.e.* short humorous prose narratives incorporated into *adab*-literature upon the principle of the mixture of jest and earnest *(al-jidd wa-l-hazl)*; the *maqāma*; folk tales revolving around proverbial characters; and the *Arabian Nights (Alf layla wa-layla)*.

Jocular anecdotes provide a suitable perspective to look at Medieval Muslim thinkers' judgement on the legitimacy of humour in communication and its inclusion into the narratives.[60] Van Gelder suggests that the merits of jesting and earnestness were

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[58] Tamer, 'Qur'ān', 24-28. See also: Ulrich Marzolph, 'Provokative Grenzbereiche im klassischen arabischen Witz', in *Humor in Arabic Culture*, 153–66. Tamer's examples are taken from Ulrich Marzolph, *Arabia Ridens: Die humoristische Kurzprosa der frühen adab-Literatur im internationalen Traditionsgeflecht*, 2 vols (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1992).

[59] Pre-modern narratives were written in prose, but interspersed with poetry or in rhymed prose.

[60] Ludwig Ammann, *Vorbild und Vernunft: Die Regelung von Lachen und Scherzen im mittelalterlichen Islam* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1993).

contrasted at once on moral and literary grounds, two dimensions that were almost inseparable in the concept of *adab*.[61] Just as the principle of measure should guide to the good Muslim in his approach to humour, a judicious mixture of jest and earnest was allowed or even demanded in works of literature.

Writers often justified their compositional choice in their works' prologues, where they supported their view with some authoritative opinions about the social acceptability of jesting.[62] The balanced mixture of jest and earnest was conceived for pedagogical purposes, such as instructing while entertaining and avoiding the reader's tedium, which might be caused by the excessive gravity or hard-to-grasp subjects.

Throughout the literary compositions, the two elements tend to appear neatly separated: amusing stories alternate with serious passages. Sadan examines the distribution of *al-jidd wa-l-hazl* in pre-modern Arabic literature and "distinguishes between three levels of interaction: the balanced alternation in a work of *adab* as a whole, in a section or *faṣl*, and in one or a few sentences (*jumla* or *fiqra*)."[63]

One of the earliest proponents of the balance between jest and earnest was al-Jāḥiẓ, considered the master of Abbasid prose and frequently associated to classical Arab humour. Montgomery argues that al-Jāḥiẓ's reputation as a humourist leads some scholars to detect humour and irony even in those works that do not present clear traces of comic sense.[64]

Montgomery examines the works in which al-Jāḥiẓ discusses or applies the harmonious mixture of *al-jidd wa-l-hazl*. Interestingly enough, his *Risāla fī l-jidd wa-l-hazl* (An Epistle on Earnestness and Levity) does not tackle this issue.[65] In his *Kitāb al-*

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[61] Van Gelder, 'Mixtures', 84.

[62] Rundgren collects prologues of prose works where this literary *topos* is discussed. See: Frithiof Rundgren, 'Arabische Literatur Und Orientalische Antike', *Orientalia Suecana* 19–20 (1970-71): 81–124, esp. 111-119. Van Gelder examines a few similar cases in poetry.

[63] Van Gelder, 'Mixtures', 84. Van Gelder refers to Joseph Sadan, *al-Adab al-hāzil wa-nawādir al-thuqalāʾ* (Acre: Sarûjî Press, 1984), in particular the chapter: '*Tadākhul al-tāfih wa-l-razīn*' ('The interference of the trivial and the grave').

[64] James E. Montgomery, '*Al-Jāḥiẓ on Jest and Earnest*', in *Humor in Arabic Culture*, 211. See also Montgomery's comprehensive study of al-Jāḥiẓ: Id., *Al-Jāḥiẓ: In Praise of Books* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).

[65] Ibid. Montgomery reconstructs the reasons for this epistle's composition against the background of al-Jāḥiẓ's career. The epistle should be put in relation with other works written for the same patron. This reconstruction leads to the hypothesis of a non-ironic reading of the epistle.

*bayān wa-l-tabyīn* (The Book of Eloquence and Exposition), instead, al-Jāḥiẓ explains that the insertion of light passages serves to revive the reader's interest. Van Gelder suggests that such an overall variety fights monotony, whereas Montgomery links the need to keep the reader's interest alive to the author's engagement with the theory of psychic capacity, which sees human capabilities (*wusʿ*) as limited.[66]

In some passages of *Kitāb al-ḥayawān* (The Treatise on Living Creatures) and *Kitāb al-bukhalāʾ* (Book of Misers), al-Jāḥiẓ presents jesting as something serious and attributes positive moral qualities to laughter, probably to justify himself from some criticism.

Finally, van Gelder notes that al-Jāḥiẓ recommends not to overlap jest and earnest, but flouts this rule in some of his writings: he mentions *Kitāb al-tarbīʿ wa-l-tadwīr* (The Treatise on Quadrature and Circumference) is mentioned, whereas Montgomery looks at some minor debate treatises where jocundity is inserted into dialectic when "debating the respective merits of two slightly ludicrous or uncustomary things."[67]


Besides these examples taken from al-Jāḥiẓ's oeuvre, van Gelder notes that in the literary practice jest and earnest were not totally separated, as was recommended practice. A different pattern of interaction is found in works that are primarily entertaining or anthological:

> here jest and earnest are usually merely juxtaposed; if they interact at all it is only faintly. It is to be noted that the less serious sections of an anthology tend to come at the end, as e.g. in Ibn Qutayba's *ʿUyūn al-akhbār*, Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih's *al-ʿIqd al-farīd* or Abū Tammām's *Ḥamāsa* […] Conversely, anthologies that are devoted mainly to "unserious" themes may end on a sterner note.[68]

These considerations are further developed Lopez-Bernal, who also looks at writers from al-Andalus. She classifies the afore-mentioned *ʿUyūn al-akhbār* (Quintessential Reports) by Ibn Qutayba (d. 889) and *al-ʿIqd al-farīd* (The Unique Necklace) by the Andalusian Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih (d. 940) as works that conform to the formal principle of alternating jest and earnest, with the addition of a specific section devoted almost exclusively to ludicrous accounts.

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66 Van Gelder, 'Mixtures', 101. Montgomery, '*Al-Jāḥiẓ*', 228.
67 Van Gelder, 'Mixtures', 104. Montgomery, '*Al-Jāḥiẓ*', 229.
68 Van Gelder, 'Mixtures', 94.

Then, Lopez-Bernal identifies another group of works in which humorous accounts prime. They end with a final sterner note that might be interpreted as a formal convention. The second group includes *Akhbār al-aḥmqā wa-l-mughaffalīn* (Fools and Simpletons) by Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1201) and *Ḥadāʾiq al-azāhir* (The Gardens of Flowers) by the Andalusian Ibn ʿĀṣim al-Gharnāṭī (d. 1426). The latter was compiled in a period of social and political crisis in Naṣrid Granada, a factor that might have increased its amusing intentions. In both works, anecdotes are arranged according to the comic types or to the form used to express witticism (answers, jokes, tales).

With the passing of time, the concept of the balanced mixture became more flexible. For example, *Ḥadāʾiq al-azāhir* aims openly at entertaining and contains an obscene tone, bawdy elements, and sexual jokes. In Ibn al-Jawzī's three collections respectively on witty, clever, and stupid people, the author still justifies the serious purport of entertainment; nevertheless, Marzolph interprets "the justifying reference as a compulsory exercise, however all the more necessary to raise the traditionalistic author above all doubt of aiming to indulge in pure pleasure."[69]

The second mode in which, according to van Gelder, the boundaries between jest and earnest are not clear-cut is the satirical mode (mainly in poetry, but also in prose): "If nonsense and jesting can serve to ridicule an opponent who is at the same time attacked on serious grounds, then the cooperation of jest and earnest may be rhetorically effective."[70]

The third example is the use of parody and irony in the *maqāmāt* by al-Hamadhānī (d. 1008). The *maqāmāt* are pre-modern narratives in the form of collections of episodes, each set in a different city of the Islamic world, featuring the same narrator and protagonist. They are written in elaborate rhymed and rhythmic prose *(sajʿ)*. The *maqāmāt* develop humour on several levels, as will be detailed in ch. 4. Van Gelder remarks that jesting and serious theological issues are intertwined in some of al-Hamadhānī's *maqāmāt*:

> The *Maqāmāt* can be, and have been, read as entertaining and stylistically artful episodes and sketches. But even the wildest *hazl*, the incoherent rambling of the barber in the *maqāma* of Ḥulwān, turns out to refer to the question of free will versus predestination,

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[69] Ulrich Marzolph, 'hazl', in *EAL*, 281.
[70] Van Gelder, 'Mixtures', 94.

just as the tirade of the madman in the asylum of Basra, as Monroe demonstrates. Thus al-Hamadhānī exploits the most extreme form of *hazl*, sheer nonsense ('amphigory', to give it its scholarly name), in order to make a serious point.[71]

## 1.3.3 Stock characters and folklore

With its balanced mixture of jest and earnest or more openly entertaining compilations, pre-modern Arabic literature gave form to a rich repertoire of jocular anecdotes revolving around some categories of people:

> Throughout the history of classical Arabic literature there is an abundance of nawādir that make fun of misers, spongers, schoolteachers, ḥadīth scholars, qāḍīs, physicians, bedouins, non-Arabs, poets, philologians, women, singing girls, simpletons, homosexuals, effeminate men, and many other categories: anecdotes that pretend to be based on actual fact but are often obviously fictional and, like most jokes, anonymous.[72]

These anecdotes, which made fun of certain social behaviours through a playful fictional representation, were collected in *adab* compilations, devotes also to a single subject. For example, al-Jāḥiẓ and al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī compiled anecdotes about stingy people. The latter, mainly known for his biographical dictionary of *ḥadīth* transmitters and Baghdadi scholars entitled *Tārīkh Baghdād* (The History of Baghdad), composed also a book on party-crashers or self-invited guests, *al-Taṭfīl wa-ḥikāyāt al-ṭufayliyyīn* (Sponging).[73] Ibn al-Jawzī's *Akhbār al-aḥmqā wa-l-mughaffalīn* (Fools and Simpletons) collected anecdotal material on fools and simpletons, exemplifying the meaning of this concept in classical Arabic culture.

Ghersetti defines the fool (*aḥmaq* or *jāhil*) as somebody who lacks intellect (*ʿaql*) and acts improperly or incoherently, even though his purpose might be correct. Paraphrasing the etymological meaning, he puts things in the wrong place. Because of this innate quality, the fool is usually garrulous, cannot keep a secret, does not think about the

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[71] Geert J. van Gelder, 'Mixtures of Jest and Earnest in Classical Arabic Literature. Part II', *Journal of Arabic Literature* 23, no. 3 (1992), 176. Van Gelder examines amphigory in his essay in *Ruse and Wit*.

[72] Van Gelder, 'satire, medieval', 694.

[73] English translation: al-Khatib al-Baghdadi, *Selections from the Art of Party-Crashing in Medieval Iraq*, trans. Emily Selove (Syracuse University Press: Syracuse, New York, 2012). Italian translation: al-Ḫaṭīb al-Baġdādī, *L'arte dello scrocco: storie, aneddoti e poemi di scrocconi*, trans. Antonella Ghersetti (Catanzaro: Abramo, 2006).

consequences of his actions, has exaggerate reactions, is driven by earthly appetites, and is vain.[74]

This anecdotal material tended to concentrate around specific characters, which became proverbial in representing a certain feature or social behaviour. Marzolph calls them 'focusees', meaning "individuals serving as a focus for the attribution of narratives".[75] The idea underlying this phenomenon was already expressed by al-Jāḥiẓ: an anecdote, even if boring, would be more effective if attributed to a well-known trickster, whereas a clever anecdote ascribed to an unknown protagonist would be boring and dull.[76]

Marzolph lists the main focusees in Arabic jocular anecdotes: "Thus, in classical and post-classical sources, Ashʿab used to represent the stereotype greedy and stingy person, Bunān the sponger, Qarāqūsh the absurd judge, or Buhlūl the wise fool. The most prominent of all is Jūḥā."[77] Other famous protagonists of jokes and buffoonery were Abū Dulāma, Abū l-ʿAynāʾ, Muzabbid, Abū l-Ḥārith Jummayn, and Habannaqa.

We shall briefly sketch out these characters, as well as the historical counterparts on which they were partly based, before focusing on Jūḥā, who has become the protagonist of Arabic jocular narratives and folklore over the centuries.

*Ashʿab*

Ashʿab was a singer and entertainer who lived in Medina in the 8th century. Because of his profession, his anecdotes are included into the 10th-century *Kitāb al-aghānī* (The Book of Songs) by Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī (d. *ca.* 972).

These anecdotes are translated by Rosenthal in his seminal study of classical Arabic humour.[78] According to Rosenthal's reconstruction, jokes attached to Ashʿab initially regarded the political environment of the nobility in Mecca and Medina, then religion,

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[74] Antonella Ghersetti, 'I paradigmi della stupidità: *ḥumq* e *ḥamqā* nella letteratura d'*adab*', *Annali di Ca' Foscari* XXXII, no. 3 (1993): 83–95. *Aḥmaq* and *jāhil* partially overlap in their meaning and are used alternatively in literary sources to indicate a stupid person.

[75] Ulrich Marzolph, '"Focusees" of Jocular Fiction in Classical Arabic Literature', in *Story-Telling in the Framework of Non-Fictional Arabic Literature*, ed. Stefan Leder (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1998), 123. Marzolph explains that 'focusees' is a transposition of the German word *Kristallisationsgestalten* used in folk narrative research.

[76] Ibid., 124-24. Also in Kishtainy, *Arab Political Humor*, x.

[77] Marzolph, 'humor', 295. Qarāqūsh appears as a character in Shalabī's *Riḥlāt* (see below, 4.4.3).

[78] Rosenthal, *Humor in Early Islam*. See also: Hilary Kilpatrick, 'The "genuine" Ashʿab. The relativity of fact and fiction in early adab texts', in *Story-telling*, 94–117.

and finally the urban middle class milieu. The latter were the most persistent and Ashʿab became proverbial for his greed and for begging. The mild mockery of Islamic institutions and religious behaviour found in some jokes "is harmless because it is put into the mouth of a buffoon, someone who may say uncomfortable truths with impunity."[79]

*Abū Dulāma*

Abū Dulāma (d. end of 8th century) was an early Abbasid black poet and wit. He acted as a kind of court jester for the Abbasid caliphs al-Saffāḥ (749-754), al-Manṣūr (754-775), and al-Mahdī (775-786).

*Other court jesters*

Abū l-Ḥārith Jummayn and Muzabbid were popular jesters around the time of the caliph al-Mahdī. Muzabbid was still a popular character in the 17th century, as it can be inferred by his presence in two compilations of that period. Abū l-ʿIbār was the court jester of the Abbasid caliph al-Mutawakkil (847-861) and died in the mid-9th century.

*Buhlūl*

Buhlūl embodies a slightly different type and is still popular in Persian and Turkish oral tradition. This character is based on a contemporary of the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (786-809), a pious or even ascetic man linked to Shiism, who is believed to be buried in Baghdad. Marzolph describes him as follows: "Some kind of uncompromising, probably mentally deranged ascetic character, Buhlūl (by way of contamination with several other contemporaries) became the stereotype wise fool in the popular tradition of the Islamic world."[80] Furthermore, he acted as "a mirroring reminder of the *vanitas mundi* (a function that, incidentally, corresponds to that of the court-fool in medieval Europe)."[81]


## 1.3.3.1 Jūḥā

While the popularity of the afore-mentioned stock characters has decreased over the centuries, Jūḥā, the model of the trickster and fool, is popular till nowadays in the folk tradition of various Mediterranean regions and beyond. To give an example of his ability to travel and adapt in different contexts, he is known as Giufà in Sicily, Si Djeh'a in

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[79] Geert J. van Gelder, 'Introduction', in Rosenthal, *Humor in Early Islam*, xvi.
[80] Ulrich Marzolph, 'Buhlūl', in *EAL*, 160. See also: Id., *Der Weise Narr Buhlūl* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1983).
[81] Marzolph, 'Focusees', 123.

North-African Berber culture, Djoha in Jewish culture, Goḥa in Egypt, Jeḥa in Tunisia, Joḥi in Persian oral tradition, and is mixed with the Turkish Nasreddin Hoca.

Similarly to other 'focusees', the fictional character has its starting point in a historic counterpart, identified with Dajīn ibn Thābit, known as Abū l-Ghuṣn, who lived in Baṣra and Kūfa in the 7th-8th century. A tradition established around the 14th century suggests that two men inspired the fictional Jūḥā, a pious man from Baṣra and a fool from Kūfa. They died in the same year.[82] This may explain the birth of a character who is sometimes capable of great intelligence and sometimes of utter foolishness.

As regards Jūḥā's presence in literary sources, Jūḥā is mentioned by the 7th-century poet ʿUmar ibn Abī Rabīʿa, as reported by Corrao. The first anecdote in which he appears as the protagonist is found in al-Jāḥiẓ, followed by his presence in various compilations. A booklet devoted entirely to him, *Kitāb nawādir Jūḥā* (The Book of Jūḥā's Anecdotes), was listed in the 10th-century *al-Fihrist* (*The Catalogue*) by Ibn al-Nadīm (d. *ca.* 995), but it did not survive.

Marzolph argues that his repertoire expanded considerably in the compilations of the 15th and 17th century. This expansion happened because Jūḥā combined a clear basic structure (the provocative half-wit), preventing him from becoming unrecognisable, with a certain degree of openness that allowed the addition of new stories.[83]

Jūḥā was ascribed some anecdotes from the high literary and oral folk traditions, previously attributed to known or anonymous protagonists; he also acquired tales fitting his image, whose motifs are found in cross-cultural folklore. In this way, his popularity overshadowed that of the other 'focusees'.

With the printed editions of Jūḥā's anecdotes in the 19th century, his tales started to merge with those originally been attributed to the Turkish jester Nasreddin Hoca, with the two characters getting mistaken as well. Nasreddin Hoca is the main protagonist of humorous prose narrative in the Turkish area of influence (from the Balkans to the Persian area). Numerous anecdotes portray him as smart and wise or as a fool with a great sense of humour.[84]

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[82] Francesca Maria Corrao, *Giufà: il furbo, lo sciocco, il saggio* (Milano: Mondadori, 1991), 21.

[83] Marzolph, 'Focusees', 123.

[84] Ulrich Marzolph, 'Naṣr al-Dīn Khodja', *EI2*, vii, 1018-20; Id., *Nasreddin Hodscha. 666 wahre Geschichten* (München: Beck, 1996); and Id., 'Sanitizing Humor: Islamic Mediterranean Jocular Tradition in a Comparative Perspective', in *Europa e Islam tra i secoli XIV e XVI / Europe and Islam between [the]*

His supposed historical counterpart lived in the 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> century and is often associated with the Mongol ruler Tamerlane (Tīmūr), who invaded Anatolia. He is said to be born in a town near Eskişehir, whose natives were famous in folk stories for their strange behaviour and ingenuousness. A mausoleum attributed to him survives in Eskişehir.

Marzolph suggests that Jūḥā's repertoire has not just expanded, but also developed. Early anecdotes contained some scatological, sexual and obscene material. Later compilations and printed editions domesticated this aspect, while developing the image of the half-wit, a philosopher and social critic, sometimes harmless and sometimes provocative.

Jūḥā is usually represented as travelling on his donkey, an animal associated with foolishness, but also with a great capacity of resistance and adaptability.[85] At the beginning of the anecdotes, the established order is usually disrupted, either because Jūḥā is victim of the situation or because he does not act according to the expectations (in this sense, he is victim of his own foolishness). His own reaction or the external help from the members of his family function as magical tools restoring the order.

In this process, Jūḥā sometimes proves to be clever, sly and to have a practical sense; sometimes his own foolishness solves the complicated situation or he plays the fool to get out of troubles. When he is the victim, his ruse turns the situation against his opponent. As Jūḥā's opponents usually belong to a more powerful social group, thus his comic interventions question or subvert power relations. Furthermore, he often transgresses social and moral boundaries, even though he is not always conscious of that.

Language plays an important role in creating a humorous effect. For example, Jūḥā takes idiomatic expressions literally or misunderstands some instructions. Some of his answers and some key elements in the tales have crystallized in proverbs and sayings, such as Jūḥā's nail *(mismār Jūḥā)*. In the story, the nail is a kind small clause that turns the contract in favour of Jūḥā; in popular wisdom, it means a feeble excuse, but also a nuisance.

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*14th and 16th Centuries*, ed. Michele Bernardini et al., Istituto Universitario Orientale, vol. 2, 2 vols. (Naples, 2002), 767-68.

[85] Corrao, *Giufà*, 31.

Within the rich tradition of anecdotes, his age varies: when he is young, he interacts with his father and mother; whereas when he is old, he is accompanied by his son, who may be seen as his double.

One of the reasons why Jūḥā has become so popular is his ability to laugh at all aspects of everyday life and to appeal to universal human experience. He is appreciated for his permanent inclination to play pranks, facing all situations with a mixture of humour and wisdom, and his apparently candid way of exposing at people's faults. As Marzolph puts it, "he would usually allow the audience to either share his delight in fooling his opponents and 'teaching them a lesson', of feel superior to his overt simplicity of mind."[86]

These features make him a dynamic character adaptable to the circumstances of modern life. He has abandoned his donkey and travels by train, bus, car, or plane; his opponents have changed their profession, becoming lawyers, politicians, and policemen; he tackles present day economic and political issues, such as unemployment, corruption, and inefficiency.

Three essays collected in *L'humour en Orient* illustrate Jūḥā's vitality in the modern context. They recall the historical evolution of this character, examine some of his features, and explore how he was appropriated by the Moroccan, Tunisian, and Jewish Ottoman tradition respectively. This process of adaptation implies a partial overlapping with local folk characters and involves both an oral and a written dimension.[87]

## 1.3.4 *The Arabian Nights*

Jūḥā exemplifies how anecdotes attach themselves to certain characters and folk tales migrate from one context to another. Such a process of tales' circulation was central in *Alf layla wa-layla* (The *Arabian Nights*), a form of intermediate literature where stories of multiple origins, originally performed orally as evening entertainment, were arranged in manuscripts.

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[86] Marzolph, 'Sanitizing humor', 767.

[87] *L'humour en Orient* mentions some examples of Jūḥā's vitality is modern writing: Zaki El Hakim, 'Goha chez les écrivains égyptiens d'expression française', *La Revue égyptienne de littérature et de critique*, no. 1 (mai 1961); and Irène Fenoglio, 'Caricature et représentation du mythe: Goha', in *Images d'Égypte. De la fresque à la bande dessinée*, ed. Jean-Claude Vatin (Cairo: CEDEJ, 1991), 133–43. The latter essay focuses on an Egyptian weekly magazine appeared in 1930-34.

Due to the entertaining purpose of this narrative, humour appears on various levels. In *Humor in Arabic Culture*, Ott suggests that laughter in the *Arabian Nights* carries the existential function of saving lives. It is not only Shahrazād who saves her life thanks to the power of narration, but also other storytellers overcome negative or dramatic circumstances by telling amusing and playful tales. To activate this life-saving power, the tales should be "'exciting and amusing' [...] In Arabic this is expressed by the key-concept ʿajīb wa-gharīb."[88]

Ott illustrates how the variety of stories collected in the *Arabian Nights* paves the way for different types of humour: the comic expresses human feelings, including *Schadenfreude* and a mocking attitude; is the motif driving the action; and is elicited by comic types, such as the court jester and characters pertaining to the lower strata of society.

In this respect, Ott refers to *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia*, where instances of humour are classified into four main categories:[89]

1. Anecdotes serving for entertainment at face value, usually related to sexuality and human weaknesses (for example, greed and haughtiness);

2. Anecdotes integrated from works of *adab* literature, set in the court or among the Bedouin, serving as exemplary tales;

3. Stories in which the rouge, usually pertaining to ordinary people, outsmarts the victim, usually pertaining to the upper classes; alcohol and hashish are prominent components in such stories;

4. Comical effects caused by conflict or contrasts, such as the inversion of roles, the opposition of roles (for example, the caliph and the vizier), disguises and mistaken identities, bawdy episodes and caricature eroticism, wordplay and general stereotypes.

Larzul's essay in *L'humour en Orient* deals with two aspects listed above, *i.e.* the inversion of roles and the integration of *adab* anecdotes into the *Arabian Nights*. She examines humour in the long tale of Abū l-Ḥasan the Wag *(al-khalīʿ)*, known as *'le*

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[88] Claudia Ott, 'Worüber lacht *Tausendundeine Nacht*?', in *Humor in Arabic Culture*, 256.

[89] Ulrich Marzolph, Richard van Leeuwen, and Hassan Wassouf, eds., *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia*, vol. 1, 2 vols. (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2004), 593-94.

*dormeur éveillé'* in Antoin Galland's French translation (1704).[90] Having analysed the tale's structure and the main character, Larzul concludes that the *Arabian Nights*, could create pieces of true humour without conforming to the balance of jest and earnest, due to its nature of entertaining intermediate literature. Furthermore, this literature was receptive of a non-orthodox way of thinking about gender relations and moral conduct, integrated through the lens of fiction and comedy.

Larzul illustrates that *adab* anecdotes were among the story's sources by examining the story's central part, which contains the episode of the sleeper awakened (tale-type 1531 in Thompson's *Motif-Index*)[91] and the inversion of roles. The disguised caliph Ḥārūn al-Rashīd plays a trick on the merchant and *viveur* Abū l-Ḥasan, who is forced to fall asleep, transported to the court, and induced to believe that he is the caliph.

This tale is traced back to the Chinese and Indian traditions, where it had a didactic purpose. The earliest Arabic attested version is found in a 17th-century *adab* compilation. Larzul argues that the *Nights* version exploits the comic potential to a larger extent than the *adab* version. Furthermore, Marzolph stresses that this compilation and the first manuscripts of the *Nights* were chronologically close. Thus, it is likely that the *adab* version was taken as a direct source for the *Nights*.[92]

The story's epilogue (tale-type 1556 in Thompson's *Motif-Index*) contains Abū l-Ḥasan's revenge: the merchant and his wife play a trick on the caliph, revolving around the false death to extort money. This anecdote was attributed to Abū Dulāma in several *adab* sources and to other jocular characters of the Abbasid period, such as Abū Nuwās and Buhlūl, in 20th-century compilations. Marzolph suggests that this epilogue is "a clearly recognizable addition from an extraneous and originally independent source."[93]

In this case, Abū l-Ḥasan is the protagonist of an anecdote previously attributed to other focusees. Due the popularity of these focusees, one might wonder if they appear in the *Arabian Nights*. Marzolph tackles this issue in order to explain the presence of one

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[90] Sylvette Larzul, 'Un récit comique des *Mille et une nuits*: l'«Histoire d'Abû l-Ḥasan, ou le dormeur éveillé»', in *L'humour en Orient*, 36.

[91] Mot. W 131.1 in Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books, and Local Legends*, 6 vols. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989).

[92] Ulrich Marzolph, 'The Story of Abū al-Ḥasan the Wag in the Tübingen Manuscript of the Romance of ʿUmar ubn al-Nuʿmān and Related Texts', *Journal of Arabic Literature* 46, no. 1 (2015): 34–67.

[93] Ibid., 44.

single tale featuring Jūḥā in the fairly modern Madrid manuscript (18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century). He concludes that:

> Besides the case of Jūḥā in the Madrid manuscript, not one of the popular fools and tricksters of classical Arabic literature, such as Ashʿab, Buhlūl, Muzabbid, or Habannaqa play a prominent role as the protagonist of a story in an Arabic manuscript or edition of the *Arabian Nights*. In fact, the only prominent mention of such a character in the *Arabian Nights* is the chapter on Buhlūl the Jester in *The Diwan of Easy Jests and Laughing Wisdom*, once more added from extraneous material to the Mardrus edition.[94]

## 1.3.5 Ottoman *karagöz*

The *Arabian Nights*, jokes, and anecdotes belong to folk humour and entertainment. Another traditional form of entertainment that has survived till the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century is the Turkish *karagöz*. It is a type of shadow theatre that develops a satirical discourse under the surface of a farcical show, made of pranks, obscenities, and buffoonery.

The history of the *karagöz* dates back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when the shadow theatre was imported from Egypt to Istanbul. According to some historical sources, the Ottoman Sultan Selim watched a shadow play by an Egyptian puppeteer re-enacting the hanging of the last Mamluk Sultan, which sealed the Ottoman conquest of Egypt in 1517. The play pleased the Sultan so much that he wanted this form of entertainment to be imported to Turkey.[95] There, it developed in its Ottoman form and spread to the regions controlled by the Empire, including Syria, Egypt, and North Africa.

In the same period, *Commedia dell'Arte* emerged in Western theatre. The two dramatic traditions have been paralleled because of the similarities in their structure, characters (built mainly on geographical and professional stereotypes), and contents (including universal themes, such as food, love, and money).

The essays of *Ruse and Wit* and *L'humour en Orient* focus on the evolution of the *karagöz* in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Ottoman Empire, but do not deal with the previous tradition of Arabic shadow theatre. It is useful to describe, yet briefly, pre-modern popular drama known for its satirical dimension.

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[94] Ulrich Marzolph, 'Juhā in the Arabian Nights', *Journal of Arabic Literature* 36, no. 3 (2005), 322.

[95] Shmuel Moreh, 'shadow-play', in *EAL*, 701–2 and Anna Stavrakopoulou, 'Ottoman Karagöz and Greek Shadow Theatre: Communicational Shifts and Variants in a Multi-Ethnic and Ethnic Context', in *Ruse and Wit*, 147.

The shadow theatre travelled from the Far East, mainly China and India, to the Muslim world, including Andalusia, where it was attested since the late 10th century. These performances were mainly oral and the puppeteer's improvisation played a central role. Due to the orality and the crackdown of censorship, only few plays are preserved.

The manuscripts of three shadow plays by Ibn Dāniyāl (d. 1311) have exceptionally survived. The studies devoted of to them point out the affinity with the classical *maqāma* and the satirical depiction of the early Mamluk society.[96] With a focus on the lowest strata of Cairo society, these plays rely extensively on licentiousness, obscenity, and scatology (in the Arabic poetic tradition, *mujūn* and *sukhf*).[97]

Recent scholarship discusses the role of this indigenous dramatic tradition in modern Arabic theatre.

Going back to the Ottoman *karagöz*, the cast of characters provides interesting insights on the mechanisms of humour and the audience it sought to entertain. As Stavrakopoulou points out, the cast usually discussed does not belong to the traditional repertoire (16th and 17th centuries), but to the plays performed and written down in the 19th century.[98]

The two main characters are Karagöz and Hacivat: the former is an ordinary man, a kind of trickster who does not show good manners, but is wry and cunning; the latter is an opportunist who serves the wealthy and powerful. Around them gravitate characters found in international folklore, such as the hunchback, the addicted, and the fool, as well as urban and female characters. Other characters represent the different ethnic groups that lived under the Ottoman empire, like the Albanian, the Jew, the Armenian, and the Arab.[99] To sum up, these types portray everyday life in cosmopolitan Istanbul and the regions of the multi-ethnic and multi-religious empire. The parody of their accents and stereotypical attitudes in playful situations produces the comic effect.

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[96] Francesca Maria Corrao, *Il riso, il comico e la festa al Cairo nel XIII secolo: il teatro delle ombre di Ibn Dāniyāl* (Roma: Istituto per l'Oriente C. A. Nallino, 1996); Cyrus Ali Zargar, 'The Satiric Method of Ibn Dāniyāl: Morality and Anti-Morality in "Ṭayf al-Khayāl"', *Journal of Arabic Literature* 37, no. 1 (2006): 68–108; and Rosella Dorigo Ceccato, 'Un diverso approccio al *Ḥayāl al-ẓill* nella letteratura araba tra Ottocento e Novecento', *Quaderni di Studi Arabi*, no. 5/6 (1988-1987): 208–25.

For a recent critical edition and translation into English: Li Guo, *The Performing Arts in Medieval Islam: Shadow Play and Popular Poetry in Ibn Daniyal's Mamluk Cairo* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

[97] E.K. Rowson, 'mujūn', in *EAL*, 546-48 and Id., 'sukhf', in *EAL*, 743.

[98] Stavrakopoulou, 'Ottoman Karagöz'.

[99] Michèle Nicolas, 'La comédie humaine dans le Karagöz', in *L'humour en Orient*: 75-87.

Similarly, the political, military, and religious authorities were mocked, allowing the temporary disruption of the social and moral order, which was re-established by the end of the play. Since the authorities and society were ridiculed by means of mimicry and grotesque representation, instead of realistic representation, the *karagöz* adapted itself over the centuries. It was able to hint at the events and socio-political shortcomings of the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The *karagöz* appealed to an audience that could recognize itself in the performance, as if it was a distorted mirror of reality. As Georgeon suggests, the late-Ottoman audience was ethnically and religiously heterogeneous; it comprised various social strata, but in particular middle-class men. Originally the performances had coincided with festive occasions, especially Ramaḍān nights, whereas at the turn of the century they were usually held in urban spaces like the cafés or trade centres *(khān)*.[100]

The functions and themes of the *karagöz* were similar to two other traditional forms of collective entertainment: the improvisation theatre and performances by storytellers *(maddāḥ)*. These three forms were affected by the introduction of modern media like the radio, translations and adaptations from Western comedies, and the decline of the Ottoman empire. Between the beginning and the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, their popularity rapidly declined, but they survive as folkloric heritage.[101]

## 1.3.6 Satirical press

The late Ottoman empire saw the birth of the satirical press, which was introduced thanks to the development of the printed press and flourished in periods of political change. Two essays in *L'humour en Orient* explore the ethnic satirical press (Greek and Armenian) in the Ottoman empire, where the number of satirical magazines increased around the years of the Revolution of the Young Turks (1908). In Iran, instead, the key moment followed the Constitutional Revolution (1906-1911).[102]

These essays suggest that satirical magazines need a certain degree of tolerance and press freedom to be produced. They denounce injustice and oppression caused by the

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[100] François Georgeon, 'Rire dans l'Empire ottoman?', in *L'humor en Orient*, 92-94.
[101] Ibid., 106.
[102] Ali Gheissari, 'Despots of the World Unite! Satire in the Iranian Constitutional Press: The *Majalla-Yi Istibād*, 1907-1908', in *Ruse and Wit*, 98–118.

local and colonial political authorities, while depicting the local community with a certain degree of self-mockery. This portrait is particularly interesting in transitional periods, when the concept of nationalism is elaborated and the various communities negotiate their affiliation.

Finally, the satirical press is exposed to censorship: many of these publications were ephemeral because of the crackdown of the authorities, changes in the political scenario, and the circumstances affecting their main contributors (in some cases, their single contributor).

Kishtainy makes similar considerations in his portrait of the pioneers of the Egyptian satirical press.[103] The first magazines appeared in the last quarter of the 19th century within the context of nationalistic struggles. Yaʿqūb Ṣanūʿ (also James Sanua, 1839-1912) launched *Abū naẓẓāra zarqāʾ* (est. 1877; The Man with the Blue Spectacles),[104] whereas ʿAbd Allāh al-Nadīm (1842-1896) created *al-Tankīt wa-l-tabkīt* (1881; Joking and Censure) and *al-Ustādh* (1892-1893; The Teacher).[105]

Their satire targeted the British colonial presence, the Egyptian royal family, the despotic habits of the local authorities, as well as the social behaviours of the Egyptians, including the blind adoption of European customs by the bourgeoisie and the backwardness of the peasants.

They both supported the nationalist cause and were considered political agitators. Ṣanūʿ was exiled, whereas al-Nadīm, who had been also an orator for the 1881-1882 ʿUrābī revolt,[106] was chased by the authorities. The use of Egyptian dialect, known for its immediacy and humorous effects, was part of their project to attract a wide audience to the nationalist cause.

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[103] Kishtainy, *Arab Political Humor*, 69-99.

[104] Eliane Ursula Ettmüller, *The Construct of Egypt's National-Self in James Sanua's Early Satire and Caricature* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2012).

[105] Francesco De Angelis, *La letteratura egiziana in dialetto nel primo '900* (Roma: Jouvence, 2007).

[106] For this and further references to modern Egyptian history in this chapter, see: Martin W. Daly, 'The British Occupation, 1882-1922', in *The Cambridge History of Egypt*, *Volume 2, Modern Egypt, from 1517 to the End of the Twentieth Century*, edited by Id. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 239-51; and Massimo Campanini, *Storia dell'Egitto contemporaneo: dalla rinascita ottocentesca a Mubarak* (Roma: Lavoro, 2005).

Their satirical writings included essays, colloquial dialogues, colloquial poetry *(zajal)*,[107] and one-act plays (in the case of Ṣanūʿ), all of which recent scholarship has reconsidered for its contribution to modern drama and fiction. Some decades later, the popular satirical press hosted the literary compositions of another renowned Egyptian humourist, Bayram al-Tūnisī (1893-1961). These literary figures will be further discussed in the next chapter to define the status of humorous writings in Egyptian contemporary literature.

After the 1919 revolution against the British occupation, the publication of satirical magazines flourished again: *al-Kashkūl* was launched in 1921, whereas *Rūz al-Yūsif* was established in 1923. These magazines featured the first professional cartoons, after the early drawings by Ṣanūʿ.[108] Kazazian defines the Armenian Alexander Saroukhan (1898-1977) as the father of the Egyptian caricature.[109]

The study of satire and political humour covers also the contemporary period.[110] One essay in *L'humor en Orient* and one in *Humor in Arabic Culture* looks at Algerian cartoonist and satirical journalists, who were confronted by the emerging Islamic extremism since the 1980s and, in some cases, emigrated to France. De Poli, instead, examines the case of Ali Lmrabet (b. 1959), a cartoonist of the Moroccan periodical *Demain/Dūmān*, who was accused for ridiculing the king's religious and political authority at the beginning of the 21st century.[111]

Another type of political humour that has received attention are jokes: one essay in *L'humour en Orient* examines Egyptian political jokes, whereas *Humor in Arabic Culture* looks at Lebanese jokes.[112] We shall analyse Egyptian political jokes in 1.4, because they

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[107] *Zajal* refers to "rhymed strophic poems composed in non-classical Arabic and based rhythmically on metrical patterns adapted from the classical tradition." Marilyn Booth, *Bayram al-Tunisi's Egypt: Social Criticism and Narrative Strategies* (London: Ithaca Press, 1990), 10.

[108] *Abou Naddara Collection* (website).

[109] Anna Kazazian, 'Saroukhan ou la satire amère de l'histoire. Les débuts d'un caricaturiste arménien en Égypt', in *L'humour en Orient*: 175–89.

[110] For an overview of Egyptian political humour, comprising satirical journalism, cartoons, and jokes till the 1990s, see: Patrizia Zanelli, 'Egitto, mitica terra della risata', in *Il sorriso della mezzaluna*, 103–41.

[111] Barbara De Poli, 'Umorismo e censura nel mondo arabo: il caso "Demain"', in *Il sorriso della mezzaluna*, 143–76.

[112] Amr Helmy Ibrahim, 'La *nokta* égyptienne ou l'absolu de la souveraineté', in *L'humour en Orient*: 199–212. Sara Binay, '"Why Will Hassan Nasrallah Win the Nobel Prize for Education?" Zeitgenössische politische Witze im Libanon', in *Humor in Arabic Culture*, 299–311. By the same author, on Lebanese jokes, see also: Sara Binay, '"Where Are They Going?": Jokes as Indicators of Social and Political Change',

belong to popular humour and shared cultural background, which humorous fiction can exploit.

### 1.3.7 Modern and contemporary literature

When it comes to the modern and contemporary period, the three edited volumes consulted for this overview pay attention to humour and satire in social interactions and cultural productions, including interpersonal humour, jokes, cartoons, and cinema.

Besides this, *Humor in Arabic Culture* looks at a selection of contemporary authors from heterogeneous contexts: Driss Chraïbi (1926-2007), who wrote in French in post-colonial Morocco; Rashīd Ḍaʿīf (b. 1945), a contemporary Lebanese author invited to work with a German writer in the exchange programme *West-östlicher Diwan*; and Zakariyyā Tāmer (b. 1931), a Syrian writer living in exile in London since 1981. Each of them is analysed from a different perspective, according to their writing's stylistic features and the humorous aspects developed at most.

For instance, Tāmer's short stories are chosen for their satire, crafted through the characters' caricature and parody of the literary heritage. These techniques generate a kind of black humour and a Kafkesque world view, which conveys the author's socio-political criticism.

In addition, humour in Palestinian and post-civil war Lebanese fiction has received some attention, yet the focus is mainly on the social functions of comedy rather than on the strategies, motifs, and characters recurring in more than one author.

Another essay looks at satire in contemporary Egyptian drama. Abou El Naga considers satire on stage as a form of artistic resistance, particularly effective when kings or sultans interact with ordinary people. She examines two plays in which the counter-discourse of the oppressed is inserted through the popular oral tradition, including rhyming songs, jokes, and tunes. In order to circumvent censorship, old plays, foreign plays, and plays re-enacting historical episodes are usually staged.[113]

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in *Proceedings of the Conference 'Inverted Worlds: Cultural Motion in the Arab Region'*, Beirut, October 4–8 2012, Hg. Syrinx von Hees, Nadia von Maltzahn, Ines Weinrich, 2013.

[113] Shereen Abou El Naga, 'Satirical Weapons, Egyptianized Kings', in *Humor in Arabic Culture*, 291–98.

A foreign play adapted to the Egyptian context is *al-Malik huwwa al-malik* (The King is the King) by the Syrian playwright Saʿd Allāh Wannūs (1941-1997). In Syrian drama, Wannūs and Muḥammad al-Māghūṭ (1934-2006) are known for their satirical criticism of political circumstances.[114]

Egyptian playwrights, like Alfred Faraj (1929-2005), Yūsuf Idrīs (1927-1991), Najīb Surūr (1932-1978), and ʿAlī Sālim (1936-2015) have developed different aspects of humour and satire in their works.[115] Besides his satirical plays, Sālim is famous for the travelogue of his journey to Israel in 1994.[116]

Egyptian theatre and cinema provide also comedies featuring funny characters, misunderstandings, absurd situations, and laughable sketches that usually lead to a happy ending.[117] The popularity of comedies is linked to some famous actors, for example ʿĀdil Imām (b. 1940). One essay in *L'Humour en Orient* examines two films of the 1990s starring Imām, in which different comic strategies (including the different role interpreted by this actor) allow to tackle the same political issue, *i.e.* the violence perpetrated by Islamic extremist groups, which threatened tolerance and coexistence.[118]

Humour in contemporary literature is studied both in fiction and drama with a focus on single authors and satire, seen as a weapon of cultural resistance for its oblique criticisms of socio-political issues. This attention allows to parallel Egyptian humorous literary texts with other cultural productions employing humour, which have circulated in the recent decades and intensified before the 2011 Revolution and in its aftermath: cartoons, graphic novels, satirical columns and fictionalized essays (often collected in

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[114] On Wannūs, see: Monica Ruocco, 'Il Teatro e la Storia nel Masrah al-Tasyis di Sa'd Allah Wannus', *Oriente Moderno* VI, no. LXVII (1987): 7–12. On al-Māghūṭ, see: Mas 'ud Hamdan, 'The Carnivalesque Satires of Muhammad al-Maghut and Durayd Lahham: A Modern Layer of Comic Folk Drama in Arab Tradition', *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* XVIII, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 137–48.

[115] Monica Ruocco, *Storia del teatro arabo. Dalla* nahḍah *a oggi* (Roma: Carocci, 2010), 100-5, 173-74. For further reference on comedy in Arabic theatre, see: Mieke Kolk and Freddy Decreus, eds., *The Performance of the Comic in Arabic Theatre: Cultural Heritage, Western Models and Postcolonial Hybridity* (Gent: Documentatiecentrum voor Dramatische Kunst, Universiteit Gent, 2005).

[116] Claudia Franke-Ziedan, *Satire und Kontext: Gesellschaftskritik in den Dramen des ägyptischen Autors Ali Salem* (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2013). His travelogue is *Riḥla ilā Isrāʾīl* (Cairo: Akhbāar al-yawm, 1994).

[117] For further reference on comedy in Arabic cinema, see: Gayatri Devi and Najat Rahman, eds., *Humor in Middle Eastern Cinema*, Contemporary Approaches to Film and Media Series (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014).

[118] Solange Poulet, 'Cinéma et politique en Égypte: une stratégie du rire', in *L'humour en Orient*: 213–24.

books published under the label of *adab sākhir*), songs, blogs, TV programmes, jokes and memes circulating online.[119]

These forms of popular humour may contain fictional and literary elements, are closely intertwined with current events, and represent a cultural background shared among the intended audience of humorous writings.

The next section explores Egyptian political jokes as an example of popular humor, which we shall take into consideration in our study of literary humour.

## 1.4 Focus on Egyptian political jokes

I remembered one of my favorite jokes: a depressed man goes to a psychiatric clinic for treatment and tells the doctor that he cannot stand living in this world, so the doctor prescribes him a drug that will allow him to sleep for fifty years and wake up when the world has changed. The depressed man is elated, buys the drug, sleeps and wakes up fifty years later to find everything as it was, with the Leader's grandson in office and the crowds chanting for him.[120]

This passage is taken from the Iraqi novel *Iʿjām* by Sinān Anṭūn (b. 1967), which revolves around a manuscript supposedly found in the prison cell of a young University student and poet. Humour in the novel is found mainly in the irony that characterizes the manuscript, which appropriates and ridicules the language of the regime. Furthermore, the narrator inserts some references to political humour circulating in Iraq, like the above-mentioned joke, poems, and writings on the walls.

If we focus on contemporary Egyptian fiction, a passage taken from the novel *Dhāt* by Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm (b. 1937) exemplifies the interrelation of political jokelore and literature. After having portrayed two neighbours exchanging 'innocent' jokes,[121] the

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[119] Stephan Milich and Sabine Damir-Geilsdorf, eds., 'Proceedings of the International Conference "Creative Resistance: Political Humour in the Arab Uprisings"', forthcoming.
On cartoons, see: Jonathan Guyer, *Oum Cartoon* (website) and Eliane Ursula Ettmüller, 'Caricature and Egypt's Revolution of 25 January 2011', *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History* 9 (2012): 138–48. On comics, see: De Angelis, 'Graphic Novels'. On *adab sākhir*, see above, Introduction. A famous satirical TV show in the aftermath of the 2011 Revolution was *il-Barnāmag* by Bāsim Yūsuf (b. 1974). A famous meme platform is *Asa7be Sarcasm Society*.
[120] Sinan Antoon, *Iʿjaam: An Iraqi Rhapsody*, trans. Sinan Antoon and Rebecca C. Johnson (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2007), 29. Original Arabic: Sinān Anṭūn, *Iʿjām* (Beirut: Dar al-ādāb, 2004).
[121] See below for 'innocent jokes' in Freud's classification.

narrator makes an ironic commentary about the Egyptian tradition of political humour and its diminishing aggressiveness and efficacy:

> The desire to build and strengthen bridges led them to gradually explore the art of fine evening conversation. It fell upon El Shanqeety to take the initiative, for he had spent his military service training how to erect bridges, and one evening he accosted Abdel Maguid with that most common of Egyptian passwords: "Have you heard the latest joke?" Abdel Maguid pretended to be interested: "No, what?" El Shanqeety, with a slow deliberateness, that allowed him to remember the detail he had been struggling all day to memorize, related the joke: "This man's getting drunk and his friend asks him, 'Why do you drink?' So the man says, 'To forget.' His friend asks him, 'Forget what?' The man thinks for a minute then says, 'I can't remember.'"
>
> Abdel Maguid burst into laughter and came back from the bank the next day with a similar password. "This man called Ass gets fed up with his name so he changes it and goes to his friend. He's really happy: 'Guess what?' he says, 'I've changed my name.' His friend says: 'Congratulations. What did you change it to?' The man says: 'Fish'. His friend's surprised, he asks him: 'Can you swim?' He says: 'No.' His friend says: 'So you're still an ass.'"
>
> El Shanqeety burst into laughter. In fact, he slapped his thighs with the palms of his hand, initiating a period of thigh slapping that did not last for long, for the spring from which they had supped soon dried up. Indeed, the technological progress that the Egyptians had been achieving had led to a diminishing of their creative ability in the one field in which they had historically dominated all other nations, and their output declined, quantitively and qualitatively, until they had exhausted its limited themes: politics (the laughing cow, or *la vache qui rit*) and racism (the Upper Egyptians).[122]

To be sure, the study of literary humour is not limited to the instances of jokes in novels, where the comic is developed in multiple strands and intertwined with formal techniques like parody, ambiguity, and linguistic variation. In fact, humour in novels does not usually rely on a single joke recurring in the whole text or a punchline at the very end.

Nevertheless, political jokes exemplify the collective political and satirical tradition, which functions as a cultural background for humorous literary writings. Egyptian political jokes, which have already received some scholarly attention, allow us to restrict our geographical area of interest and focus only on verbal humour, without taking into consideration the visual component of cartoons and comics.

We examine them as small textual units to illustrate what contemporary Egyptians laugh at: who are they targets of satire? How are they depicted? Which are the main humour-generating techniques? To this aim, various theoretical approaches for the study of humour are combined.

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[122] Sonallah Ibrahim, *Zaat*, trans. Anthony Calderbank (Cairo and New York: AUC Press, 2001), 76-77. Original Arabic: Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm, *Dhāt* (Cairo: Dār al-mustaqbal al-ʿarabī, 1998 [1992]), 86-87.

## 1.4.1 Functions

Jokes are a vital component of folk culture. Since they circulate from mouth to mouth, they reflect popular feelings about society, marriage, religion, and taboos. Among them, political jokes, which laugh at the political climate and the rulers, may be seen as a barometer of the situation.[123]

In his analysis of political jokes about the former Egyptian presidents Nasser (1956-1970), Sadat (1970-1981), and Mubarak (1981-2011), Shehata shares this view and maintains that political jokes are more common and pervasive in authoritarian societies.[124] When freedom of speech and political opposition suffer limitations, political jokes become an alternative form of criticism, without fear of reprisal. They can elude censorship thanks to their oral collective circulation and the impersonal joke-teller can say something that, otherwise, would be unacceptable.

Shehata relies on Freud's classification of jokes: innocent jokes do not have a purpose and are an end in themselves, whereas tendentious jokes have a purpose. The latter are divided into hostile jokes, serving the purpose of aggressiveness, and obscene jokes, serving the purpose of exposure. Various scholars, including Raskin, follow this classification:

> According to Raskin (1985), political jokes are divided into two classes – denigration jokes and exposure jokes. Under the first class come scripts of denigration of a political figure, political groups or institutions, political slogans or ideas. Yet those scripts of the other class are those of exposure of national traits, of political repression, of shortages and of specific political situations.[125]

Nevertheless, Shehata places all political jokes within the category of hostile jokes, because he identifies their main function in ridiculing the leaders and regimes. This non-violent aggression by means of mockery activates the mechanism described by Freud as

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[123] This idea is expressed in Binay, 'Jokes as Indicators' and Samer S. Shehata, 'The Politics of Laughter: Nasser, Sadat, and Mubarek in Egyptian Political Jokes', *Folklore* 103, no. 1 (1992): 75-91. Shehata states that: "For the student of Egyptian politics and history, folklore, in the form of political jokes, provides an infinitely rich and largely untapped resource for the study of Egyptian popular attitudes, feelings, beliefs, and views on politics." (Ibid., 76)

[124] Shehata compares the Egyptian case with other authoritarian societies in which political jokes are a vehicle for criticism. His considerations are based on Egon Larsen, *Wit As a Weapon: Political Joke in History* (London: F. Muller, 1980).

[125] Dalia E. Hammoud, 'Egyptianising Politics/Politicising Egyptians: An Analysis of Political Jokes', *IOSR-JHSS Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 19, no. 6 (June 2014), 21. This classification scheme is taken from Raskin, *Semantic Mechanisms*, 222-46.

follows: "by making our enemy small, inferior, despicable or comic, we achieve in a roundabout way the enjoyment of overcoming him."[126]

Scholars usually agree that political humour is an instrument of criticism and resistance, but still debate its practical effects in demanding and achieving a change.[127] The aggressive theory is, thus, complemented by the relief theory, which sees laughter as a discharge of nervous energy and a temporary psychological relief. Transposed to the social level, political jokes function as a safety-valve and coping mechanism for bearing the pressures of life.

Another approach that describes the collective dimension and subversive nature of political jokes is the Bakhtinian concept of the 'carnivalesque'. In their essay about translation, Salem and Taira identify humour as a key element in the mass protests leading to the ouster of Mubarak. Among other definitions, these protests were labelled *al-thawra al-ḍāḥika* (the laughing revolution), because of the high number of jokes and their immediate dissemination.[128]

Salem and Taira suggest that the demonstrators shaped a collective counter-narrative by activating the shared jokelore and cultural references. Humour allowed them to break the fear barrier, incorporate and overcome the unfolding events, and mock the political authority and its official discourse.

They frame this mockery, which suspends socio-political hierarchies and dethrones the revered figures of power, into Bakhtin's conceptualization of the carnival:

> As the Russian cultural critic Mikhail Bakhtin succinctly put it "during carnival: what is suspended first of all is hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette with it" and "mock crowning and subsequent decrowning of the carnival king." Finally, "his crown is removed, the other symbols of authority are taken away, he is ridiculed and beaten."[129]

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[126] Freud, *Jokes*, 103.

[127] Kishtainy suggests that humour is a an ephemeral escape and not a remedy in itself (see Kishtainy, *Arab Political Humour*, 7, also mentioned in De Angelis, 'Graphic Novels', 34), whereas Binay maintains that jokes do not change the circumstances, but can express a desire for change (see Binay, 'Jokes as Indicators').

[128] Heba Salem and Kantaro Taira, '*al-Thawra al-daHika*: The Challenges of Translating Revolutionary Humor', in *Translating Egypt's Revolution: The Language of Tahrir*, ed. Samia Mehrez (Cairo and New York: AUC Press, 2012), 183-211.

[129] Ibid., 185. Salem and Taira quote from Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 122-25. Another essay that applies the carnivalesque to the study of Arab political humour is Muhammad A. Badarneh, 'Carnivalesque Politics:

Moreover, Salem and Taira add two functions of political humour: it does not only generate sympathy, but solidarity amongst people affected by the same oppression; and it has a didactic function, as it allowed the Egyptian activists to communicate important demands in a simple way, far from the hackneyed political discourse.

Finally, they underline the role of new technologies in the dissemination of political jokes, which affects also their form and topics. The next section examines the formal and thematic aspects with an interdisciplinary approach.

## 1.4.2 Interdisciplinary approach

Shahata adopts a sociological approach, since he examines how political humour changes together with the historical circumstances. He adopts also a literary perspective when illustrating the jokes' motives, structure, and characters. This double approach reconstructs how the three former presidents were ridiculed:[130]

> Under Nasser, Egyptians criticized the absence of freedom of expression, police methods, including torture, the Egyptian Army's performance in the 1967 War and the failure of (Nasser's) socialism in Egypt. During Sadat's presidency, Egyptians were highly critical of Jihan Al-Sadat's role in politics, Sadat's harsh relations with the Coptic Church and Pope Shenouda III, the corruption of the Sadat regime, and the facade of 'the religious president'. Finally, the criticisms of Mubarek have been quite personal and ridicule his intelligence, competence and worthiness as a leader.[131]

Mubarak was ironically compared to the donkey and the monkey to expose his lack of competence, whereas his nickname *la vache qui rit*, taken from a cheese brand, mocked his supposed appreciation for fun.[132] Furthermore, wordplay was created with his surname, that literally means 'blessed'.

With Mubarak staying in power longer and longer, new topics were added: the repressive measures taken by a regime that presented itself as more liberal, violations of human rights, unemployment and corruption, government negligence determining absurd situations in daily life, Mubarak's age, and the possibility that his son would inherit his power.

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A Bakhtinian Case Study of Contemporary Arab Political Humor', *Humor - International Journal of Humor Research* 24, no. 3 (2011): 305–27.

[130] The same double approach is found in Binay's study of Lebanese jokes.

[131] Shehata, 'The Politics of Laughter', 87-88. For a content-based review of Egyptian political jokes, see: ʿĀdil Ḥamūda, *al-Nukta al-siyyāsiyya. Kayfa yaskharu al-miṣriyyūn min ḥukkāmihim* (Cairo: Dār Sfinks, 1990).

[132] Salem and Taira, '*al-Thawra*', 190 and Helmy, 'La *nokta* égyptienne', 211.

This reconstruction, based mainly on content, does not overlook the culturally bound nature of humour and the linguistic strategies, all of which is systematically analysed by GTVH.

Hammoud slightly modifies GTVH to study a selection of one-line Egyptian political jokes posted on Facebook from November 2011 till January 2012, with the aim of seeing whether spontaneous and professional jokes are different.[133] She concludes that the two types of jokes are similar, except for some differences in Target (professional jokes are more keen on introducing self-criticism) and Narrative Form (spontaneous jokes rely frequently on question-answer sequences).

They are similar in Situation, since they are all set in Egypt and deal with its socio-political situation. This setting leads to the inclusion of several "words or pieces of information that pertain only to Egyptian cultural elements that can hardly be understood outside their cultural-bound context".[134] Without a shared encyclopaedic knowledge of the school system, religion, songs, and geography, the jokes may fall flat

These cultural elements pose a big challenge for translators, as Salem and Taira suggest.[135] The main challenge is transferring all these elements, as well as wordplay and rhetorical figures, in a concise and effective way that renders the immediacy of the jokes.

As regards Language, the rhetorical strategies generating humour also vary from one culture to the other. The jokes examined by Hammoud employ lexical ambiguity (both paronymy and homonimy) to create wordplay, antonyms to juxtapose contradictory ideas, repetition to provide a rhythmic pattern that exaggerates the situation, figurative language, and satire.

The linguistic register of the analysed jokes reflects the diglossia existing in the Arabic-speaking communities, where two languages coexist and cover different functions.[136] Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is the language of writing, "used in textbooks, newspapers, magazines, fiction and nonfiction, and in bureaucracy. The

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[133] Hammoud omits the Logical Mechanism (LM). Professional jokes were those posted on Facebook by the satirical journalist Jalāl ʿĀmir (1952-2012).

[134] Hammoud, 'Egyptianizing Politics', 24.

[135] Salem and Taira, 'al-Thawra', 195-96.

[136] Reem Bassiouney, *Arabic Sociolinguistics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 10. In some cases, it is necessary to speak of polyglossia.

language of daily exchanges and that of nonprint media is Egyptian Arabic, used in television, radio, theatre and film, but on the whole prevented from becoming a language of writing."[137] Egyptian Colloquial Arabic (ECA) has influenced the style of printed media, and is usually employed in cartoons captions and advertisement.

ECA expresses verbal humour in daily non-formal interactions. Thus, the spontaneous jokes of Hammoud's corpus are mainly in ECA, whereas professional jokes are written in MSA with some colloquial words put into quotation marks. In the latter case, this divergence of linguistic registers produces a comic effect.

Hammoud's language-driven approach examines the jokes' content through the lens of semantic classes. For example, the opposition between 'we' and 'they' serves to criticize the rulers (them) or to expose the mishaps of the ordinary Egyptians (us). Words regarding human weakness and words with a negative connotation are also frequent.

To sum up, an integrated content and language-driven perspective illustrates the stylistic strategies, language choices, and images used to ridicule the rulers and expose social behaviours. Translation studies point out how difficult it is to balance the brevity of the jokes with the need to clarify the intertextual references, while transferring wordplay and rhetorical figures often based on sound. An interdisciplinary approach takes into account these issues, as well as the cultural elements, and the main functions of political humour.

## 1.5 Conclusion

The study of literary humour recognizes the culturally bound nature of the comic, which varies in different cultures and historical periods. Still, the main aesthetic and linguistic humour theories explain the cross-cultural mechanisms underlying this phenomenon.

This chapter has focused on the application of these theories to literary criticism. Malti-Douglas adopts a theoretical framework which goes beyond the descriptive study of

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[137] Niloofar Haeri, *Sacred Language, Ordinary People: Dilemmas of Culture and Politics in Egypt* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), x.

humour instances, to examine the narrative and rhetorical elements that cause laughter in literary texts. Triezenberg adapts GTVH to texts that are primarily literary and, in the second place, entertaining. She defines humour enhancers as those textual elements that facilitate and increase the experience of humour. Finally, translation studies look at the transferability of humour despite local cultural references and linguistic variation.

Triezenberg's humour enhancers will inform our analysis of Egyptian novels, where we expect to find stereotypes, stock characters, and repetition/variation. Stock characters, in fact, are the protagonists of brief jocular anecdotes in the Arabic literary tradition and folklore. Jūḥā is the famous Arab trickster and wise fool, who travels across the Mediterranean and acquires different traits in each region. Furthermore, the master of pre-modern prose, al-Jāḥiẓ, suggested that anecdotes are more effective if ascribed to famous tricksters or historically recognizable characters.

Our analysis of the characters in the novels of the corpus will look at the revival of stock characters, their role in the contemporary context, and the familiarity with the intended audience. In other words, are these comic characters the modern versions of Jūḥā? Is al-Jāḥiẓ's rule still valid?

The Arab cultural heritage *(turāth)* has constructed humour in many literary forms. The study of literary humour has looked extensively at the pre-modern period. Another turning point is the late Ottoman empire, with the evolution of popular drama and the birth of the satirical press.

The contemporary period, instead, has received only partial attention. Firstly, fiction and drama are examined alongside other cultural productions, such as satirical journalism, cartoons, jokes, and cinema. This approach suggests the relevance of socio-political satire and the constant exchange between literary and non-literary forms of humour. This interest for the functions of humour in contemporary society leads us to explore how it is generated in fiction.

Secondly, the study of humour in contemporary literature tends to focus on single authors. For instance, Zakariyyā Tāmer and Imīl Ḥabībī (1922-1996) are considered masters of irony and satire in Syrian and Palestinian literature respectively. Nevertheless, literary criticism does not usually look at other novelists who write in a humorous style in the same years and context. These novelists appear as exceptions.

Keeping this in mind, the present research aims at looking at a recent period in

Egyptian literature (from the 1980s onwards) to identify some representative authors of humorous novels, establish the connections between them and within the literary scene, and examine humour with a close textual analysis. The next chapter illustrates the selected corpus and the analytical framework.

# Chapter 2

# HUMOUR IN EGYPTIAN FICTION: CORPUS AND METHODOLOGY

> It was a joke at the start. Perhaps it was a joke in the end too. Actually it was not a joke in the real sense, but an incident, rather, which happened to involve those fabricators of jokes who were past masters of the art.[138]

The three Egyptian authors chosen for the present study belong to two different generations. Muḥammad Mustajāb (1938-2005) and Khayrī Shalabī (1938-2011), whose career has spanned over several decades, belong to the so-called Generation of the Sixties. Ḥamdī Abū Julayyil (b. 1968) belongs to a group of authors born in the late 1960s who started publishing in the 1990s and gained recognition at the beginning of the 21st century. Despite this generational gap, the three writers share many similarities in their lives, careers, and style.

This chapter outlines the selection criteria for our corpus and the research questions we aim to answer. Then, it sets the selected authors against the background of the contemporary Egyptian literary scene, providing their biographical profiles and illustrating some features of their literary output. Finally, it describes the analytical framework for the study of the four selected novels, which is conducted in ch. 3-6.

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[138] Yusuf Idris, 'Did You Have to Turn on the Light, Li-Li?', trans. Wadida Wassef, in *The Essential Yusuf Idris. Masterpieces of the Egyptian Short Story*, ed. Denys Johnson-Davies (Cairo and New York: AUC Press, 2009), 109. Original Arabic: Yūsuf Idrīs, 'A-kāna lā-buddᵃ yā Līlī an tuḍīʾī al-nūr?', in *Bayt min laḥm*, 1971.

## 2.1 Corpus

### 2.1.1 Humour in the canon

The study of humour in contemporary Egyptian fiction requires to take into account the canon formation of modern prose[139] and the boundaries of the legitimate literary field.[140]

Jacquemond argues that modern satire and humour blur the boundaries of the critical divide between high and low literature. Some consecrated writers, in fact, employed humour both in their novels and other writings published in popular outlets. These include columns, episodic sketches, travelogues, autobiographical writings, anecdotes, and the neo-*maqāma*, all of which were published in the popular satirical press and in book-length collections.

For example, Ibrāhīm ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Māzinī (1890-1949) was a poet, literary critic, and writer.[141] Humour emerges both in his novels and in his series of vignettes later collected into volumes.[142] Similarly, Mustajāb, one of the authors of this corpus, is famous for the devastating humour of his fiction and columns.

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[139] On the canon formation, see: Samah Selim, *The Novel and the Rural Imaginary in Egypt, 1880-1985* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004); Id., 'The Narrative Craft: Realism and Fiction in the Arabic Canon', *Edebiyat: Journal of M.E. Literatures* 14, no. 1–2 (2003): 109–28; Lorenzo Casini, Maria Elena Paniconi, and Lucia Sorbera, *Modernità arabe. Nazione, narrazione e nuovi soggetti nel romanzo egiziano* (Messina: Mesogea, 2012); and Richard Jacquemond, *Conscience of the Nation. Writers, State, and Society in Modern Egypt* (Cairo and New York: AUC Press, 2008) – first published as *Entre scribes et écrivains. Le champ littéraire dans l'Egypte contemporaine* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2003).

[140] The theoretical background of Jacquemond's study of the Egyptian literary field is Pierre Bourdieu, *Les regles de l'art: genese et structure du champ litteraire* (Paris: Seuil, 1992).
Jacquemond draws from Bourdieu two concepts that we shall use in this chapter:
- 'legitimate field': Bourdieu sees the cultural (and literary) field as the site of a struggle for the monopoly of legitimacy, *i.e.* the monopoly of power to define with authority who is a writer; for Jacquemond the legitimate literary field in Egypt broadly coincides with high literature and the fusion of creativity and commitment.
- 'consecrated writers': consecration is the culmination of a legitimizing process which entitles the consecrated writer to confer a similarly privileged status on others.

[141] J. Brugman, *An Introduction to the History of Modern Arabic Literature in Egypt* (Leiden: Brill, 1984), 138-47, 270-72 and Hilary Kilpatrick, 'The Egyptian Novel from Zaynab to 1980', in *Modern Arabic Literature. The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*, ed. M. M. Badawi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 234.

[142] al-Māzinī's novels are *Ibrāhīm al-kātib* (1931; *Ibrahim the Writer*, 1976) and *Ibrāhīm al-thānī* (1943, Ibrahim II). His vignettes, comic sketches, and essays were collected in *Ṣundūq al-dunyā* (1929, Peep Show) and *Khuyūṭ al-ʿankabūt* (1935, Spider's Webs).
For the study of humour in his writings, see: M. M. Badawi, 'Al-Māzinī the Novelist', *Journal of Arabic Literature* 4 (1973): 112–45 and William Hutchins, 'Ibrāhīm ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Māzinī', in *Essays in Arabic Literary Biography: 1850-1950*, ed. Roger Allen (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010), 219–25.

This complementarity leads to reconsidering the contribution of satirical writings to the emergent modern prose fiction in Egypt. Recent scholarship has focused on some pioneers of the *naḥḍa* such as Ṣanūʿ, al-Nadīm, and Muḥammad al-Muwayliḥī (1858-1930),[143] whose writings published in the popular press aimed at the satirical dissection of Egyptian society. They integrated the didactic purport with some fictional elements and gave a new form to pre-modern satire (especially the *zajal*, intended as narrative colloquial ballads, and the *maqāma*).

A seminal study is Booth's analysis of Bayram al-Tūnisī's early-mature production in the form of *zajal*, vernacular prose dialogues, and parodical neo-*maqāma*.[144] She links al-Tūnisī's satire to the historical context, his political and cultural mission, and the publication venue. She examines how satire explodes at the intersection of the thematic focus, compositional form, diction, and intertextuality with the literary antecedents.

The attention to such writers leads us to the second consideration about the boundaries of the legitimate field. Except for al-Muwayliḥī, the afore-mentioned authors made an extensive use of colloquial Arabic. Humour and satire are found in writings placed on the margins of the legitimate field also because of their diction. Indeed, poetry and fiction written in the colloquial are popular among the audience, but struggle for critical recognition.[145]

Dialect as a literary language is, thus, linked to humour in two ways: on the one hand dialect provokes laughter and emotive identification, since it articulates daily experience;[146] on the other it is suitable only for non-serious topics.

Yet, recent scholarship has made this connection more complex and nuanced. Booth, Selim, and De Angelis argue that the pioneers of the satirical press chose the colloquial

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[143] For al-Muwayliḥī, see below, 4.2.1.

[144] Booth, *Bayram*.

[145] For colloquial poetry, see: Marilyn Booth, 'Poetry in the Vernacular', in *Modern Arabic Literature*, 463–82; Id., 'Colloquial Arabic Poetry, Politics, and the Press in Modern Egypt', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 24, no. 03 (1992): 419–40; and Noha Radwan, *Egyptian Colloquial Poetry in the Modern Arabic Canon. New Readings of* Shiʿr al-ʿĀmmiyya (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

For the colloquial as literary language in the *naḥḍa* and its pre-modern antecedents, see: De Angelis, *Letteratura egiziana*, 53-78.

[146] Pierre Cachia, *An Overview of Modern Arabic Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), 59-75.

to involve the broadest possible audience in their discussion of socio-political reforms. They are defined as humorous reformers *(iṣlāḥī fukāhī)*.[147]

Selim adds that Ṣanūʿ and al-Nadīm anticipate the novel's dialogic dimension with multiple contrapuntal voices representing the society of the emerging nation. These voices include the hybrid colloquial voice of the peasants, both subaltern and rebellious, which mocks the official discourse of the authorities, aristocracy, and new urban elite.[148]

She finds this parodic colloquial voice also in a canonical novel known for its humorous passages and ironic representation of the Egyptian legal system: *Yawmiyyāt nāʾib fī l-aryāf* (1937; *Maze of Justice*, 1947) by Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm (1898-1987). Selim suggests that the villagers' colloquial language contrasts comically with the narrator's controlled Standard Arabic and conveys a critique of the hegemonic discourse, including that of the realist bourgeois novel.[149]

As Rosenbaum and De Angelis note, the choice of ECA as a literary language has significantly expanded and increased its recognition with the practice of some writers in the 1960s, the 1990s, and the beginning of the 21st century, when it was also influenced by Internet communication.[150] Some writers choose exclusively ECA, while many others mix the two varieties not simply for ideological purposes, but for their artistic and stylistic goals. Rosenbaum concludes that "Doing so extends the spectrum of stylistic options available to these writers, in comparison to writers who insist on using only MSA or only [ECA]."[151]

Despite this expansion of the boundaries of legitimate literature, humorous prose narratives of the 2000s attracted some critical attention mainly because of their extensive use of the colloquial. This is exemplified, at least, by three works: *An takūnᵃ ʿAbbās al-ʿAbd* (2003; *Being Abbas el Abd*, 2009), a post-modern novel by Aḥmad al-ʿĀydī (b.

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[147] Booth, 'Poetry, Politics, and the Press', 422 and De Angelis, *Letteratura egiziana*, 62.

[148] Selim, *Rural Imaginary*, 25-35.

[149] Ibid., 119-26

[150] De Angelis, *Letteratura egiziana*, 187-193 and Gabriel M. Rosenbaum, 'The Rise and Expansion of Colloquial Egyptian Arabic as a Literary Language', in *Culture Contacts and the Making of Cultures: Papers in Homage to Itamar Even-Zohar*, ed. Rakefet Sela-Sheffy and Gideon Toury (Tel-Aviv: Unit of Culture Research, Tel Aviv University, 2011), 323–43.

For an anthology of Egyptian literature written in the colloquial, see: Madīḥa Dūss and Humphrey Davies, eds., *al-ʿĀmmiyya al-miṣriyya al-maktūba: mukhtārāt min 1401 ilā 2009* (Cairo: al-Hayʾa al-miṣriyya al-ʿāmma li-l-kitāb, 2013).

[151] Rosenbaum, 'Rise and Expansion', 337-38.

1974); *ʿAyza itgawwiz* (2008; *I Want to Get Married!*, 2010) by Ghāda ʿAbd al-ʿĀl (b. 1978), a blog turned into book and TV comedy series, whose social satire revolves around marriage; and Khālid al-Khamīsī's (b. 1968) *Taksī. Ḥawādīt al-mashāwīr* (2006; *Taxi*, 2008), which merges a sociological portrait and the episodic nature of the neo-*maqāma*.

Furthermore, *ʿAyza itgawwiz* and *Taksī* have many aspects in common with a new wave of *adab sākhir*, which includes political columns, fictionalized essays, and books exposing the mishaps of Egyptian society in a humorous way. This label makes them recognizable in the publishing market. On a linguistic level, they combine MSA with an extensive use of ECA.[152]

The literary status of these narratives has been questioned by literary critics who see them as a deviation from the canon due to the following aspects: the popular publication venue;[153] the colloquial diction linked to daily life and non-serious representation; and the interplay of fiction and non-fiction (for example, the language of digital communication, blogs, and journalism).

Only some studies have linked the humorous/satirical thematic focus to the multiple linguistic registers, characters' construction, and exploitation of the literary antecedents for comical purposes.[154]

## 2.1.2 A canon of humour

Literary criticism has examined the status of humorous prose within the canon, with special reference to the *nahḍa* and the recent resurgence of satirical writings. This has allowed also to identify some masters of humour.

This gallery of masters is complemented by some consecrated authors who employ humour as one of their stylistic tools. They are usually presented as individual cases: al-

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[152] Jacquemond, *'The Yacoubian Building'*. Popular satirical writers are Bilāl Faḍl (b. 1974), ʿUmar Ṭāhir (b. 1973), and Haytham Dabbūr (b. 1986).

[153] *An takūnᵃ ʿAbbās al-ʿAbd* is an exception, since it is a cult book published by Dār Mīrīt, the leading private publishing house of the literary and political avant-garde.

[154] Lucia Avallone, 'Autori egiziani degli anni Duemila. Blogosfera, graphic e postmoderno: nuovi linguaggi nel panorama letterario arabo', *Kervan - Rivista Internazionale di studii afroasiatici*, no. 13/14 (July 2011): 25–46; and Tarek El-Ariss, *Trials of Arab Modernity. Literary Affects and the New Political* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), in particular ch. 6 'Hacking the Modern', 145-71.

Māzinī and al-Ḥakīm for the early novel; Najīb Maḥfūẓ (1911-2006) and Yūsuf Idrīs (1927-1991) for realist fiction.[155]

In this study, we prefer a comparative approach for the analysis of humour, irony, satire, and parody in the writings of the so-called Generation of the Sixties. This literary avant-garde broke the mimetic approach in fiction by developing some experimental techniques, such as narrative fragmentation, polyphony, intertextuality, and metafiction.

In his analysis of these formal innovations in Arabic fiction from 1979 till 2002,[156] Caiani points out that:

> Nonetheless, it is true that most of the texts under scrutiny in this study, though not devoid of humour, ironic asides and comic sketches, have a non-ironic purpose. […]
> We often find the same serious approach to socio-political criticism and discourses on historiography, which in contemporary writers like Rushdie are mainly conveyed through irony and humour. Other contemporary Arab writers, like Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm for example, use irony to convey their political criticism and Ḥanān al-Shaykh (b. 1945) is one of the few Arab writers who portrays serious themes (such as the life of Arab exiles in London in *Inna-hā Lundun yā ʿazīzī*, 2001; *Only in London*, 2001) in an often lighthearted and humorous style.[157]

Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm, mentioned in this quote, and Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī (1945-2015) are two writers of the Sixties whose experimental novels have received great critical attention for their ironic purpose and techniques. Kassem-Draz, who examines al-Ghīṭānī and Ibrāhīm alongside Yaḥyā al-Ṭāhir ʿAbdallāh (1938-1981) and Majīd Ṭūbyā (1938), argues that the ironical ethos presides over the formal innovations of the Generation of the Sixties.[158] A close textual analysis reveals which textual strategies create an ironic distance *(al-mufāraqa)*.

Adopting Kassem-Draz's approach, Paniconi employs narrative irony as the lens to examine some novels of the 1980s and early 1990s written by writers of the Sixties, who

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[155] Muṣṭafā Bayyūmī, *al-Fukāhah ʿinda Najīb Maḥfūẓ* (Cairo: al-Sharika al-miṣriyya al-ʿālamiyya li-l-nashr, 1994) and Roger Allen, ed., *Critical Perspectives on Yusuf Idris* (Colorado Springs, CO: Three Continents Press, 1994).

[156] Fabio Caiani, *Contemporary Arab Fiction: Innovation from Rama to Yalu* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007). This study looks at F. al-Takarlī (1927-2008), I. al-Kharrāṭ (1926-2015), I. Khūrī (b. 1948), and M. Barrāda (b. 1938). The comparative approach lies in the choice of authors coming from four Arab countries (respectively, Iraq, Egypt, Lebanon, and Morocco) and in the reference to concepts elaborated in Western literary criticism (for example, post-modernism and Bakhtin's dialogic imagination).

[157] Ibid., 129.

[158] Céza Kassem-Draz, 'In Quest of New Narrative Forms: Irony in the Works of Four Egyptian Writers: Jamāl Al-Ghīṭānī, Yaḥyā Al-Ṭāhir ʿAbdallah, Majīd Ṭūbyā, Ṣunʿallah Ibrāhīm (1967-1979)', *Journal of Arabic Literature* 12 (1981), 137-59. See also: Sīzā Qāsim Draz, 'al-Mufāraqa fī l-qaṣṣ al-ʿarabī al-muʿāṣir', *Fuṣūl*, no. 2 (1982): 143–51.

had reached by then their maturity and recognition.[159] She suggests that irony is a critical distance, which allows to represent reality with non-mimetic techniques, question its accepted principles, and ultimately criticize it.

She contrasts these literary innovations with those brought about by the so-called Generation of the Nineties. The new avant-garde does not aim at representing reality, not even through to ironic distance. Instead, irony becomes a self-referential mechanism to explore the self's inner world and the writing process.

To sum up, Egyptian fiction of the late 1970s and 1980s offers some interesting material for the study of humour and related phenomena. A first approach has examined how ironic distance influences the narrative elements, leading to formal experimentation. Another approach should identify those novels which combine this experimentation and the amusing effects of comedy. These writings do not only use irony as a critical distance from reality and established literary conventions, but employ humour as their main stylistic feature. If we consider that the same years saw a significant production of satirical plays and journalism,[160] we understand that our comparative approach allows to explore on trend in humorous writing and the network of relations between authors.

## 2.1.3 Selection criteria and research questions

To study literary humour with this comparative approach, the selected corpus should allow us to:

1. recognize as masters of humour some writers who have received some critical recognition, but are understudied compared to the pioneers and other writers of the 1970s-1980s (for example, al-Ghīṭānī and Ibrāhīm);

2. contribute to the study of experimental post-Mahfuzian literature by defining a humorous sub-genre;

3. identify a set of humour-generating techniques and see whether they evolve with the formal and thematic innovations of subsequent decades.

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[159] Maria Elena Paniconi, 'Narrare il disincanto. L'ironia nel romanzo egiziano deli anni Ottanta e Novanta' (Unpublished Ph.D. diss., Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, 2006). This study looks at I. Aṣlān (1935-2012), S. Bakr (b. 1949), I. ʿAbd al-Majīd (b. 1946), Ṣ. Ibrāhīm (his novel *Dhāt*, 1992), and Y.T. ʿAbdallāh,

[160] For satirical drama, we have already mentioned ʿAlī Sālim, whereas popular satirical prose writers were Muḥammad ʿAfīfī (1922-1981), ʿĀṣim Ḥanafī, and Maḥmūd al-Saʿdanī (1927-2010).

To this aim, Larkin Galiñanes's definition of humorous novels has served as a criterion for our selection: "those which maintain a constant and recurring effect of laughter caused by the adventures and mis-adventures of their characters, and the situations they get themselves into and create".[161]

Besides this definition, we have looked at novels that Arab and Western reviewers define humorous, funny, and ironical. Our aim is going beyond this label to understand the mechanisms of humour. Similarly, we have taken into consideration writers who are often associated to humour and satire in reviews and literary criticism.

Another factor is the presence of comical episodes and witty repartees in the novels. We have looked for humour on the level of the story, as it is performed by individual characters and groups, popular entertainers, and comedy actors.

Finally, we have taken into consideration novels that discuss humour from a sociological perspective (what do Egyptian laugh at?) or a metafictional perspective (how to write in a playful way?). Indeed, these passages contain humour-related vocabulary that describes the comical types (agents and victims), functions of humour, and degrees of laughter.

Among the writers of the Sixties, Khayrī Shalabī is usually associated to humour because of his vivid language and depiction of eccentric characters living on the margins. The Egyptian literary critic ʿAṣfūr suggests that this writing on the margins reflects a carnivalesque joy that subverts the social hierarchies and literary compositional principles.[162]

This reading invites for a further exploration of humour in Shalabī's works. Moreover, the thematic focus on the margins and the urban underworld has restricted our selection to a sub-group of novels that portray these communities with humour. Therefore, the selected corpus does not encompass all the major features and topics of humorous writing, but is representative of a certain trend.

Considering this, Muḥammad Mustajāb and Ḥamdī Abū Julayyil satisfy our selection criteria and allow us to cover a significant time span. We compare Shalabī with Mustajāb,

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[161] Larkin Galiñanes, 'Narrative Structure', 143.
[162] Jābir ʿAṣfūr, *Zaman al-riwāya* (Damascus: Dār li-l-thaqāfa wa-l-nashr, 1999), 309-18.

a fellow writer of the Sixties who reached his maturity in the 1980s. Both of them increased their critical recognition at the beginning of the 21st century and influenced younger writers. In particular, Shalabī published some popular novels in the 1990s and 2000s, which represent the link with younger authors like Abū Julayyil.

Having applied these stylistic, thematic, and chronological criteria, we have chosen four novels:

1. *Min al-tārīkh al-sirrī li-Nuʿmān ʿAbd al-Ḥāfiẓ* (1982) by Mustajāb, the anti-epic of a village boy told by a non-reliable historian;

2. *Riḥlāt al-ṭurshajī al-ḥalwajī* (1981/1983) by Shalabī, which follows the narrator's time-travels in the Fatimid and Mamluk eras and provides a portrait of what is authentically Egyptian;

3. *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa* (2000) by Shalabī, which depicts a community of hashish addicted intellectuals who are amused by the apparently irrational behaviour of the hashish waiter that gives the title to the novel;

4. *al-Fāʿil* (2008) by Abū Julayyil, a short novel on construction work and literary aspirations from the perspective of a young Bedouin who moves to Cairo.

Our close textual analysis of these novels aims at identifying which recurrent techniques generate humour, with a focus on the characters and themes. Furthermore, we shall examine how humour is intertwined with the following narrative conventions: the formal innovations of contemporary Egyptian fiction on the one hand; and on the other the cultural heritage including literary forms, jokelore, and socio-political satire. Finally, we shall compare the humorous style of these authors.

Each of the following chapters is devoted to the analysis of one novel, while we choose to introduce the selected writers in this chapter, since a comparative approach points at the similarities in their careers and writings.

## 2.2 Authors

### 2.2.1 Origins

Mustajāb, Shalabī, and Abū Julayyil come from rural areas and a humble social background. In the 1960s and 1990s an increasing number of writers came from the lower-middle class of the provinces and moved to the city for economic opportunities and higher education. Yet, the authors examined in the present study do not simply come from the provinces, but from marginal areas they depict in their novels. Moreover, their little economic and educational opportunities did not prevent them from joining the literary circles and institutions.

Mustajāb was born from a peasant family in the village of Dayrūṭ in the Governorate of Asyūṭ in Middle Upper Egypt.[163] When he was a child, he worked in the fields with his family. In the late 1950s, he went to Cairo for the first time, but did not have a stable job.

In the mid-1960s, he returned to Upper Egypt to work in the construction of the High Dam in Aswān. It is then that he started writing: he met Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), who was travelling in Egypt in 1967, and took part in the Congress of Young Writers organized by the Arab Socialist Union's Youth Organization in Zaqāzīq in 1969.[164]

After spending some months in Iraq, he moved to Cairo where he enrolled in the Academy of Fine Arts, but did not finish his studies.

While Mustajāb came from Upper Egypt, Shalabī was born in the Nile Delta, in the village of Shabbās ʿAmr in the Governorate of Kafr al-Shaykh.[165] His family enjoyed some social and intellectual prestige, and his father was a political activist and one of the founders of the *Wafd* party. However, when the political scenario changed, he went through some financial difficulties, which made it hard to provide for his numerous children.

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[163] For Mustajāb's biographical sketch see: Samia Mehrez, 'Kitābat al-qariyya fī l-adab al-muʿāṣir', *Mawāqif*, no. 70–71 (February 1993), 175 and Hans Mauritz, 'Autorenforum: Muhammad Mustagab - Der böse Spötter aus Oberägypten', *Leben in Luxor*, 2009.

[164] Muḥammad Muḥammad Mustajāb, 'ʿAn tafāṣīl al-ḥayāt al-yawmiyya. Muḥammad Mustajāb al-ibn yastaʿīdu dhikrayyāt Mustajāb al-ab fī l-sadd al-ʿālī', *Al-Ahram*, 16 January 2016.
  For the Congress of young writers, see: Selim, *Rural Imaginary*, 150.

[165] For Shalabī's biographical sketch see: Mehrez, 'Kitābat al-qariyya', 175; Abier Bushnaq, *Der historische Roman Ägyptens: Eine literaturwissenschaftliche Untersuchung am Beispiel der Mamlukenromane* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2002), 495-99; and Jacquemond, *Conscience*, 147.

Because of this, Shalabī started working when he was young while struggling to continue his education: he worked as a cotton gatherer, tailor, carpenter, and street seller. In the mid-1950s, he enrolled in the teacher training college in Damanhūr, a medium-size city in the Delta. After being expelled, he made a living from various jobs and frequented the cafés where local writers met. Later he moved to Alexandria, where he continued his training with university students and local writers.

In the 1960s he went to Cairo and began to work in journalism: after an internship at *al-Jumhūriyya* newspaper, he worked for *Majallat al-masraḥ*. He also attended the Academy for Scriptwriters and wrote some radio dramas. Afterwards, he obtained a post at *Majallat al-idhāʿa wa-l-talfizyūn* (the radio and television weekly).

Finally, Abū Julayyil is an author of Bedouin origins. His family emigrated from Libya and settled in the Fayyūm region in northern Upper Egypt in the first half of the 19th century. They had enjoyed a certain prestige among the nomadic communities, but faced some socio-economic difficulties when they became sedentary.

Like his family, Abū Julayyil experienced migration when he moved to Cairo to work as a construction labourer. In the 1990s he lived in Manshiyyat Naṣr, a neighbourhood established in the Nasserist era on the outskirts of the southern industrial district of Ḥulwān in Greater Cairo. His first novel is set there.

The three authors' humble origins, migration, and work experience prevented them to continue their formal education. After attending primary or partially secondary school, they continued their studies on their own. In some interviews, Mustajāb and Shalabī proudly insist on being self-taught and having learnt from experience and folk culture.

Shalabī, for instance, recalls the rich cultural life of his village: in the houses of the learned middle-class, religious scholars discussed religion and literature; his father's friends debated politics and he could access their libraries, which included political memoirs, sociological essays, and modern fiction. At the same time, he was fascinated by recorded music and popular storytelling, especially the recitation of the folk epics *(sīra shaʿbiyya)*.[166]

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[166] Mohamed El-Assyouti, 'Khairi Shalabi: The Narrative Eye', *Al-Ahram Weekly*, Issue No. 463, 6-12 January 2000.

Another common trait among Mustajāb, Shalabī, and Abū Julayyil is that they did manual labour while pursuing their literary aspirations. This experience made them familiar with some unprivileged communities of workers in the countryside and the city, whose routine, jargon, and displacement they depict in their novels. In particular, Shalabī and Abū Julayyil portray the precarious living conditions of seasonal and daily hired labourers over the past decades.

When the three authors moved to Cairo, they gradually entered the literary circles and started their career.

## 2.2.2 Career and recognition

Once settled in Cairo, Mustajāb dedicated himself to literature and journalism. He published his first short story, *al-Waṣiyya al-ḥādiyyat ʿashara* (The Eleventh Testament), in the magazine *al-Hilāl* in 1969. Thanks to ʿAlī Sālim, he contributed under a pseudonym to the humorous magazine *Ṣabāḥ al-khayr*. Meanwhile he published his short stories on several literary journals, attracting the attention of the critics. Soon afterwards, he was assigned a governmental post in the Academy of the Arabic Language and was later appointed director of the same institution.

His famous novella, *Min al-tārīkh al-sirrī li-Nuʿmān ʿAbd al-Ḥāfiẓ* was published in instalments in 1976-77 in the magazine *al-Kātib* and released as a book in 1982. It was followed by the publication of the short story collection *Dayrūṭ al-sharīf* (1984, Dayrut the Noble). The two works may be seen as complementary and were later published together.[167]

In the 1980s and 1990s Mustajāb published several collections of short stories, written in those years and in his early career. In the 2000s he published some novels about a family's genealogy in which he inserts himself as a character, such as *Innahu al-rābiʿ min āl Mustajāb* (2003, Mustagab the Fourth) and *Kalb āl Mustajāb* (2004, The Dog of the

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[167] Muḥammad Mustajāb, *Min al-tārīkh al-sirrī li-Nuʿmān ʿAbd al-Ḥāfiẓ* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Nīl li-l-ṭabʿ wa-l-nashr, 1982); Id., *Dayrūṭ al-sharīf* (Cairo: Maktabat Madbūlī, 1986 [1984]); and Id., *Dayrūṭ al-sharīf wa-Nuʿmān ʿAbd al-Ḥāfiẓ* (Cairo: Maktabat Madbūlī, 1986).

Mustagabs). His last work, *al-Lahw al-khafī* (2005, Hidden Amusement), was published a few months before he died.

Over his career, Mustajāb has developed his satirical vein both in fiction and columns published in newspapers and magazines, including *al-Sharq al-awsaṭ*, *al-Muṣawwar*, *al-Usbūʿ*, *al-ʿArabī*. His columns were later collected in anthologies, such as the popular *Nabsh al-ghurāb* (1999-, The Crow Digs Up, columns published in *al-ʿArabī*).

Mustajāb's style confirms that *adab sākhir* crosses the boundaries between literature and journalism, fiction and non-fiction. In an interview about the decline of *adab sākhir* in the Egyptian cultural scene, he mentions himself along with other popular satirical writers, such as al-Saʿdanī, Ḥanafī, and ʿAfīfī, as well as the pioneers of Egyptian fiction al-Māzinī and Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm.[168]


Shalabī was a very prolific writer: he is the author of almost seventy books including novels, short story collections, historical tales, and critical studies. His novels and short stories focus on marginalized characters whose vitality, adventures, habits, and way of thinking are rendered in an expressive language.

His critical studies cover various literary and historical topics: literary criticism in *Muḥākamat Ṭaha Ḥussayn* (1972, Taha Hussein's Trial); philology in *Fatḥ al-Andalus* (1973, The Conquest of Andalusia), a recently discovered play by the Egyptian nationalist leader Muṣṭafā Kāmil (1874-1908); contemporary theatre in *Fī-l-masraḥ al-miṣrī al-muʿāṣir* (1981, Egyptian Contemporary Theatre) and *al-Shāʿir Najīb Surūr: masraḥ al-azma* (1989, Najīb Surūr: The Theatre of Crisis);[169] vernacular poetry; and biography.

The author could cultivate his research interests thanks to his employment in public institutions. He was editor-in-chief of the magazine *Majallat al-shiʿr* and the book series *Library of Popular Studies*, published by the General Organization of the Cultural Palaces attached to the Egyptian Ministry of Culture. His interest in folklore, popular culture, and oral storytelling informs his research, editorial tasks, and literary output. This is

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[168] ʿAbīr Darwīsh, 'al-Adab al-sākhir.. li-mādhā ikhtafā min ḥayātinā al-thaqāfiyya?', *al-Sharq al-awsaṭ*, 29 August 2001. Shalabī is interviewed in the same article.

[169] Shalabī was a screenwriter for radio dramas and wrote some unpublished plays in the 1960s. He also published a play: *Masraḥiyyat ṣuyyād al-lūlī - masraḥiyyatān ghināʾiyyatān* (The Pearl Fisher – Two Musical Plays, 1982).

exemplified, for instance, by the structure of his *Thulāthiyyat al-amālī* (1990-1995, The Trilogy of Hopes), which resembles the folk epics.

Thanks to his affiliation to government cultural institutions and his long contribution to *Majallat al-idhāʿa wa-l-talfizyūn*, Shalabī knew the community of fellow journalists and writers very well. He mentions many colleagues and acquaintances in his novels *Riḥlāt al-ṭurshajī al-ḥalwajī* and *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa*, which will be analyzed respectively in ch. 4 and 5. Similarly, he depicts the community of intellectuals in his non-fictional writings, such as a compilation of biographical portraits of Egyptian outstanding figures and an autobiography in the form of essays about his masters and friends, published in 2011, the year of his death.[170]

Journalism has played a significant role also in Abū Julayyil's career, providing him a publishing venue and the opportunity to enter a network of fellow intellectuals. He worked with the consecrated novelist Ibrāhīm Aṣlān, who was a good friend of Shalabī's,[171] and had Mustajāb among his mentors.

Abū Julayyil started publishing his short stories in the mid-1990s and has realised three collections: *Asrāb al-naml* (1997, Swarms of Bees), *Ashyāʾ maṭwiyya bi-ʿināya fāʾiqa* (2000, Items Folded with Great Care), *Ṭayy al-khiyām* (2010, Folding the Tents).

He has published two novels: *Luṣūṣ mutaqāʿidūn* (2002; *Thieves in Retirement*, 2006) and *al-Fāʿil* (2008; *A Dog With No Tail*, 2009).[172] He is the author of two non-fictional books that offer a historical guide of Cairo: *al-Qāhira: shawāriʿ wa-ḥikāyāt* (2003, Cairo: Streets and Stories) and *al-Qāhira: jawāmiʿ wa-ḥikāyāt* (2013, Cairo: Mosques and Stories).

Like Shalabī, Abū Julayyil worked as editorial director for some book series attached to the Ministry of Culture, in particular the *Folk and Popular Culture Series* and *Horizons of Writing*, directed by Aṣlān. When he was working for *Horizons of Writing*, he was

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[170] These non-fictional writings are respectively *ʿAmāliqa ẓurafāʾ* (Refined People, 1985) and *Uns al-ḥabāyb: al-shukhūṣ fatrat al-takwīn* (In Company of the Loved Ones: People in my Formative Years, 2011).

[171] Samīr Grīs, 'Ḥiwār maʿa al-adīb Ibrāhīm Aṣlān: Khayrī Shalabī kāna mutakhawwaf[an] an tuṣbiḥa Miṣr dawla dīniyya', *Qantara.de*, 13 September 2011.

[172] Ḥamdī Abū Julayyil, *Luṣūṣ mutaqāʿidūn* (Cairo: Dār Mīrīt, 2002) and Id., *al-Fāʿil* (Beirut and London: Dār al-sāqī, 2011) – first published by Dār Mīrīt, Cairo, 2008.

involved in the controversy over the novel *Walīma li-ashʿāb al-baḥr* (1983, Banquet for Seaweed).[173]

This classic by the Syrian writer Ḥaydar Ḥaydar (b. 1936) was published first in Nicosia and then reprinted in some Arab countries. The General Organisation of Cultural Palaces reprinted it for the first time in Egypt in 1999. Over the following months, some reviews accused the novel and its author of blasphemy against Islam, claiming the ministry's responsibility and calling for public demonstrations. What followed was a political battle between Islamist groups and political authorities, incidentally fought over legitimacy and censorship in the cultural field. In an interview, Abū Julayyil describes the climate of intimidation caused by this issue.[174]

Over these years, Abū Julayyil has worked as a journalist for the UAE daily newspaper *al-Ittiḥād* and the cultural page of the Lebanese daily *al-Safīr*; he currently writes for to the Egyptian newspaper *al-Maqāl*, whose editor in chief is Ibrāhīm ʿĪsā.[175]

As can be inferred from our reconstruction, the careers of the three writers partially overlap in the 1990s and 2000s. Besides this chronological parameter, our selection takes into consideration the critical attention that these authors have received. Shalabī and Mustajāb have increased their recognition thanks to national and international literary prizes and translation in the 2000s, which coincides with Abū Julayyil's immediate critical reception. Nevertheless, all the three authors have been only partially studied.

A first stage in Shalabī's and Mustajāb's recognition dates back to the 1980s, when they were both awarded the Egyptian *State Incentive Award*. Shalabī won the prize in 1980 for his travelogue *Fallāḥ miṣrī fī bilād al-faranja* (1978, An Egyptian Peasant in the Land of the Franks), whereas Mustajāb won it in 1984 for his novella *Min al-tārīkh*.

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[173] For a detailed account of the Ḥaydar Ḥaydar affair, see: Sabry Hafez, 'The Novel, Politics and Islam. Haydar Haydar's *Banquet for Seaweed*', *New Left Review*, II, no. 5 (2000): 117–41; Aldo Nicosia, 'Il caso Haydar tra fikr e kufr', in *Eredità del XX secolo in Medio Oriente*, ed. Giuseppe Restivo (Atti del convegno SeSaMo - Taormina 2000, Milano: Selene Edizioni, 2002), 189–205; and Samia Mehrez, *Egypt's Culture Wars. Politics and Practice* (Cairo and New York: AUC Press, 2010), 18-21.

[174] Mehrez, *Culture Wars*, 19-20. Mehrez translates an excerpt of this interview (*Akhbār al-Adab*, 21 January 2001).

[175] For the role of Ibrāhīm ʿĪsā in the Egyptian media, see Naomi Sakr, *Transformations in Egyptian Journalism*, Kindle edition (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013), ch. 2, section 'Individuals vs institutions'; and Cecilia Valdesalici, 'Stampa e potere nell'Egitto contemporaneo. Il dibattito politico e sociale nell'attività giornalistica di Magdī al-Gallād, ʾIbrāhīm ʿĪssā e Muḥammad al-Sayyad Saʿīd (2004-2009)' (Unpublished Ph.D. diss., Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, 2011-2012), 129-43.

Almost two decades later, the Egyptian *State Merit Award* confirmed the interest of the critics and the success among the readers. It was awarded to Shalabī in 2004 for his novel *Wikālat ʿAṭiyya* (1991; *The Lodging House*, 2006) and posthumously to Mustajāb in 2005.

This prize paved the way for the international reception of their writings. Even though some of Mustajāb's short stories had already appeared in translation before 2005,[176] it was only after his death that *Dayrūṭ al-sharīf* and the novella *Min al-tārīkh* were translated together into English.[177] This was followed by the English translation of other short stories published in journals, anthologies, and blogs.[178]

The case of Shalabī illustrates how international reception relies on and, at the same time, reinforces internal recognition. Before winning the *State Merit Award*, his novel *Wikālat ʿAṭiyya* had received the *Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature* in 2003. This prize is awarded by the American University in Cairo and secures the English translation of the winning novel.[179] *Wikālat ʿAṭiyya*'s English translation won the *Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize for Arabic Literary Translation* in 2007.

This was followed by the English translation of *Riḥlāt al-ṭurshajī al-ḥalwajī* (1981/1983; *The Time-Travels of the Man Who Sold Pickles and Sweets*, 2010) and *Ṣāliḥ*

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[176] Muhammad Mustagab, 'Les Gaber', trans. Frédérique Gourdan and Raafat al-Malatawi, *Égypte/Monde arabe*, Première série, no. 17 - Soudan 2 (1994): 185–93; Mohamed Mustagab, 'Two Short Stories "The Exit" and "Hulagu" with Profile by Mona Zaki', ed. and trans. Mona Zaki, *Banipal* 12 (Autumn 2001); and Muhammad Mustagab, 'Der Bergzahn', trans. Hartmut Fähndrich and Edward Badeen, *LiteraturNachrichten. Afrika-Asien-Lateinamerika* 79 (Oktober – Dezember 2003): 12-13. Reprinted in: *Arabische Erzählungen*, ed. Taufiq Suleman, (München: Verlag, 2004), 65–69.

[177] Mohamed Mustagab, *Tales from Dayrut: Short Stories*, trans. Humphrey Davies (Cairo and New York: AUC Press, 2008). The German translation also appeared after the author's death and includes the novella and a short story entitled 'Blutbrennen': Muhammad Mustagab, *Irrnisse und Wirrnisse des Knaben Numân*, trans. Hartmut Fähndrich and Edward Badeen (Basel: Lenos Verlag, 2009).

The Dutch and French translations, on the contrary, were published earlier: Mohammed Moestagaab, *Uit de geheime geschiedenis van Noeʿmaan Abd al-Hafiz. 3 Verhalen uit Egypte*, trans. Djûke Poppinga (Baarn, Den Haag, and Brussel: Ambo/NOVIB/NCOS, 1989) and Mohamed Mostagab, *Les tribulations d'un égyptien en Egypte*, trans. Stéphanie Dujols and Nashwa El-Azhari (Arles: Actes Sud, 1997).

[178] Mohamed Mustagab, 'Naked He Went Off', trans. Denys Johnson-Davies, in *Homecoming: Sixty Years of Egyptian Short Stories* (Cairo and New York: AUC Press, 2012), 244–47; Id., 'A Story "The Hired Killer" and a True Account "Ola the Hit Man" with Introduction by Mona Zaki', ed. and trans. Mona Zaki, *Banipal* 25 (Spring 2006): 124–30; Muhammed Mustajab, 'The Battle of the Rabbits', trans. Robin Moger, *Qisasukhra*, 28 August 2012; Id., 'Mustajab VII', trans. Robin Moger, *Qisasukhra*, 4 April 2015.

[179] Mehrez, *Culture Wars*, 41–57.

*Hēṣa* (2000; *The Hashish Waiter*, 2011).[180] His last novel *Isṭāsiyya* (2010, Ecstasy) was longlisted for the *International Prize for Arabic Fiction* in 2011.

In the same years Abū Julayyil established himself as an emerging writer and received immediate critical attention: his short story collections were awarded with one international and two national prizes.[181]

His first novel, *Luṣūṣ Mutaqāʿidūn*, was published in 2002, only two years after Shalabī's *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa*. It was translated into English, French, and Spanish.[182] His second novel, *al-Fāʿil*, won the *Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature* in 2008 and was translated into English.[183]

The three authors have received the major prizes and accessed the international readership basically in the same decade. They are also tied by a network of mutual friends, in which the established novelists are the mentors of younger writers.

## 2.2.3 Literary influences

"If I am stranded on a desert island for the rest of my life, the *Thousand and One Nights* will be quite enough."[184] This sentence condenses Khayrī Shalabī's love for popular storytelling. Nonetheless, it also simplifies the many aspects of popular culture

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[180] Khayrī Shalabī, *Riḥlāt al-ṭurshajī al-ḥalwajī*, (Cairo: Maktabat Madbūlī, 1991). First edition: Cairo: Silsilat kitāb al-yawm, 1981. English translation: Khairy Shalaby, *The Time-Travels of the Man Who Sold Pickles and Sweets*, trans. Michael Cooperson (Cairo and New York: AUC Press, 2010).

Khayrī Shalabī, *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa* (Cairo: Dār al-hilāl 2000). English translation: Khairy Shalaby, *The Hashish Waiter*, trans. Adam Talib (Cairo and New York: AUC Press, 2011).

For further translations: Khairi Shalabi, 'Pissing over the Imam's Head', trans. Robin Moger, *Qisasukhra*, 7 September 2012; Id., 'The Clock', in *Under the Naked Sky: Short Stories from the Arab World*, ed. and trans. Denys Johnson-Davies (Cairo and New York: AUC Press, 2000). Reprinted in: *Homecoming*, 292–93.

[181] *Jāʾizat al-majmūʿ al-qiṣaṣiyya*, awarded by the Ministry of Culture in 1997; *Jāʾizat al-qiṣṣa*, awarded by *Akhbār al-yawm* in 1999; and *Jāʾizat al-ibdāʿ al-ʿarabī*, awarded by the United Arab Emirates in 2000.

[182] English translation: Hamdi Abu Golayyel, *Thieves in Retirement*, trans. Marilyn Booth (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2006). The English translation was the runner-up for the *Saif al-Ghobashi Banipal International Arabic Translation Award*, 2007. French translation: Hamdi Abou-Golayyel, *Petits voleurs à la retraite*, trans. Stéphanie Dujols (Paris: Editions de l'Aube, 2005). Spanish translation: Hamdi Abu Golayyel, *Ladrones jubilados*, trans. Álvaro Abella Villar (Barcelona: Ediciones de París, 2008). The English translation is reviewed in Mona Zaki, 'Mona Zaki reviews "Thieves in Retirement" by Hamdi Abu Golayyel', *Banipal* 29 (Summer 2007). The Spanish translation is reviewed in Ignacio Gutiérrez de Terán, 'Taxistas y proletarios de Egipto: ¡leed a Dostoievski!', *Revista de Libros*, no. 155 (2009): 44–45.

[183] English translation: Hamdi Abu Golayyel, *A Dog with No Tail*, trans. Robin Moger (Cairo and New York: AUC Press, 2015 [2009]).

[184] El-Assyouti, 'Khairi Shalabi'.

that Shalabī, Mustajāb, and Abū Julayyil insert into their writings: folk epics, ballads, sayings, anecdotes, Bedouin and rural legends, cinema, and television.

Re-reading the literary heritage and intertextuality with popular culture were part of the literary experimentation conducted by the Generation of the Sixties. Mustajāb and Shalabī belong to this group in chronological terms, but followed their own paths. Mustajāb shared with his peers some influential readings, for example existentialism, but had different political beliefs. Shalabī did not engage in politics and chose solitude for his writing: he read, wrote, and met his friends in Cairo's historical cemeteries.

Shalabī's eccentricity in the relation with his peers coincides with his disaffection for modernist writers, like al-Kharrāṭ, whose works he deemed not enjoyable to read and too influenced from the Western novelistic tradition. On the contrary, he appreciated realist novelists: "He considers Yehia Haqqi his literary father, Youssef Idris his older brother and Abdel-Rahman El-Sharqawi, Saad Mekkawi, Naguib Mahfouz, and Ihsan Abdel-Quddous his relatives."[185]

Among the writers of the Sixties, an intimate friend of Shalabī was Aṣlān, who is related to the corpus of the present research because of the irony of his short stories and the depiction of marginal urban communities. Indeed, Aṣlān lived in the popular Cairene district of Imbāba, which he depicted in his novels.[186] Furthermore, he was a joining link with the younger generation of Egyptian writers, including Ṭāriq Imām (b. 1977) and Abū Julayyil.

As regards his literary influences, Abū Julayyil considers Ibrāhīm Manṣūr (1932-2004) a mentor, [187] and critics indicate Mustajāb and Aṣlān as his masters. Lindsey points out some similarities and differences with Mustajāb's style:

> Abu Golayyel is a protégé of the late satirical master Mohamed Mustagab […], and he shares his mentor's sweeping sarcasm […] and talent for weaving the startling and the ridiculous into chronicles of the dispossessed. Where they differ is in their prose styles: Mustagab had a penchant for lyricism, and Abu Golayyel says his goal is "to make literary

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[185] Ibid.

[186] For the analysis of two novels by Aṣlān, see: Paniconi, 'Narrare il disincanto', in particular 'Capitolo 1. Nostalgia postcoloniale e ironia intertestuale in Mālik al-ḥazīn di Ibrāhīm Aṣlān', 15-52; Dina Heshmat, 'L'évolution des représentations de la ville du Caire dans la littérature égyptienne moderne et contemporaine' (Ph.D. dissertation, Université Sorbonne Nouvelle - Paris 3, 2004), in particular: 'Chapitre 3. Ibrâhîm Aslân, Asâfîr al-Nîl: ville et campagne ensemble', 110-36.

[187] Al-Fāʿil opens with two short quotations from I. Manṣūr and Marguerite Duras respectively. For a portrait of Ibrāhīm Manṣūr and his role in Egyptian cultural life, see: Youssef Rakha, 'Ibrahim Mansour: The Duke in His Domain', Al-Ahram Weekly, Issue No. 452, 21-27 October 1999.

language reach the level of spoken language – in simplicity, lightness, and the power to convince".[188]

Badawī suggests that, in different moments, both authors had an influence on this emerging writer:

> Ḥamdī Abū Julayyil distanced himself from Mustajāb, maybe afraid to follow his path towards exemplary abstraction. Indeed, Mustajāb's prose became a kind of fortress, made of metaphors and symbols. The weight of reality was decreasing, while his characters almost lost their psychological and social characterization. Abū Julayyil became closer to Aṣlān, who has not forgotten Hemingway's suggestion of writing only about what the writer knows. In this sense, Ḥamdī is a "realist" writer, even if influenced by Milan Kundera's views of wandering about with his imagination.[189]

# 2.3 Works

After looking at the interconnections between Shalabī, Mustajāb, and Abū Julayyil, this section illustrates some common themes, characters, and narrative techniques in their writings. This overview presents some novels that are central in the authors' production, but are not examined as case studies in the following chapters. Furthermore, it identifies some general features that guide us in the analysis of the corpus.

Firstly, the setting plays a central role. Be it the village or the city, space is not just a physical landscape, but a network of social and ideological relations that are subject to change, in which the writers are immersed.

Space is a key element for shaping the characters, who belong to small communities within the national one. This attention to marginal places and communities allows to craft an alternative history. Finally, these writers insert many autobiographical elements into their fiction.

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[188] Ursula Lindsey, 'Book Review: "Why Did You Leave the Village?"', *The National*, 7 January 2010.
[189] Muḥammad Badawī, 'Riwāyat "al-Fāʿil" li-l-miṣrī Ḥamdī Abū Julayyil. Sard mutaqaṭṭiʿ yatabādalu al-maraḥ maʿa al-ʿālam', *Al-Ḥayāt*, 26 April 2008. The translation is mine.

## 2.3.1 Village

### 2.3.1.1 Collective narration

Mustajāb and Shalabī gave voice to the stories, legends, secrets, landscape, and everyday life of the Egyptian countryside respectively of Upper Egypt and the Delta. In their village novels, they abandoned the bourgeois urban perspective of the pioneers of Egyptian fiction, such as Muḥammad Ḥussayn Haykal (1888-1956), Ṭaha Ḥussayn (1889-1973), and Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm, or the external look of the committed realist writer ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sharqāwī (1920-1987).[190]

They adopted, instead, the perspective of the insider, the logic of the village, and its narrative modes. In this respect, they are paralleled to other authors of village novels in the 1970s and 1980s, such as ʿAbd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim (1935-1990) and Yaḥyā al-Ṭāhir ʿAbdallāh.

Mehrez argues that this new mode of writing the village blurs the boundaries between the prose genres: the short story, the novella, and the novel.[191] The narrative does not follow the story of an exceptional subject, but this subject becomes a conscious insider of the village reality. Thus, the whole village emerges as hero or anti-hero.

Mehrez notes that this shift from the subject's (auto)biography to collective history has a consequence on the structure: the story does not necessarily have a beginning, a middle, and an end contained within the boundaries of one novel; on the contrary, the cumulative and interwoven stories of the village may expand over a short story collection, a novel with an episodic structure, or a series of novels. The same shift implies that the collective narrating voice prevails over the individual voice,[192] with innovations in style, language, and type of realism.

According to Mehrez, *Dayrūṭ al-sharīf* by Mustajāb and *al-ʿArāwī* (1986, Buttonholes) by Shalabī exemplify these structural changes. *Dayrūṭ al-sharīf* collects thirteen short stories that appeared in 1970-77, plus one story published in 1983. Mehrez suggests to read these short stories as episodes or chapters of the same story for the

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[190] Ami Elad, *The Village Novel in Modern Egyptian Literature* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1994), 86.

[191] Mehrez, 'Kitābat al-qariyya', 166-67.

[192] See also, Selim, *Rural Imaginary*. Selim suggests that the collective subaltern counter-discourse is found, to a major or minor extent, also in village novels written before the 1970s. It challenges the main narrative discourse, also with parodic effects.

following three reasons: firstly, the author published other short stories over the same years, but he chose only those set in his hometown for this separate volume; secondly, the collection's title is not taken from one of the stories, but refers to the setting and protagonist; and finally, at the end of the book there is an appendix with some historical and geographical information about the village, which invites the reader to reconsider the whole text, probably as an alternative geography.

Ch. 3 will look at some stylistic features of these stories, in particular incongruity, satire, and the absurd, which are relevant for the study of the novella *Min al-tārīkh*.

Shalabī's novel *al-ʿArāwī* consists of multiple stories about the hamlets, families, and rivalries of a Delta village. These stories are of little importance if they are taken separately, but, taken as a whole, they map the geography and history of this place. The narrator is a young boy who works in a tailor's workshop and waves these accounts together as if he were sawing a dress. In this task, he is helped by a wise old man of the village.

On a broader level, Mehrez's considerations about the episodic structure will be taken into consideration for examining the structure of the novels under scrutiny. In particular, the insertion of anecdotes, folk tales, and oral storytelling into the novels may affect the humorous effect, due to the brevity of the single textual unities.

## 2.3.1.2 Village characters

Shalabī and Mustajāb have written village novels both at the beginning and at the end of their careers. Over the years, a recurrent feature is Shalabī's focus on the unprivileged rural classes and their relation with the local and national authorities.

A central theme is the exploitation of seasonal *(tarāḥīl)* and daily hired workers *(anfār).* This topic is tackled in the classic *al-Ḥarām* (1959; *The Sinners*, 1984) by Yūsuf Idrīs. Shalabī, who had been a daily worker in cotton collection, portrays this community in his novel *al-Awbāsh* (1978, The Riff Raff). Some decades later, Abū Julayyil's *al-Fāʿil* explores the precarious conditions of construction labourers in the city. His fictional account is also based on his personal experience.

Going back to *al-Awbāsh*, the protagonist, Ṭalʿat, belongs to a group of seasonal migrant workers.[193] They are forced to work as a punishment for a crime they are collectively accused of: a suitcase, containing money and drugs, disappears with the complicity of the village authorities. The crime is investigated first by Ṭalʿat's father, a judge, whom he has never met. Then it is investigated by the public prosecutor, but to no avail. It is solved only by the peasants themselves. After being imprisoned in the estate stable, local and migrant peasants unite under Ṭalʿat's guide: they examine the papers of the conspiracy and rebel against the pasha's guards. In the subsequent fire, some of them die.

The novel exploits some traditional tropes of the Egyptian village novel, *i.e.* the crime investigation, the corruption of central and village authorities, the conflict between the self and the community, and the peasants' insurgency.[194] Shalabī develops these motifs by looking at the most precarious groups, the local landless peasants and the seasonal workers, who are all hired to work in the fields.

Selim argues that this novel challenges the romantic nationalist image of the harmonious rural community, since it reveals the internal divisions between the local and the outsiders. These divisions are overcome only when the peasants realize that they suffer from the same exploitation and articulate their rebellion through a collective act of narration. Furthermore, the concepts of patriarchal family and kinship are questioned, and the local landscape is re-appropriated.[195]

Shalabī's last novel, *Isṭāsiyya*, explores similar social themes: the changes in the Egyptian countryside, social injustice, and patriarchy.[196] It revolves around an unsolved crime (the protagonist's son's murder) and includes some acts of rebellion (especially those of the female protagonist who gives the title to the book). Furthermore, it portrays

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[193] For the plot, see: Elad, *Village Novel*, 169-70.

[194] Selim, *Rural Imaginary*, 126. For example, the crime investigation is at the core of al-Ḥakīm's *Yawmiyyāt nāʾib fī l-aryāf*. The peasants' insurgency is first exemplified in modern Egyptian fiction in Maḥmūd Ṭāhir Ḥaqqī's novella *ʿAdhrāʾ Danshawāy* (1906; *The Maiden of Dinshway*, 1986). Another classic example is al-Sharqāwī's novel *al-Arḍ* (1954; *Egyptian Earth*, 1990). Selim argues that Shalabī's *al-Awbāsh* depicts "the struggle against oppression as a process of political enlightenment and insurgency" (Ibid., 129).

[195] Ibid., 156-58.

[196] On *Isṭāsiyya*, see: Dina Heshmat, 'Istasiya de Khayri Shalabi. Le retour du héros engagé pour le changement' (paper presented at the 10th EURAMAL Conference, Paris, 2012) and Ḥamdī Abū Julayyil, 'Khayrī Shalabī: harabtu min al-ḥaddāthyyin alladhīna shawwahū al-thaqāfa al-gharbiyya ilā l-maqābir', *al-Safīr*, 28 September 2010.

the rural community's internal divisions caused by kinship, power struggle, and religion: the novel deals with sectarianism between Muslims and Copts.

The novels of the corpus tackle some of the social issues described here. For example, there is not a focus on sectarian tensions, but humour mocks those religious authorities who spread superstition and corruption. Another common theme is social inclusion/exclusion: while *Min al-tārīkh* is set in the countryside, the other three novels portray how the rural enters the urban due to migration. Therefore, the traditional rivalry between the city and the village still shapes some comical characters and misunderstandings. Finally, migration leads to reconsidering the history of both the village of origins and the city.

## 2.3.2 City

### 2.3.2.1 Urban characters

As he does in his village novels, Shalabī depicts some marginalized characters also in his fiction set in the city. His urban characters include ordinary people, such as students, shop keepers, street vendors, and employees, as well as the underworld of vagrants, rogues, drug dealers, and petty criminals.[197] They inhabit the alleys, cafés, hash dens, and semi-legal shelter places of the popular districts, which Shalabī knows well from his own experience as a young migrant who did not have a stable dwelling.

They belong to the city's margins or to central districts that are neglected. From this position, they coexist with or confront the ruling class as single individuals, small cliques, or the rebellious and chaotic throng.

These types combine the vitality of the urban poor with a peculiar Egyptian identity that emerges from their values, way of speaking, and connection to the place they inhabit. The author plays with the stereotypical image of the authentic Egyptian (*al-miṣrī al-aṣlī* or *ibn al-balad*). He is an ordinary man who does not belong to the elite; lives in the city, especially in the popular neighbourhoods; may have received formal education, but has

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[197] ʿAṣfūr, *Zaman*, 314. ʿAṣfūr suggest that these types can be gathered under the label of *shuṭṭār*, which means 'smart, cunning' and 'a scoundrel'. *al-Shuṭṭār* is the title of one of Shalabī's novels. See also: Muḥammad al-Fāris, 'al-Ightirāb fī adab Khayrī Shalabī', *Al-Qāhira*, no. 109, 15 October 1990.

learnt from life and is smart; is not a state employee; is resourceful and sometimes opportunist; and has an innate sense of humour.[198]

These characters of the urban underworld are central in *Riḥlāt* and *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa*, but it is probably the novel *Wikālat ʿAṭiyya* that develops them at most. Set in Damanhūr, it tells the story of a young man of rural origins who is expelled from the teacher training college because he assaults his instructor, who discriminates on him. His downfall into the urban underworld starts when he seeks refuge in the *wikāla*, a historical but now run-down caravanserai where the urban poor and disreputable live.

The novel follows the unnamed first-person narrator's rambling travels and the entertaining life stories of the *wikāla*'s inhabitants. On the background is the political scenario of the Nasserist era, with its inclusive educational policy and the massive crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood. The protagonist, who is also an aspiring writer, is the focal point to look at the city's margins: "There is a strong sense of place, and of the smells, sounds and sights in the city's streets and quarters." [199]

The *wikāla* is a microcosm that represents the whole city. Therefore, Booth parallels this enclosed location to the setting of Abū Julayyil's first novel:[200] *Luṣūṣ* revolves around a single building, a family house in the shantytown of Manshiyyat Naṣr on the southern edge of Cairo. The house and the neighbourhood are inhabited by people of rural origins that have adapted to life in the urban fringes. Abū Julayyil's second novel *al-Fāʿil* shapes another urban underworld made of the network of labourers and fellow-villagers.

In Abū Julayyil's novels and Shalabī's *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa* the countryside enters the city: new migration waves and the lack of urban planning has led to the creation of informal settlements where urban and rural living conditions merge. Consequently, contemporary Cairo is populated by outsiders who keep their accent, storytelling, and sense of humour alive.

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[198] For a historical reconstruction of the concept of *ibn al-balad* in Egyptian modern culture, see: De Angelis, *Letteratura egiziana*, 35-51. De Angelis mentions a seminal study on this issue: Sawsan el-Messiri, *Ibn al-Balad: A concept of Egyptian Idenity* (Brill: Leiden, 1978). See also, Booth, 'Poetry, Politics, and the Press', 438, fn. 26.

[199] Susannah Tarbush, 'Book Reviews - The Lodging House by Khairy Shalaby', *Banipal* 30 (Autumn/Winter 2007).

[200] Marilyn Booth, 'House as Novel, Novel as House: The Global, the Intimate, and the Terrifying in Contemporary Egyptian Literature', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 47, no. 4 (September 2011): 377–90.

The fictional representation of recent urban changes redefines a traditional narrative trope, *i.e.* the conflictual relation between the city and the countryside, and the popular regional humour targeting the Bedouin and the peasants, especially from Upper Egypt.

Both writers populate their urban underworld with picaresque figures that resort to creative, yet often illegal, survival strategies. Their adventures require an incessant movement (the dimension of the journey is central, especially in Shalabī) and include evening entertainment, such as hashish smoking sessions and storytelling.

### 2.3.2.2 Urban history

Mustajāb, Shalabī, and Abū Julayyil look at the relation between space and its inhabitants also from a historical perspective. Like other modern Egyptian writers, they remap space on the basis of their memories, socio-cultural and ideological background, and interest in historical documents.

These novelists pay as much attention to their characters' genealogy as to the genealogy of the place. For instance, in *Luṣūṣ*, the narrator reconstructs with irony how Manshiyyat Naṣr was established. In *al-Fāʿil*, he describes the urban changes of a less-known city, Madīnat al-Fayyūm. Finally, his interest in historical landmarks is found in his two non-fictional books about Cairo.

The history of the place is central in Shalabī's fiction, as the subtitles of two of his works suggest: *Riḥlāt al-ṭurshajī al-ḥalwajī* bears the subtitles *Riḥla fī l-zamakān* (A Journey in Space-and-Time), whereas *Baṭn al-baqara* (1996, The Cow's Belly) is defined as *jughāwiyya* (geo-novel). In the dedication to the latter, the author links his interest to *al-khiṭṭa*, a specific genre in Islamic historiography:

> To my cousin, the late Sheikh Ali Mohammed Okasha…
> I rummaged through his library as a young schoolboy and got my hands on the first volume of Al Maqrizi's *Plans*. I fell in love with it. It was without cover or title so I gave it a title of my own, inspired by its subject matter—*The History of Houses and Streets*—and I believe that the spontaneity of feeling embodied in that title still governs my view of this unique science: the study of street-plans; the history of place.[201]

Ch. 4 will illustrate how this historiographical genre was revisited in modern Egyptian literature by ʿAlī Mubārak (1824-1893) and later by al-Ghīṭānī. Al-Ghīṭānī and Shalabī

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[201] Shalabi, 'Pissing over the Imam's Head'. Original Arabic: Khayrī Shalabī, *Baṭn al-baqara* (Cairo: Dār al-mustaqbal, 1996).

shared a great interest for the history of the city and the landmarks they knew so well. However, they revive and parody Mamluk historiography with different purposes.

### 2.3.3 Autobiographical elements

The authors of the corpus insert many autobiographical elements into their writings. As illustrated above, Mustajāb depicts his native village and creates a semi-autobiographical family saga, whereas Shalabī draws inspiration from his work experience and wanderings in the city. This section focuses on Abū Julayyil who exemplifies some trends in contemporary Egyptian fiction, *i.e.* the presence of autobiographical references to focus on the self and represent non-national communities.

The first autobiographical element in Abū Julayyil's writings is the depiction of the Bedouin community, whose identity is gradually fading. The first-person narrators of his two novels are young Bedouin, who transmit a repertoire of legends about the forefathers and stories illustrating the tribal moral codes. These tales are sometimes retold in different versions in his short story collections.

Nevertheless, there are other authors of Bedouin origins who portray their own community, such as the Libyan novelist Ibrāhīm al-Kūnī (b. 1948). An Egyptian Bedouin writer is Mīrāl al-Ṭaḥāwī (b. 1968), who hails from the Sharqiyya Governorate in the eastern Nile Delta. Her social background is partially different, since she comes from a well-off family and has completed her higher education.[202] Like Abū Julayyil, she started publishing her short stories in the mid-1990s and won the *Naguib Mahfouz Medal* for her latest novel *Brūklīn Hāyts* (2010, Brooklyn Heights).[203]

Her writings are usually read as autobiographical or semi-autobiographical, since they follow the displacement and self-discovery of a young female character, whose trajectory resembles that of the author: her first books portray rural-urban migration from a Bedouin settlement to Cairo, whereas *Brūklīn Hāyts* follows a transnational migration to the United States, where al-Ṭaḥāwī currently lives.

In her novels displacement triggers a process of identity negotiation told from a female perspective. In this negotiation, al-Ṭaḥāwī's female characters preserve the Bedouin

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[202] Jacquemond, *Conscience*, 285.
[203] Mīrāl al-Ṭaḥāwī, *Brūklīn Hāyts* (Cairo: Dār Mīrīt, 2010). This novel won the *Naguib Mahfouz Medal* in 2010 and was shortlisted for the *International Prize for Arabic Fiction* in 2011.

heritage by transmitting oral poetry and songs, and by exploring the role of women in their individual and collective memories.

The second autobiographical element, migration, is ubiquitous in recent Egyptian novels. Abū Julayyil is representative of "many of the mega-city's more recent, migrant, young literati",[204] who moved to Cairo to study or work. Like their Cairene counterparts, they usually write about the social group they belong to and the urban reality they experience, be it in central or marginal districts.[205]

Abū Julayyil draws inspiration from on his own experience to portray the displacement, the marginal district of Manshiyyat Naṣr, and construction work. Nevertheless, he is aware of the fictional conventions, as he states in this interview:

> AFKAR/IDEES : Quelle est l'importance de l'expérience personnelle dans votre roman ?
> HAMDI ABOU GOLAYYEL : J'écris sur moi-même, mais on ne peut pas parler d'une autobiographie. Je pense que le transfert littéral de la réalité est impossible. Lorsqu'on écrit une lettre, les mots pensés et dits se transforment en quelque chose de différent au moment de les écrire. L'écriture présente des normes. J'aimerais écrire la réalité telle qu'elle se présente, car je crois que c'est là le plus bel art qui puisse exister, mais les règles de l'écriture obéissent à quelque chose de non naturel, elles sont différentes de la vie réelle.[206]

Finally, the presence of autobiographical elements is in line with the literary experimentation of the 1990s: this fiction focuses on the inner world of the subject, everyday life, and minute details; furthermore, it employs metafiction to blur the boundaries between the narrating voice and the character, fiction and reality. Because of this, critics apply the categories autobiography and autofiction as an analytical framework.

Many novels of the 2000s, including *al-Fāʿil*, resort to these narrative techniques. In *al-Fāʿil* the picture is further complicated because the first-person Bedouin narrator is an aspiring writer who works as a labourer. He shares with the author some real personal

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[204] Mehrez, *Culture Wars*, 167.

[205] Among the trends of the contemporary Egyptian novel, Prevedello mentions the representation of communities whose identity undergoes big changes (such as the Bedouin and Nubian identities) and the appropriation of urban spaces, as in the case of Abū Julayyil. Francesca Prevedello, ed., *Figli del Nilo. Undici scrittori egiziani si raccontano* (Messina: Mesogea, 2006), 211-12.

[206] Hamdi Abou-Golayyel and Elisabetta Ciuccarelli, 'La nouvelle littérature égyptienne. Entretien avec Hamdi Abou Golayyel par Elisabetta Ciuccarelli', *Afkar/Idees IEMed* 24 (2010): 34–35.

details: he reveals that his name is Ḥamdī,[207] and states his full name and date of birth, which coincide with those of the writer.[208] Real personal details appear also in other Egyptian novels that are not considered autobiographical, in order to disrupt the link between reality and fiction with the complicity of the reader.[209]

Many reviewers discuss this aspect of the novel: Muftī argues that the overlapping of the narrator and protagonist makes *al-Fāʿil* close to a fictional autobiography (*al-sīra al-dhātiyya al-mutakhayyala*) or autofiction (*al-takhyīl al-dhātī*), whereas Badawī believes that Abū Julayyil writes about what he knows on the basis of his own experience.[210] Among the motivations of the *Naguib Mahfouz Medal* judging committee is "the author's awareness of the aesthetic achievements of the novel and autobiography in nowadays Arab creativity."[211]

## 2.4 Literary innovation

The authors selected for the present study published their works over a long time span, from the late 1960s till the beginning of the 21st century, in which Egyptian fiction has seen relevant aesthetic innovations. This section sets their activity against the background of their contemporary literary context to illustrate to what extent they fit into or depart from the main narrative trends. Mustajāb and Shalabī share with other writers of the Sixties an interest for non-conventional social groups, folk culture, and vernacular language, whereas Abū Julayyil combines the experimental techniques of the Nineties with an attention to social issues.

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[207] The narrator is anonymous until chapter 4, when he reveals his name. In *Luṣūṣ*, Ḥamdī is ʿĀmir's bango dealer (*Luṣūṣ* 71-72/74-75).

[208] The full name is:*"Ismī bi-l-kāmil: Ḥamdī Abū Ḥāmid ʿĪsà Ṣaqr Abū Julayyil"*, *al-Fāʿil* 27/32.
The date of birth is 16th August 1967 in *al-Fāʿil* (not translated/96), whereas it is 16th August 1968 in *Luṣūṣ* 53/56.

[209] Al-ʿĀydī inserts his real phone number into *An takūna 'Abbās al-'Abd*, a novel centered on the self but not strictly autobiographical. In Aḥmad Murād's *Fīrtījū* (2007; Vertigo, 2012), the protagonist, Aḥmad, is a photographer born on 14th February. These details coincide with the author's profile, but the novel is not autobiographical, rather a detective story.

[210] Bashīr Muftī, '"Al-Fāʿil" li-Ḥamdī Abū Julayyil: riwāyat al-maqāṭiʿ al-dhātiyya', *Al-Ḥayāt*, 10 December 2011 and Badawī, 'Riwāyat "al-Fāʿil"'.

[211] Source: *AFP*. It is reported in various newspaper articles.

## 2.4.1 Generation of the Sixties

Egyptian fiction of the 1970s and 1980s has been extensively studied for its experimental narrative techniques. The military defeat of the Arab armies in 1967 is considered as a historical turning point that accelerated the aesthetic innovations in the Arabic novel. The rapid changes in the socio-political reality, the disillusionment with the Nasserist revolution, and a sense of identity crisis contributed to the search for new narrative forms that could break the conventions of mimetic representation and challenge realism as the dominant paradigm in Egyptian fiction, epitomized in Maḥfūẓ's early novels.

In short, the realist paradigm portrays reality through the linear development of the story, verisimilar scenarios and plots, solid temporal and spatial settings, credible heroic characters, and an omniscient reliable narrator. These elements are challenged by fragmentation, fractured or cancelled time, anti-heroes, unreliable narrators, and polyphony, including the voices inserted through intertextuality and metafiction.

These formal innovations allowed to criticize, often indirectly, the oppression of the regime as well as the alienation of the self and the intellectual in society. Casini notes that oppression and alienation are conveyed by suffocating spaces, such as the room or the prison. Furthermore, the depiction of conflictual family relations questions the patriarchal authorities in the private and public spheres, while the choice of taboo topics defies the social constraints.[212]

This experimentation has multiple sources of inspiration, including Western literary currents (especially existentialism and the absurd) and the reappropriation of the Arab cultural heritage *(turāth)*. Critics attribute some peculiarities of this experimentation to the Arab socio-political context: the concern with historiography in an attempt to write an alternative history (and geography) that counterbalances official historiography; and political engagement, which sees writers as agents of change.[213]

These innovations were brought about by writers already active in the Egyptian literary field, such as al-Kharrāṭ, and by young authors who gathered around the literary magazine

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[212] Lorenzo Casini, 'Introduzione', in *Fuori Degli Argini. Racconti Del '68 Egiziano*, ed. IDEM (Roma: Edizioni Lavoro, 2003), vii–xvi.

[213] Roger Allen, 'Rewriting Literary History: The Case of the Arabic Novel', *Journal of Arabic Literature* 38, no. 3 (2007): 247–60; and Samia Mehrez, *Egyptian Writers between History and Fiction. Essays on Naguib Mahfouz, Sonallah Ibrahim and Gamal Al-Ghitani* (Cairo: AUC Press, 1994).

*Jalīrī 68*. These writers are known as the Generation of the Sixties or the post-revolutionary avant-garde. Some scholars define their formal techniques as modernist or post-modernist, whereas Jacquemond and Selim speak of neo-realism to suggest the continuity with the previous paradigm, especially in terms of the writers' concern with the real world and the relation between the State and the intellectuals. Al-Kharrāṭ gathers the various ways to innovate realism under the concept of 'new sensibility' *(al-ḥasāsiyya al-jadīda)*.[214]

The Generation of the Sixties, thus, is not a movement with its own manifesto or program. It rather refers to a heterogeneous literary production that aimed at innovating the fictional representation of reality. In her study of four representative authors of this Generation, Kassem-Draz captures the variety of ironic textual techniques that allow to break the mimetic approach, convey an oblique criticism, and avoid censorship.[215]

In his novel *al-Zaynī Barakāt* (1971; *Zayni Barakat*, 1988), al-Ghīṭānī plays an intertextual game with the chronicle of the Mamluk historiographer Ibn Iyās (d. 1522). Thanks to parody, pastiche, and polyphony in the construction of the main character, he draws a parallel between the setting of the novel, Mamluk Egypt on the eve of the Ottoman conquest, and Nasserist Egypt on the eve of the 1967 military defeat. His novel *Waqāʾiʿ ḥārat al-Zaʿfarānī* (1976; *Incidents in Zaʿfarani Alley*, 1986) employs other humour-related techniques to continue the "examination of the mechanisms of coercion in society":[216] the initial situation, an epidemic of impotence in the alley, is ironic and the story includes grotesque characters, doses of humour, and phantasy.

Ibrāhīm is considered a master of satire for his novels *Najmat Aghusṭus* (1974, The Star of August), *al-Lajna* (1981; *The Committee*, 2002) and *Dhāt* (1992; *Zaat*, 2001). His satirical tools are the narrator's detachment, ironic echoes of the official discourse, intertextuality with non-fictional sources, and anti-heroic characters. These writing techniques reveal the shortcomings of the rapidly changing society, satirize the economic liberalization and global capitalism, and express the alienation of the self.

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[214] Idwār al-Kharrāṭ, *al-Ḥasāsiyya al-jadīda* (Beirut: Dār al-ādāb, 1993).
[215] Kassem-Draz, 'In Quest'.
[216] Hilary Kilpatrick, 'Egyptian Novel', 266.

Kassem-Draz analyzes the mechanisms of literary irony in also Yaḥyā al-Ṭāhir ʿAbdallāh and Majīd Ṭūbyā: the first employs the folktale as hypotext for parody, while the latter inserts the fantastic in the midst of reality to create a sense of ambiguity. Storytelling and folk culture (for example in ʿAbdallāh), the magical and phantasy (in Ṭūbyā and al-Ghīṭānī), and the influence of Sufi language (in ʿAbd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim) are other facets of literary experimentation that have been recently studied.

These aspects are developed also by Mustajāb and Shalabī, who insert fantastic elements into their writings: like Ṭūbyā, Mustajāb treats phantasy with a matter-of-fact tone, lacking astonishment or estrangement, whereas Shalabī adds a magical atmosphere to the realistic description of space. Furthermore, they are both interested in recovering the folk tradition through legends, sayings, and storytelling. In particular, Shalabī reproduces orality in its richness of registers and voices. Like ʿAbdallāh, he develops the vernacular as a literary language and chooses marginal characters.[217]

Despite the affinity with their peers, Mustajāb and Shalabī are still understudied. One of the reasons may be the non-radical degree of their formal innovations, in particular in the case of Shalabī, who experiments with collective narration and the folk tradition, but relies on the realist representation for other aspects. Mustajāb's experimentation, instead, is more articulated: Malti-Douglas suggests that metafiction and intertextuality in *Min al-tārīkh* exemplify post-Mahfouzian fiction, alongside other techniques employed by al-Ghīṭānī and Yūsuf al-Qāʿid (b. 1944).[218]

Perhaps another reason is that they were their less engaged in politics than was expected from the writers of their Generation. This apparent lack of engagement does not mean that their writings disregard social criticism and the search for knowledge and justice. Moreover, they were deeply concerned with crafting a counter-historiography, like their peers.

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[217] ʿAbdallāh's *Ḥikāyāt li-l-amīr* (1977, Tales for the Prince) includes some characters that are found also in our corpus: "in the 'Arabesque Tale' the hero's father is a pickle-maker, the Saʿīdi joins his compatriots as a 'fāʿil' in the building industry." Kassem-Draz, 'In Quest', 147.

[218] Fedwa Malti-Douglas, 'Mahfouz's Dreams', in *Naguib Mahfouz: From Regional Fame to Global Recognition*, ed. Michael Beard and Adnan Haydar (Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 127-28.

## 2.4.2 Generation of the Nineties

Shalabī's and Mustajāb's late recognition points at the need to investigate their writings further. On the contrary, Abū Julayyil has raised immediate critical interest, probably because he finds a balance between the experimental narrative techniques of the Generation of the Nineties and a renewed concern for social issues that has emerged in Egyptian fiction at the turn of the millennium. Moreover, he has benefitted from the endorsement of consecrated novelists and the reputation of Dār Mīrīt as the leading private publisher of good-quality innovative literature.

The Generation of the Nineties has taken the formal innovations of the previous decades to their extreme, elaborating a poetics of the self (*kitābat al-dhāt*) which shies away from big national and ideological issues (*ikhtifāʾ al-qaḍāyā al-kubrà*).

The literary critic Sayid al-Baḥrāwī defines it "«l'écriture pour la vie.» Ou en d'autres termes, écrire la vie faut de pouvoir la vivre",[219] whereas the novelist May al-Tilmisānī (b. 1965) calls it 'writing on the margins of history' (*kitāba ʿalà hāmish al-tārīkh*).[220] Sabry Hafez speaks of the 'novel of the closed horizon' and suggests that the experimental narrative techniques reflect the recent urban transformations, in particular the haphazard development of informal settlements in Cairo (*al-madīna al-ʿaswāʾiyya* or 'third city').[221]

In *Luṣūṣ* and *al-Fāʿil* Abū Julayyil adopts some of these literary innovations: he experiments with structural and temporal fragmentation, repetitions, attention to minute details, multiple narrations of the same event, intertextual references to cinema and realist fiction, and metafictional commentaries about "'the story of the story', his relation with what he writes, and the imagined reader".[222]

For example, when *al-Fāʿil*'s narrator mentions his grandfather for the first time, he meditates about the many possibilities of telling his forefather's story and suggests the interplay of memory and writing:

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[219] Sayed Bahrawi, 'Une nouvelle génération d'écrivains en Egypt. L'écriture pour la vie', in *Egitto oggi. I quaderni di Merifor*, ed. Elisabetta Bartuli (Bologna: Il Ponte, 2005), 145. Al-Baḥrāwī mentions Abū Julayyil among these emerging writers (Ibid., 144).

[220] Quoted in Maria Elena Paniconi, 'Il romanzo sperimentale egiziano degli anni Novanta: gli esempi di Muṣṭafā Ḏikrī, Muntaṣir Al-Qaffāš, May al-Tilmisānī', *Annali di Ca' Foscari* XLV, no. 3 (2006): 66. Paniconi mentions Abū Julayyil among experimental writers of the Nineties (Ibid., 65).

[221] Sabry Hafez, 'The New Egyptian Novel. Urban Transformation and Narrative Form', *New Left Review*, II, no. 64 (August 2010): 47–62.

[222] Badawī, 'Riwāyat "al-Fāʿil"'.

"I must go back to my grandfather. My grandfather Aula: the first story, the first tale, of my life."

In the original Arabic: "*Wa-lakin fa-li-aʿud li-jaddī, jaddī Awla,* **al-riwāya** *wa-ḥattā **al-qiṣṣa** wa-**l-ḥikāya** al-ūlā fī ḥayātī.*" (*al-Fāʿil* 5/13, emphasis added)

*Luṣūṣ* and *al-Fāʿil* are experimental novels centred on the self, but at the same time they depict social reality in a vivid way, thanks to the narrator's positioning as both an insider and outsider. In his essay, Hafez hints at the possibility of causing "a rupture – a rip in the closed horizon" by adopting the viewpoint of the marginalized.[223] Booth goes further and places Abū Julayyil among a new generation of authors who combine "attention to issues of socioeconomic right, gender politics, globalization (in all of its many forms), and dislocation with a profoundly introspective layering that eschews the navel-gazing of which some young writers over the past fifteen years have been accused, if not always with justification."[224]

His first novel has been studies for the representation of marginal urban spaces, Bedouin identity, and complex gendered identities, as well as its sarcasm and dark ironies. El Ariss explores the negotiation of gendered identities in Ḥanān al-Shaykh's *Innahā Lundun yā ʿazīzī* and *Luṣūṣ*. This parallel study illustrates how both novels tackle serious issues, including violence and rebellion, with a humorous style. Because of the degree of violence and vulgar language, in *Luṣūṣ* humour is eminently dark; some episodes are so absurd that they provoke a bitter laughter.[225]

Brutality, slang, and coarse words as aesthetic tools have been further developed in Egyptian novels published after 2011, such as *Nisāʾ al-Karantīnā* by al-Ṭūkhī and *Istikhdām al-ḥayyāt* (2014; *Using Life*, forthcoming) by Aḥmad Nājī. There humour appears mainly in the form of sarcasm.

Considering Abū Julayyil as a representative of contemporary trends in Egyptian fiction, the critical attention to satire and irony in his first novel invites to investigate his second novel as well. Therefore, *Luṣūṣ* will be a term of comparison for the analysis of humour-generating techniques in *al-Fāʿil*.

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[223] Hafez, 'The New Egyptian Novel', 61. On the possibility of breaking the "closed horizon", see also: El-Ariss, 'Hacking the Modern', in *Trials*.

[224] Marilyn Booth, 'Introduction. On the Fringes of Cities (Cairo) and Languages (Arabic)', in *Thieves in Retirement*, xvii.

[225] El-Ariss, 'Majnun Stickes Back', in *Trials*, 114-44.

## 2.5 Analytical framework

Having illustrated the selection guidelines for our corpus and the peculiarities of the three authors within contemporary Egyptian fiction, this section outlines the analytical framework that will be applied to our case studies. To this aim, we go back to the studies devoted to the masters of humour.

In his article about Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm's literary output from 1966 till 2000, Starkey argues that the author has developed a peculiar novelistic technique based on the frequent use of intertextuality and the deliberate patterning of different narrative modes. With the exception of *Warda* (2000), his novels revolve around anti-heros, defined as "m[e]n or wom[e]n given the vocation of failure".[226] Starkey investigates the relation between the construction of characters and the narrative modes: "What, then, are some of the characteristics of the narrator/'anti-hero' and how do they relate to the narrative techniques that Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm has employed in the work?"[227]

In this research question, the narrator and the anti-hero coincide, because Ibrāhīm privileges a first-person narrator with many autobiographical traits. Nevertheless, Starkey examines how this relation evolves in Ibrāhīm's novels told in the third-person, such as *Dhāt*.

Similarly, Booth focuses on these elements for her analysis of Bayram al-Tūnisī's satire. She looks at the characters, with a focus on their diction and the social identities and stereotypes upon which they draw; the narrating voice and focalization; and intertextual linkages with the literary antecedents.[228] She explains how these factors are intertwined in creating a satirical effect:

> The interplay of narrating voice and focalizing perspectives is integral to the construction of satire based on ironizing gaps which exploit and explode the initial presentation of characters. The relationship of narratorial structure to focalization is also a pivotal element in the way each set of texts exploits its particular textual model. This leads,

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[226] Paul Starkey, '"Heroes" and Characters in the Novels of Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm', *Middle Eastern Literatures* 9, no. 2 (August 2006), 147. Starkey draws his definition of hero from: J. A. Cuddon, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 3rd edition (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 46.

[227] Starkey, '"Heroes"', 148.

[228] Booth, *Bayram*, 4-5.

in each case, to a discussion of the internal organization of the text and its relationship to both textual model and thematic presentation.[229]

With a focus on literary humour, our analysis looks at the three aspects mentioned by Starkey and Booth: the narrating voice, characters, and intertextuality.

*Narrating voice*

We are interested in the attitude of the narrating voice towards the characters, the story, if not the entire world crafted in fiction. Various techniques create the ironic distance from which the narrator looks at the story: a detached and deadpan attitude; the corrective look of the social critic; and a sympathetic attitude.

Moreover, the narrator may be the agent or the subject of humour. In self-mockery, he/she adopts a humorous and debasing attitude towards himself/herself. When self-mockery targets both the narrator, the reader, and the group they belong to, it reinforces group affiliation and involves the audience in the same intellectual game.[230]

*Characters*

As regards characters, Starkey's definition of anti-hero is related to incongruity and ultimately humour: the anti-hero is "incompetent, unlucky, tactless, clumsy, cack-handed, stupid [and] buffoonish."[231] The anti-hero is commonly defined as someone ordinary who does not do heroic deeds. This feature becomes humorous when the character's trivial deeds and humdrum life contrast with a high narrative register, for example that of the epic.

Besides anti-heroes, humour revolves around stock characters, which are found in Arabic folklore and classical literature. Stock characters include regional, professional, and social types; entertainers and wits; wise fools, rogues, and picaresque figures. These characters bear a cross-cultural dimension, but we shall focus on their Egyptian connotations and peculiarities drawn from the Arab cultural heritage.

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[229] Ibid.
[230] Marina Mizzau, *L'ironia. La contraddizione consentita* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1984), 104-6.
[231] Starkey, '"Heroes"', 154.

Furthermore, the construction of characters belonging to the lowest strata of society, with their unconventional behaviour, hybrid language, and jargon, may activate the carnivalesque, and essentially political, side of buffoonery.

Our analysis will examine the physical description, behaviour (especially if it breaks taboos or social hierarchies), geographical identity, and group affiliation. When they are presented as members of a community, we shall enquire whether this community ridicules other groups or is laughed at. Finally, we shall explore the social functions of humour within these groups.

*Intertextuality*

When discussing intertextuality, Caiani points out the complexity of al-Ghīṭānī's dialogue with the cultural heritage, which is not confined to parody for the purpose of political criticism:

> As far as the use of the *turāth* is concerned, we could say that Munif, al-Ghīṭānī and al-Kharrāṭ all see in formal innovation an aesthetic value *per se* and not a means to convey political ideas.[22]
> [22] Although Meyer seems to suggest that in Ḥabībī and al-Ghīṭānī the *turāth* is there mainly to provide a vehicle for the irony with which they comment in an indirect way on political matters (cf. Meyer 2001: 71-72). Such is the extent and the scope of these writers' use of *turāth*, however, that it would seem to point to wider artistic reasons (the whole of al-Ghīṭānī's impressive novelistic production relies on Arabic literary models of the past, including the *khiṭaṭ* genre and the mystical work of Ibn ʿArabī (cf. Allen 1995: 123).[232]

Similarly, Mustajāb, Shalabī, and Abū Julayyil revisit the *turāth*, especially its folk dimension, on many levels. This emerges from the narrative structure of some of their novels as well as from their editorial jobs.

They are broadly interested in folk and popular culture, but the present research will highlight those aspects that are related to humour, such as sayings, idiomatic expressions, songs, jokes, banters, and eccentric characters. References to local culture and jokelore makes humour more effective for an audience that shares a similar encyclopaedic knowledge. Indeed, Triezenberg includes cultural factors among humour enhancers, since the author of a humorous text should be well-versed in the humorous traditions of the readers.

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[232] Caiani, *Contemporary Arab Fiction*, 73 and note 22, 150-51.

Mustajāb, Shalabī, and Abū Julayyil interact also with the literary tradition to achieve a humorous effect. We shall examine whether they recall literary forms that traditionally contain a humorous dimension, like the *maqāma* and the *nādira*. At the same time, we shall see to what extent they adopt or mock the conventions of some sub-genres of contemporary Egyptian fiction, such as the village novel, anecdotal storytelling, social portrait, and migration tale.

The parodic effect may target the canonical novelistic and cinematic representation, the dynamics of the intellectual community, and official historiography. History is a topic that cuts across the classical and modern literary conventions. We shall identify some recurrent historical periods and events, linked to the social groups portrayed in their novels.

## 2.6 Conclusion

The corpus of the present research consists of four novels published from the beginning of the 1980s till 2008, which are representative of a trend of humorous writing featuring the adventures of marginal characters. This chapter provides the context for the analysis of these case studies: it introduces Mustajāb, Shalabī, and Abu Julayyil in their mutual relations and in their connections with the literary field; it also explains which aspects of their writings have already been studied and which aspects deserve further attention.

We have chosen the lens of humour to examine how these texts fit into and, at the same time, contribute to recent trends in Egyptian fiction. The close textual analysis and the study of humour-generating techniques aims at illustrating how incongruity emerges and is playfully solved in these novels.

Each of the following chapters (ch. 3-6) looks at a single novel. After a summary of the plot, each chapter describes structure, narrating voice, and non-mimetic techniques, especially those related to ambiguity and incongruity. In doing so, it examines which writing conventions and models are echoed. Finally, it illustrates the main narrative threads and themes.

This preliminary analysis allows us to identify significant humorous episodes in each novel, which are expected to interplay with the narrative threads and overall structure. The second part of the chapter examines these episodes or sketches by looking at the following elements:

- action: does the humour derive from misunderstandings, inappropriate behaviour, or absurdity?
- characters: do they revive the literary and folkloric tradition? Are they mocked for their group's mores and values?
- narrating voice: how does it look at the characters and the story?
- themes: which social dimensions are tackled with humour? Are power relations subverted by means of humour?
- language: which rhetorical tools and linguistic varieties increase the humorous effect?

Since we follow a chronological order, the first case study is *Min al-tārīkh* by Mustajāb. This choice corresponds to the thematic evolution, as this is the only novel of the corpus set in the countryside and portrays Egyptian society from the 1930s till 1956.

# Chapter 3

# THE BIOGRAPHY OR FOLKTALE OF AN ANTI-HERO: *MIN AL-TĀRĪKH AL-SIRRĪ LI-NUʿMĀN ʿABD AL-ḤĀFIẒ* BY MUḤAMMAD MUSTAJĀB

He proceeded to remind me of our days in Deirut, when we used to work together in the Legal Department. He then demanded a cigarette and began to smoke it saying 'Do you remember at Deirut – how we used to stand at the window looking over the roofs for a woman's chemise worked in lace – just to convince ourselves that women really existed in those parts.' That country was indeed primitive and barbarous. The southern part of Egypt is terrifying for the inhabitants of the Delta […]

He puffed smoke from his nose and mouth and continued: 'God confound that place! I bet if you opened the heads of nine-tenths of the people of Deirut you'd find them shaken up through being whacked with steel piping.'[233]

*Min al-tārīkh al-sirrī li-Nuʿmān ʿAbd al-Ḥāfiẓ* by Mustajāb is a village novel set in Upper Egypt, which combines some elements of folk epics and scholarly writing: an anonymous historian or biographer narrates the early life of a young boy, turning him into a legendary figure.

Humour emerges from the incongruity between the protagonist's trivial deeds on the one hand, and the narrator's great efforts to document his life on the other. The story focuses on the village's preoccupations, while Egyptian national history remains on the

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[233] Tawfik al-Hakim, *Maze of Justice: Diary of a Country Prosecutor*, trans. Abba Eban (London: Saqi, 1989), 129. Original Arabic: Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm, *Yawmiyyāt nāʾib fī l-aryāf* (Cairo: Dār Miṣr li-l-ṭibāʿa 1958 [1937]), 141-42.

background. This gap between ordinary issues and big history activates the satirical criticism of ignorance, superstition, politics, human relations, and the rural-urban conflict.

In 2001, Bahīj Ismāʿīl (b. 1939) adapted *Min al-tārīkh* into a play, directed by Yāsīn al-Ḍawī. In her review of this play, the Egyptian theatre critic Selaiha argues that the form and the narrator shape the novella's ironic tone, which is hard to transfer on stage.[234]

Indeed, Mustajāb employs experimental writing techniques. Malti-Douglas praises his extensive use of metafiction and intertextuality.[235] For instance, he inserts several footnotes, which are not common in fiction. This issue is examined by Metwally in his study of writing from the margins in Egyptian fiction.[236]

In her analysis of the novella,[237] Malti-Douglas examines the formal level (structure and writing conventions), the discursive level (the narrator's language), and the semantic level (the characters' interaction). The incongruities on all three levels concur to flout the rules of writing, language, and life, thus breaking the illusion of reality and inviting the reader to pay more attention to the writing process than to the story.

As regards the formal level, Malti-Douglas identifies some elements borrowed from academic writing, such as footnotes, bulleted lists, the nearly absence of dialogues, and linguistic annotations. Despite their apparent conformity, these elements do not follow all conventions of scholarly writing and acquire an additional meaning in this fictional text. On the level of discourse, she focuses on the narrator: his technique of reporting events creates a distance between him and the story, whereas some linguistic choices unmask his unreliability and the contradiction of the utterances. Finally, on the semantic level, she conducts a structuralist analysis of three episodes, ascribable to the morphological category of the interrupted ritual.

Malti-Douglas refers only partly to the novella's humorous effect: she illustrates that absurdity governs the combination of facts and utterances, but she does not fully explain the mechanisms producing a grotesque effect.

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[234] Nehad Selaiha, 'From Page to Stage. Nehad Selaiha is Bewitched and Repelled by a Stage Version of a Popular Satirical Novel', *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 5-11 July 2001.

[235] See above, 2.4.1.

[236] Mohammed Metwally, 'Margins in the Center. Reading Thresholds of the Egyptian Novel. A Study of Structure and Significance' (Unpublished Ph.D. diss., Freien Universität Berlin, 2014), in particular: ch. 5 'Footnotes', 166-96.

[237] Fedwa Malti-Douglas, 'Min al-tārīkh al-sirrī li-Nuʿmān ʿAbd al-Ḥāfiẓ wa-tadmīr ṭuqūs al-ḥayāt wa-l-lugha', *Ibdāʿ*, no. 6–7 (June 1983): 86–92.

In our analysis, we shall adapt her framework to explore how humour is produced in the text. We shall look at the structure to find the elements of academic writing and the peculiarities of *Min al-tārīkh* as a village novel. Then, we shall consider the narrator and the main character as the vehicle of the discourse and the centre of the action respectively. Our approach will overcome the clear-cut separation of the three levels of analysis, on the assumption that humour depends on their interplay. Finally, we shall examine the three connected stories and other episodes in which humour serves the purpose of social criticism.

# 3.1 *Min al-tārīkh*

## 3.1.1 Plot

The novella follows the story of Nuʿmān, a boy of the village of Dayrūṭ al-sharīf, from his birth till his marriage in his early youth. He was born in the 1930s on the banks of Baḥr Yūsuf from Umm Nuʿmān, a seller of salted fish, and ʿAbd al-Ḥāfiẓ Khamīs, whose awkward behaviour causes the village's animosity towards him.

Nuʿmān was born right after his father's death. He lives in his mother's portable hut along the channel's banks and spends long hours in the fields. This formative period ends with an unknown disease cured by exorcism.

Two main events mark his adolescence. A local wealthy woman, Madame Fawqiyya, wants to purchase him from his mother. The boy spends only one night at the lady's house for the guests' entertainment and the lady's pleasure. What happens between the two of them is a mystery, but Nuʿmān runs away terrified.

The second significant event happens when the boy joins Ismāʿīl *al-ḥaffār* (the Gravedigger), who houses him in an empty tomb. A possessed woman, who is undergoing a healing treatment there, discovers that Nuʿmān is not circumcised. His status makes the ritual impure and the woman runs off possessed by the devils.

More adventures follow. Nuʿmān's belated circumcision has to be performed on the threshold of the tomb of a local saint, so the circumcision procession leaves Dayrūṭ for the neighbouring village of Amshūl. There ʿĪd *al-muzayyin* (the Barber) starts his duty, but is abruptly interrupted. The boy, wounded and in pain, is carried back and forth

between the two villages and treated with traditional but ineffective remedies. He heals only when Madame Fawqiyya sends him to the city's doctor.

Once recovered, it is time to marry him off to one of the village girls. The choice of the bride and the wedding night are the last episodes in Nuʿmān's partial biography.

The story covers two decades, from the mid-1930s till the mid-1950s: over this period, Egypt takes part in World War II, becomes independent after the 1952 Free Officer's Revolution, and is involved in the 1956 Suez Crisis. These historic events are deliberately kept on the background, as if official history did not affect the rural and mythical rhythms of Nuʿmān's life.

The village may be seen as the real protagonist of the novella, since the boy's adventures illustrate its traditions, customs, beliefs, socio-economic conditions, and cultural environment. At the same time, the village contributes to the narration with gossip and accounts reported by the narrator-historian.

The interplay of the protagonist, the village, and the narrator allows Mustajāb to portray a marginal rural world, barely affected by Egyptian politics and the country's modernization. Far from being nostalgic, this portrait tackles superstition, education, poverty, and violence with a satirical vein.

## 3.1.2 Play

The playwright Bahīj Ismāʿīl introduces some differences from the original text: he expands the time of the story; choses a wiser but less complex narrator, who resembles a storyteller; and gives a politically committed reading of the events. Nuʿmān's story becomes the history of Egypt from the perspective of the downtrodden, whose oppression continues over the centuries. According to Selaiha, these simplifications develop certain trends of the original novella, such as poverty and injustice. [238]

These changes are balanced by the playwright's ability to heighten the comic potential of some episodes with the techniques of dramatic comedy:

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[238] We have not seen the play and very few reviews are available. See, e.g., Āmāl Bakīr, 'Al-kūmīdiyā al-Nuʿmāniyya. Al-muwāṭin al-miṣrī al-basīṭ wa-muʿānātuhu ʿabra kull al-ʿuṣūr', *al-Ahram*, 22 June 2001. Bakīr appreciates the acting and the music, but criticizes some actors for excessive emphasis and finds the repeated long scenes boring.

Ismail infused his script with a healthy dose of earthy jokes and bawdy humour, obliquely hinted at Fawqiya's morbid passion for the child No'man (which is all anyone could do given the watchful eye of the censor), and built up No'man's courting of his prospective, lisping bride into a delicious sequence of comical, rough-and-tumble flirtation, country-style.[239]

Selaiha, however, does not appreciate one visual symbol: she finds that the permanent blood stain on Nuʿmān's white *jallabiyya* is stripped out of its context. In the novella, the boy's hemorrhage is caused by his tragicomic circumcision, whereas in the play the stain becomes a visual symbol of permanent injustice: "Bleeding wound of Egypt or no bleeding wound of Egypt, this was simply too much. The verbal analogy, literally translated into visual fact, was strained to breaking point and turned into parody."

This remark points out that the interplay of structure, narration, characters, and language gives the novella its liveliness and involves the reader in the game of irony. These aspects are analyzed in the following sections.

## 3.2 Writing conventions

Malti-Douglas argues that *Min al-tārīkh* exemplifies the 'suspense of form' theorized by Elder Olson,[240] since it oscillates between fictional and scholarly writing. In particular, the novella incorporates some elements of biographical writing, as anticipated by the title *(al-tārīkh)*. Nevertheless, these elements do not always conform to the conventions of scholarly writing and are intertwined with fictional elements of the village novel and popular storytelling. This section examines how *Min al-tārīkh* plays with writing conventions: we shall follow Malti-Douglas in her analysis of scholarly writing (formal level); before doing that, we shall illustrate how the author experiments with the village novel, an issue overlooked by previous studies.

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[239] Selaiha, 'From Page'.
[240] Elder Olson, *The Theory of Comedy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1968).

## 3.2.1 Village novel

### 3.2.1.1 Time and space

Mustajāb's novella and the related short story collection belong to the village novel, a sub-genre that has developed since the beginning of modern Egyptian fiction. He is among the authors that have integrated the traditional authoritative narrator with the village's collective voice. This innovation can be seen in the representation of time and space.

In historical and biographical accounts, time is usually marked by precise dates. *Min al-tārīkh*'s narrator tells the events in chronological order, but provides only approximate time spans or mentions some historic events, from which the exact date should be inferred. For example, Nuʿmān was born between 1930 and 1938, on the eve of World War II. Another military event marks the end of the story, since the protagonist gets married just before the 1956, as it can be inferred from this passage:

> And at the same time, an ambassador was on the move, approaching the Revolutionary Command Council to deliver to it a strongly worded warning requesting that Jamal Abdel Nasser either withdraw his army from the area around the Suez Canal or permit Britain and France to bomb the country's airports and houses. (203/254)

The novella provides only one date, the Coptic year 1668, mentioned twice in relation to Nuʿmān's circumcision.[241] Significantly, it corresponds to 1952 CE, when the Free Officers' revolution took place. The Coptic months are used as temporal references in other occurrences, whereas the Islamic calendar marks the father's burial and the wedding's preparations. [242]

This reproduces the use of the Coptic calendar in the Egyptian countryside to keep track of the agricultural seasons; furthermore, it hints at the coexistence of Copts and Muslims in Upper Egyptian villages.[243]

Another way to keep track of time are the rhythms of nature and agriculture, which emphasizes the village's collective perspective. The following examples refer to the preparations for the circumcision and the wedding:

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[241] 1668 appears on p. 162/203 and 169/211.

[242] The Coptic months appear on p. 146/182, 188/234, 191/238; the time reference for the father's burial is on p. 123/154; the time reference for the wedding's preparation is on p. 196/244.

[243] In the novella, none of the main characters is a Copt, but Nuʿmān rides the jenny of Juljula, Tādrus's wife. Juljula and Tādrus are Coptic names. A priest who practices magic and an Italian monk are also mentioned.

- at the beginning of the Bahr Yusuf flood,[2] (137/170)

[2] The first signs of the flood appear immediately following the wheat harvest and are themselves followed by the ripening of the dates, the spread of mange among the camels, a readiness to engage in the making of groats, the storing of straw, the manufacture of pots, the appearance of mendicant dill-sellers, and the leaping of the male farm animals onto the female. (144/179)

- All of this obliged Umm Nu'man, later, to return to her house in the village, though it had stood empty for six seasons, […] (171/213)

- As the spathes of the palm trees split and the smell of pollen spread […] (193/240).

Finally, 'one hundred' and 'one thousand', used in storytelling to indicate a hyperbolic indefinite number, are found in two amusing anecdotes.


The attention to rural rhythms goes hand in hand with the representation of nature as a semi-human creature with emotions and intellectual capacities. Such a depiction of nature characterizes magic realism, which transcends the limits of Latin American fiction and is discussed in Arabic fiction as well.[244]

In *Min al-tārīkh*, the natural elements witness or take part in the events:

- That autumn dawn, the fields witnessed a painful exchange between Umm Nu'man […] and her son (155/193)

- and fear seized Nu'man, Isma'il, the rocks, and the palm fronds. (167/209)

Mustajāb exploits this technique in his short stories, sometimes with a humorous effect. "Bughayli Bridge" (1975, *Kūbrī al-Bughaylī*) tells the story of a policeman sent to investigate a murder in Dayrūṭ with the help of a diver, since the murder weapon had been thrown in the canal. The canal returns the bodies of many victims of the village's violence. The police and the villagers stand on the bridge, which eventually collapses.

The opening passage of this short story has an estranging effect, because it juxtaposes the human and the animal worlds:

From the beginning – and even long before the beginning – we have had to put our faith in the fact that the fish dwell in water, bats in ruins, teachers in schools, peace of mind in death, foxes in fields, monks in monasteries, falsehood in books, seeds in cracks, poison in menstrual blood, and wisdom in the aftermath of events; and the best of you, good gentlemen, is the one who is spared either the wisdom or the events. (*Dayrūṭ* 24/32)

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[244] Tahia Abdel Nasser, 'The Arabic Archive of Magic Realism (al-Arshīf al-ʿarabī fī l-wāqiʿiyya al-siḥriyya)', *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 31 (2011): 185–214; Id., 'Revolution and *Cien Años de Soledad* in Naguib Mahfouz's *Layālī Alf Laylah*', *Comparative Literature Studies* 52, no. 3 (2015): 539–61; and Stephen M. Hart and Wen-chin Ouyang, eds., *A Companion to Magical Realism*, Colección Támesis (Rochester, N.Y: Tamesis, 2005).

Another passage of the same short story is ironical, because magic realism is stripped of its fantastic dimension and is turned into reality. A dog is so expressive that he seems able to speak, but the supernatural atmosphere is dispelled by the dog's earthly habits:

> Then a dog broke through the ring of onlookers and into the empty area, looking at the officer so hard that we were sure he was about to say something. He, however, (the dog, that is) made for the railing of the bridge, scratched his back, and raised his right hind leg. (*Dayrūṭ* 29/38)

Going back to *Min al-tārīkh*, the description of the pleasant natural scenery tinges with irony. When the narrator introduces Nuʿmān as the product of a noble lineage and a beautiful natural environment, he suggests to add further elements to this picture of the *locus amoenus*, thus showing its artificial nature:

> All these roots *[al-ʿurūq]* combined to nourish Nuʿman's innermost being, as did the Bahr Yusuf, whose waters purled at the foot of the hut, and the towering trees rustling in the breeze, and a vast sweep of fields filled with green; and if we add to the scene a few birds in the air and a few lizards on the ground and mix all that with the tributary streams *[rawāfid]* of Nuʿman's original parental heritage, things become clearer. (129/120-21)

The metaphors indicating the members of the family employ the vocabulary of nature: *al-ʿurūq* means both 'descent' and 'root, vein' in the botanical and anatomical sense; *al-rawāfid* means 'the tributary streams' and indicates his ancestors.

Finally, the village of Dayrūṭ is not described with precision. It includes a northern and a southern side (*baḥrī al-balad* and *qabīl al-balad*), the canal, and the graveyard. It is opposed to the city, seen as suffocating corrupt despite the lack of any description. The city encloses the open nature into its awe-inspiring buildings, mentioned in the following passages:

> - until [Umm Nuʿman] reached the government hospital building, with its cold cement touch (132/164)

> - It is most upsetting to have to lure Nuʿman into abandoning the fields and the trees, the gushing of the water, and the pursuit of birds and lizards to go live in a village crowded with walls, contentiousness, gossip, deception, weddings, the distillation of grapes, and secret liaisons. (137/171)

This space representation introduces the traditional theme of the rural-urban opposition, which the implied author tackles in his social satire (see below, 3.5.1).

### 3.2.1.2 Storytelling techniques

Besides experimenting with time and space, Mustajāb employs some storytelling techniques in the construction of the characters. In his adventures, Nuʿmān is helped by

some characters: his mother, Ismāʿīl the Gravedigger, ʿĪd the Barber, and Madame Fawqiyya. The narrator does not develop their psychological or emotional dimension, but focuses on their role in Nuʿmān's life.

Since the dialogues are reduced to the minimum, the characters' feelings and thoughts are conveyed by their actions. For instance, Nuʿmān's mother oscillates between happiness and anger, protecting and rebuking her son. These feelings are expressed alternatively by her ululations of joy, tears, and quarrels with Nuʿmān. In one of their fights, the focus is on her actions, while the curse that she supposedly pronounces is reported by the narrator: "[she] could find nothing else to do than to smack the face of the bastard son of a bastard with a hefty lump of mud." (155/194)

The village characters are named after their profession or religious title (*shaykh*, *ḥājj*, and *ḥājja*). In one case, the accumulation of similar names and professions has an ironic effect:

> In the end, Madame Fawqiya was moved to request everyone to desist, but no one could hear and the laughter, comments, and tossing continued until Sheikh Ali the Poultryman grew exhausted, followed by Mahmud, clerk of the market, than by another Mahmud, clerk of the slaughterhouse, followed by Abu Tisʿa, followed by Sheikh Ahmad, the school principal,[5] followed by a third Muhammad, clerk of the community center, followed by Sheikh Rashid (who was blind), followed by the other Ahmad, broker of the sugar refinery (142/177).

Other villagers are known with their nickname based on a physical defect: "Abd al-Wadud the Nasal *[al-akhnaf]*, the longest established cloth merchant in the village and its most traditional" (171/213); "Abd Allah al-Ghashim – he of the huge head" *[dhū al-raʾs al-ḍakhm]* (186/231), "Ibrahim Ghalla, of the coppery hair and dented face" *[dhū al-dimāgh al-munbaʿja al-nuḥāsiyya]* (186/232). Similarly, the candidates for marrying Nuʿmān are examined on the basis of their physical and social defects:

> At first, the daughter of the son of Abu Abd al-Mawla was proposed as a bride for Nuʿman, but she was rejected because she spoke through her nose. Then it was the daughter of the son of Bayyumi al-Bannaʾ, but she was rejected because descended from the loins of women known for giving birth to few male children. Then it was the daughter of the sister of Abu al-Uyun, but confirmed reports indicated that she was a good-for-nothing who trembled in front of the baking oven, as a result of which her bread did not spread properly. Then it was one of the granddaughters of Kamila, the chicken seller, and Umm Nuʿman was on the point of agreeing and would have done so were not for a rumor that she had bad breath. […]
> Abu al-Uyun's sister's daughter began to rise once more to the head of the list; […] All these were matters that had their weight and might compensate for the reported affliction of the voice of this proposed bride for Nuʿman – the disdained nasality which, or so it was said, prevented her from pronouncing the letter *r* at all. (192-93/239-40)

The choice of the suitable bride is followed by the two families gossiping about their respective scandals before agreeing on the marriage. Like in a fairy tale, Nuʿmān marries "the most beautiful of all the beautiful girls in the village." (191/238) These scenes have a very local flavour and exploit the comic potential of quarrels among the ordinary members of a small community. In other works of fiction, similar fights involve the residents of an alley or an apartment building.

Another storytelling technique is the formulaic repetition of the main characters' names. These epithets turn these ordinary characters into mythical figures, who can be identified and remembered easily. Fawqiyya is *"al-sayyida al-jalīla"* often accompanied by the aside *"– wa-l-jamīla ayḍan –"* ("the majestic, and also beautiful, lady"). The two adjectives are linked by assonance. In chapter 5, Umm Nuʿmān becomes "she over whom a question mark will forever hang", due to her consent to sell her son to the lady.

In one case, one of the formulaic names is distorted by exchanging the order of the letters: Ismāʿīl *ḥaffār – aw faḥḥār al-qubūr* ("Ismaʿil the digger – or delver – of graves", 162/202). The meaning does not change, but the name is duplicated through wordplay.

Other formulas create an estranging effect: one character corresponds to two villagers, "Abd al-Hamid Abd al-Aziz (or his brother Ahmad)", then a single option is given, "Abd al-Hamid the leader", and finally a footnote describes him as an opportunist; the phrase "a friend who is endowed with a certain fleeting intelligence" (136/169) remains unclear until a footnote (143/179) explains that his intelligence derives from his job in a government office where he stole money.

Other formulaic phrases concerning Nuʿmān connect the episodes one with the other: "the forelock that was dedicated to Sheikh al-Farghal and could be removed only after the slaughter of a kid" and "the thing between his legs" are repeated all over the novella. The latter refers to the inflammation after the boy's circumcision.

Furthermore, sayings, insults, and songs (199/248) insert orality and folklore in the writing. During the wedding celebration, the bride's and the groom's qualities are praised with several idiomatic expressions, reported by the narrator as if the village were speaking in one voice (201-2/251).

Mustajāb records the countryside forms of entertainment, such as dancing girls, theatrical performances, and the festivals of local saints. Being aware of the power of

storytelling in small rural communities, he makes it the central topic of his short story "The Offering" (1973, *al-Qurbān*). When the villagers lose their ability to speak, they resort to sign language, then specialize in clapping their hands and work as entertainers at weddings. The following passage illustrates the social functions of storytelling and joking:

> They busied themselves with the art of the sign, improving it and inventing new gestures, not just for rapid communication when haste was imperative, but also for the telling of stories. My village became capable, even, of recounting the tales of wonder, such as those of the Man with the Flayed Leg, the She-goul, Clever Hasan, and Thimble and the Moon of All Moons. Indeed, it reached a point where the two arms could reproduce, in miniature, all the effects of the tongue and even tell jokes, puzzles, riddles, and funny stories, and there came a time when my village used to tell – yes, tell – stories that included *anecdotes about a man who could speak*, just as nowadays we might tell *an anecdote about a man who was dumb*. (*Dayrūṭ* 49/63; emphasis added)

The punchline subverts the conventional agents and the victims of mockery.

### 3.2.1.3 Fantasy and horror

Some fantastic elements are borrowed from folk tales and epics. The supernatural manifests itself in miracles, devils and spirits, curers and exorcists, and natural wonders, usually linked to odd sexual practices. Among the village's legendary figures is *ḥājja* Fāṭima, who died twice. There is also a monk who uses his magic abilities to exert an influence on the elite, specifically on the majestic lady. His portrait establishes a parallelism with Rasputin, a figure of international folklore, and mentions the motif of the old age:

> Father Abd al-Guddus, the monk at the famous Muharraq Monastery,[2] (145/181)

> [2] Father Abd al-Guddus, who was killed two years ago riding his donkey on the Biblaw road, was the Upper Egyptian equivalent of Russia's Rasputin. He dealt in magic and legerdemain, and this endowed him with an astonishing degree of influence over the women of the wealthy classes in Upper Egypt. It is said that he lived to an age of one hundred and twenty. (152/191)

Another recurrent theme, horror, oscillates between fantasy and crude reality. Crime is one of the central elements in the Egyptian village novel. It is exemplified by Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm's *Yawmiyyāt nāʾib fī l-aryāf*, in which a prosecutor is sent to the Delta countryside to investigate petty crimes and a murder that remains unsolved. The prosecutor struggles with the village's backwardness, the nit-picking bureaucracy, and the abstract nature of the Law, which does not adjust to the Egyptian reality. The novel is

a satirical comparison of marginal communities and central authorities, as well as an ironical portrait of the protagonist and the characters gravitating around him.

In Mustajāb's "Bughayli Bridge", the policeman is overwhelmed by the discovery of infinite victims of family rivalries. These crimes respond to an internal logic, that the official law cannot understand. Violence is so natural that it becomes the subject of dark humour:

> Then [the diver] put on the leather suit, followed by the helmet. Three policemen surrounded the diver in order to adjust the helmet on his head, and we felt a keen happiness. I, personally, wished I might be granted the opportunity to kill a man every night so that the next morning I could enjoy the sight if the diver putting on his helmet. (*Dayrūṭ* 27/35)

The same logic governs *Min al-tārīkh*, where violence is so common and described with so many details that it loses its horrifying effect. The feeling of terror is often evoked, but the episodes are not frightening, rather absurd. Horror ultimately becomes grotesque, as Tarbush puts it in her review: "The story lays bare the violent feud-ridden history of the village. It shows Mustagab's surreal imagination, forthright language and characteristic narrative style teeming with characters and incidents, by turns hilarious and horrifying."[245]

To sum up, supernatural or horrifying stories become ordinary events, thus blurring the boundaries between reality and fantasy. Moreover, time, space, and storytelling techniques break the conventions of realist representation and revive the Arabic tradition of folk tales and epics. Nevertheless, the novel is structured as a historical account or official biography. As a consequence, fiction and folklore are presented as facts. The next section examines the formal aspects borrowed from scholarly writing.

## 3.2.2 Scholarly writing

*Min al-tārīkh* adopts some conventions of scholarly writing, which have an impact on the structure and the reader's expectations. They give the impression that the novella is a scholarly work, whose subject is worthy of being investigated with objectivity and accuracy. Malti-Douglas notes that objectivity and accuracy are often flouted by incongruity. Furthermore, she suggests that, when these structural elements are applied

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[245] Susannah Tarbush, '"Tales from Dayrut": Feudalism, Folklore and Fantasy', *Saudi Gazette*, 9 March 2009.

to the fictional text, they interrupt the flowing of the narrative and do not allow an immediate identification with the characters. This structure and form, unusual for a novella, create a distance, making the reader aware of the mechanisms of fiction.

Malti-Douglas examines footnotes, linguistic annotations, bulleted lists, and the nearly absence of dialogues.

*Footnotes*

The novella is divided into eleven chapters, each followed by an apparatus of notes, except chapters 6 and 7.

Metwally explores the types and functions of footnotes *(al-hawāshi)* and marginal annotations *(al-ḥawāshī)* in a selection of contemporary Egyptian novels, including *Min al-tārīkh*. He suggests that scholarly footnotes draw attention to words or concepts in the body of the text, providing a commentary, an explanation, or a reference to the sources. They engage in dialogue with the text, because of their referential nature, and address the external context, because of their interpretive and critical nature.[246]

Adopted in modern fiction since the 19th century, they have acquired creative functions. In this respect, Metwally recognized that Egyptian fiction was influenced both by the European novel and the Arabic literary heritage, whose historical, literary, and lexicographic texts already included marginal or infratextual glosses. Early modern novelists, like Jurjī Zaydān (1861-1906), employed footnotes in their historical novels to reference the sources. Later, experimental novelists incorporated footnotes into the narrative, influenced also by the French writers of the Nouveau Roman,[247] who were among Mustajāb's readings.

Metwally suggests that footnotes in fiction are paratextual elements which expand the horizon of the text both in structure and in significance.[248] They modify the structure and graphic of the novel, extend the boundaries of the story, and offer alternative narrative threads. Benstock argues that footnotes in literature belong entirely to the fictional universe and their creative function prevails over the critical one: "[they] direct

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[246] Metwally, 'Footnotes', 168-69.
[247] Ibid., 166-170.
[248] For the footnotes as elements of the paratext, see: Gérard Genette, *Seuils* (Paris: Editions du seuil, 1987).

themselves toward the fiction and never toward an external construct, even when they cite 'real' works in the world outside the particular fiction."[249] This determines how the author and the reader look at the text, allowing to reflect on the construction of the text itself.

We can now outline the types of footnotes found in *Min al-tārīkh*. Many of them are interpretive, *i.e.* they provide explanations about the following issues:

- Islamic history (fn. 3, 159-60/199-200);
- places, such as the villages of Amshūl (fn. 1, 182/227) and Ṣanabū (fn. 1.a, 203/254);
- technical or highly local terms referring to a type of salted fish (fn. 3, 144/179), a plant (fn. 4, 153/191), a cloth (fn. 5, 189/236), and two traditional healing treatments (fn. 3-4, 189/236);
- persons, usually unknown villagers and in one case the well-known Egyptian intellectual ʿAbbās Maḥmūd al-ʿAqqād (1889-1964, fn. 6, 144/180).[250]

Other footnotes cite the narrator's written sources, ranging from literature to historiography. He mentions: verses from the Qurʾān (fn. 2-7, 135/168); ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sharqāwī's novel *al-Arḍ* [1954] (fn. 5, 160/200); ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Rāfiʿ's essay about the 1919 revolution, without the exact title (fn. 4, 126/158); Ṭaha Ḥussayn's *al-Fitna al-kubrā* on Islamic history (fn. 3, 160/200); Miles Copeland's *The Game of Nations* [1969] (fn. 1, 196/245).

Explanatory and referential footnotes follow the conventions of scholarly writing in their form and meaning, thus reinforcing the image of the narrator as an authoritative source.

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[249] Shari Benstock, 'At the Margin of Discourse: Footnotes in the Fictional Text', *PMLA* 98, no. 2 (1983), 205; quoted in Metwally, 'Footnotes', 169. Benstock looks at fictional footnotes in works by Fielding, Sterne, and Joyce.

[250] Metwally classifies the identification of al-ʿAqqād as a verbal decoration, contributing to the appearance of a scholarly text, without adding any new information about this intellectual ('Footnotes', 179). On the fictional ground, it may convey the author's antipathy towards some members of the literary establishment or increase the irony of mentioning this famous man of letters among ordinary characters and events. In general, these interepretive footnotes are not very relevant, but induce the reader to believe that the novella is a historical account.

On the contrary, other footnotes do not clarify the element they are anchored to, but rather increase the obscurity and suggest multiple possibilities. They provide a counter-narrative to the narrative contained in the main text. For example, when the narrator introduces some villagers, he tells additional anecdotes in the footnotes to change the initial presentation and expose their defects. When investigating certain events, he reports multiple versions and later dismisses them; yet, he raises doubts about which version is truthful.

*Linguistic explanation*

Linguistic explanations can be seen as explanatory footnotes inserted in the main text. They do not add any relevant information to the story, but reinforces the narrator's image as a scholar. In addition, these meta-linguistic commentaries drive the reader's attention to the linguistic register of the learned narrator, contrasting with that of the ignorant villagers. An alert reader knows that Mustajāb was a member of the Academy of the Arabic language.

Malti-Douglas finds linguistic explanation in the spelling of a name, "my paternal uncle Mihimmad (so pronounced)" (117/146, *ʿammī Miḥimmad bi-kasr al-mīm al-ūlā wa-l-ḥāʾ*). The narrator could have indicated the local pronunciation by adding *al-ḥarakāt* to the word. This expanded version of *al-tashkīl*, instead, highlights the name and is a technique is borrowed from pre-modern historiography and lexicography.

Besides this example in the body of the text, we have found linguistic explanations in the footnotes at the end of chapter 10 (fn. 4-7, 197/246). Fn. 4 provides the etymology the word *al-falāyt* (runaways), while fn. 7 explains that *al-ḥarda* is a type of headscarf and gives its plural. The English translator, H. Davies, omits the latter footnote and uses the general term 'headscarves' in the main text.

Fn. 5 and 6 do not only give the definitions, but also provide the reference to linguistic sources. Fn. 5 explains that the verb *fajja* is corrupted in the common usage, as attested by the entry in the dictionary *al-Muʿjam al-wasīṭ*. The English translator omits this

footnote and puts the verb 'stepped out' between commas in the main text.[251] Similarly, fn. 6 remarks the local usage of the word *al-nīshān* (the bridal attire):

> The nishan: the overture to a life of companionship with the bride. The term is well known in Middle Egypt and the district around the Bahr Yusuf, but I could find no mention either in my colleague Zuhayr al-Shayib's translations from the *Déscription de l'Égypte* or in *The Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* by Edwards William Lane. (fn. 5, 197/ fn. 6, 246).

*Bulleted lists and dialogues*

Like footnotes, bulleted lists have an impact on the structure and the graphic of the text. They enumerate:

– the offenses inflicted upon Nuʿmān's father (chapter 1);

– the topics of the conversation at the lady's house (chapter 3);

– the rules for the therapeutic burial of the possessed woman, structured in sub-points (chapter 6);

– the elements of the dowry and bridal attire (chapter 10).

Malti-Douglas notes that these lists juxtapose inconsequential issues without any clear connection. Inconsequential events characterize also the narrator's discourse, an aspect of the discursive level that we shall anticipate here. When providing the context of a specific event, he employs the bulleted lists or reinterprets the historical genre of the annals.

This is exemplified in the long opening sequence of chapter 9, in which he lists several *akhbār* that happened in the village, the nearby town, and Cairo. However, each piece of information is very short and does not indicate the exact date. The events are extremely varied: political measures, prices, deaths, murders, miracles, the pilgrimage to Mecca, and entertainment. Like in the bulleted lists, they are incoherent and inconsequential.

In addition, Malti-Douglas remarks that bulleted lists substitute the narrative modes: enumerating events serves to summarize (or schematize) them, while listing topics of conversation substitutes dialogues. To this, we can add that listing the ritual rules highlights their fixity and anticipates that they will be disrupted.

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[251] The translator's choice to omit two footnotes out of seven may serve to avoid obscurity, since the linguistic explanation concerns multiple linguistic varieties. Yet, he partly compensates the omission. The opposite translation strategy is preserving all footnotes to heighten obscurity and accumulation.

These considerations are intertwined with the last element borrowed from scholarly writing, *i.e.* the absence of dialogues, which strips the characters of their own voice. Everything is filtered through the narrator's reported speech, evoking one of the formal conventions of pre-modern historical writing. We shall examine reported speech as a discoursive level in the next section.

To continue our analysis of the bulleted lists, we have noted that the above-mentioned lists are followed by humorous episodes, developing one or many enumerated elements. For instance, the offenses inflicted upon Nuʿmān's father are related to violence, cheating, and stealing. The focus moves from physical to verbal aggression, since this bulleted list is followed by a narrative sequence, in which the father is publicly ridiculed:

> Abu Nuʿman remained patient and silent until his enemies exceeded the bounds of honour by proclaiming in the middle of the village that his stock of manhood was meagre and that the reason his children had died before they had been weaned was that they had been conceived by methods repugnant to God. (122/152)

Then, some *shaykh*s compose a satirical poem against him. The few lines quoted in the text portray him as a wicked man who should leave the village. This short version reduces the satirical effect and sounds like a childish song or a slogan:

> From then on things got more unpleasant until the sheikhs composed a poem against him that went:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Abd al-Hafiz, Abd al-Hafiz,* | عبد الحافظ يا خميس |
| *You whose ways are the ways of Iblis.* | يا اللي فعلك فعل إبليس |
| *Go your way and leave us in peace!* | هاجر وامش[252] |

> And so on to the end of the poem,[6] which also contained an open threat to tie him onto a donkey back to front with his head covered in mud. Regrettably, the poem exceeded its duties as a warning and became mangled on the tongues of children and hooligans, who became addicted to greeting him or bidding him farewell with it, accompanied on occasion by rocks and brickbats. (Ibid.)

Finally, the footnote mocks the authors of the poem, whose wisdom serves purposes in contrast their spiritual role:

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[252] The original Arabic is not found in the English translation. It is added here instead of the transliteration. This choice is limited to poetry, to give an idea of the structure, the length of the lines, and assonance in the original Arabic.

[III] [6] The poem is forty-nine lines long, and it is said that Sheikh Rashid, though a well-known chanter of the Qur'an, permitted himself the indulgence of writing secular verses that he recited on numerous occasions, and some of these in fact came to be regarded in many of the neighboring settlements as containing semi-divine wisdom. (126-27/158)

A formal aspect overlooked by Malti-Douglas is the structure of the chapters. Most of them open with a quotation or a preamble aimed at discussing a hypothesis. Then, the events of the previous chapter are recapped with formulaic phrases, as in storytelling. At this point, the narration continues and a key word of the preamble acquires a new meaning in the story. The conventions of scholarly writing tend to order the chapters according to their topic, whereas the conventions of storytelling tie them together.

To sum up, which is the creative function of the elements borrowed from academic writing? To paraphrase Benstock, how do they shape the interplay between author, reader, and text? The implied author places the fictional biographical account in dialogue within a rich tradition, whose conventions are alternatively respected and subverted by the narrator. The next section looks at his discoursive strategies.

## 3.3 Narrator

The first-person narrator is a local scholar who reconstructs the partial biography of an ordinary village boy or countryside folk hero. His attitude toward the subject and the incongruities in his discourse turn him into a humorous character, able to attract the reader's ridicule and sympathy. This section examines his discoursive modes against the background of historical writing.

Firstly, the narrator's sources are the villagers' sayings and accounts *(maqūlāt wa-riwāyāt)*. To guarantee their authenticity, the narrator reports the chain of transmission *(isnād)*. As in pre-modern biographical literature, the narrator-author verifies and arranges his sources, but in many cases, he admits their unreliability. For instance, the following formulas are found in chapter 1:

- "in an account attributed to Sheikh Abd al-Aziz Khalil which we are disposed to trust" *[fī riwāya namīlu ilā l-wuthūq bihā li-l-shaykh ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Khalīl]* (118/147);

- "And this in itself causes us to regard as unlikely other, highly dubious, accounts" *[wa-hadha nafsuhu mā yajʿalunā nastabʿidu riwāyāt ukhrā yarqā ilayhā al-shakk]* (Ibid.);

- "Further accounts with weak chain of transmission include…" *[wa-min al-riwāyāt al-ḍaʿīfa ayḍ$^{an}$]* (Ibid.);

- "The weak point in this story lies in the fact that the report of it only appeared in recent years" *[Wa-nuqṭat al-ḍaʿf fī l-riwāya tarjaʿu ilā anna hadhihi al-maqūla lam taẓhar illā fī l-sanawāt al-akhīra]* (122/153).

Since the sources are often collective, the main reporting technique consists of impersonal formulas and passive verbs, such as: "this gave rise to rumours that" *(ḥattā uthīra ḥawlahu kalām$^{un}$ ʿan)*; "it was said that" *(qīla anna)*; "it was reported that" *(ruwiya anna)*; "news went around that" *(tarāmat akhbār anna)*; "it is certain that" *(min al-muʾakkad anna)*; "it is believed" *(fīmā yuʿtaqadu)*.

As Malti-Douglas notes, this reporting technique provided objectivity in pre-modern writings, while the compiler's opinion emerged from his arrangement of the material. She argues that in *Min al-tārīkh* this objectivity gives the impression of distance between the narrator and the content of the anecdotes, as though he was not responsible for what the villagers say. Since the reports are dubious, the implied reader doubts of the narrator. To this, we can add that this traditional technique allows to reproduce the village's polyphony in a modern novel, which aims at depicting the village from an internal perspective.

Malti-Douglas identifies another discursive strategy which challenges the authoritative image the narrator crafts of himself. As she notes, he is not reliable because he accepts the paradox in facts and utterances. He often uses the particle *aw* (or) to present two incongruous elements as simultaneously possible: for instance, he gives two options to identify characters, time, and action. This opens the story to multiple options and suggest the absurdity or nonsense *(al-lā maʿqūl)* of the whole account.

This technique is recurrent in the novella to the point that it almost becomes a void formula. The reader does not focus on the two incongruous elements, rather on the narrator's image and language.

These discursive techniques lead us to consider other peculiarities of the narrator. If the narrator reports and rejects the village's gossip, who is the author of the story? At a

certain point, in fact, the story slips through the narrator's fingers because of his lack of sources. He stops being almost omniscient and it is unclear if he relates past or contemporary events. He admits to be deceived by the events and the characters in two metanarrative passages commenting on historical writing, at the beginning of chapter 6 and 10. Irony emerges from the narrator's elaborate style as he comments on two ordinary events that have disrupted his theory, *i.e.* Nuʿmān's belated circumcision and his wedding.

Moreover, his apparent detachment contrasts with his role as a witness, since his family comes from the same village. He mentions his paternal uncle Mihimmad (117/146), his grandfather *ḥājj* Mustajāb (Ibid.), a villager called Muḥammad Mustajāb (185/230).

The family name involves the author in a metanarrative game, since the Mustajābs and the protagonist are compared for their dumbness. The narrator reports some gossip about the hereditary lack of discernment in Nuʿmān's family. This explains Umm Nuʿmān's harsh reaction when her son abandons the luxury of the lady's house to go back home empty-handed:

> To be even-handed, I have to declare my reservations about accepting the disturbing statement made by a certain scoundrel against the Khamis lineage, among whom Nu'man is to be numbered, to the effect, apparently, that they are a people lacking in discernment: *when they come across a purse full of gold, they undo the cloth purse, filch it, and leave the gold*,[1] and if one of them in those days had recourse to a moneylender to buy a sack of chemical fertilizer, he would pay the price of it many times over, and in installments, and sell the sack immediately for half its real value in order to buy tea and tobacco. […]
>
> That autumn dawn, the fields witnessed a painful exchange between Umm Nu'man, who had wished to introduce her only son into the circle of the majestic lady's entourage so that he might strut in the glory of the incandescent lamps, the meats, the rice, the tea, and the potatoes, and her son, the destroyer of her dreams, that idiotic boy who had insisted on *leaving the gold while not even filching the purse*. (154-55/192-93, emphasis added)

The punchline is effective because the narrator's words translate the mother's practical mentality. The related footnote (fn. 1) illustrates that attributing silliness to a whole family is part of popular jokelore. This feature characterizes the al-Khamīs, the Mustajābs, and could be extended to other families. Similarly, the Palestinian writer Imīl Ḥabībī revives this element in his *al-Waqāʾiʿ al-gharība fī ikhtifāʾ Saʿīd Abī l-Naḥas al-Mutashāʾil* (1974, *The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist*). The protagonist is a wise fool who inherits his dumbness and awkwardness from his ancestors.

The overall impression is that of a narrator full of contradictions. He does not discern the relevant from the irrelevant, is extremely accurate and pedantic where is not needed, is dead-pan and at the same time intrusive. Selaiha considers him the real butt of satire for "his miserable failure to deliver a coherent reading of history despite his scrupulous research". He attests the failure of official historiography and big narratives.[253]

The next section examines the narrator's counterpart, Nuʿmān, looking at his presentation, the semantics of his actions, and some stylistic peculiarities.

# 3.4 Protagonist

## 3.4.1 Nuʿmān, the anti-hero

The protagonists of biographies and folk epics are expected to have exceptional qualities that make them stand out and, at the same time, be representative of a group. Nuʿmān is rather an ordinary boy and the product of the Egyptian rural environment he lives in. His humble birth and dubious genealogy do not confer upon him any social prestige, while his life as a vagabond does not prospect a bright future.

His trivial deeds (semantic level) contrast with the narrator's apparent accuracy and the epic tone of some episodes (discursive level), if we consider that *Min al-tārīkh* oscillates between a biography and a folktale. The inadequate high register emphasizes the protagonist's defects and his anti-heroic nature. Nevertheless, Nuʿmān arises the reader's sympathy because he is the victim of events bigger than him.

Besides this incongruity, two main strategies activate humour: repetition and digressions. As regards repetition, all adventures follow a similar scheme, since they start with great expectations and end into banal accounts. Once the readers are familiar with this framework, they expect something ridiculous to happen to Nuʿmān. As regards the second strategy, digressions illustrate the narrator's artistry, but distract from the main topic and provide more prestigious terms of comparison. These strategies induce the readers to take Nuʿmān's story not very seriously: the issue does not require a great mental effort, so the audience is relaxed and ready to perceive humour. We shall examine how

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[253] Selaiha, 'From Page'.

these strategies are employed at the beginning of the novella to shape a certain image of the main character.

### 3.4.1.1 Birth and lineage

Nuʿmān's story echoes the structure of classical biography, which provides information about the subject's birth, lineage, education, field of specialization, and patronage, while inserting some amusing anecdotes to exemplify his qualities. Some of these anecdotes mention renowned political events to provide the temporal setting for the personal event.[254] However, *Min al-tārīkh* is a partial biography, so it does not include material about maturity, death, and legacy.

The first episode under scrutiny is the reconstruction of Nuʿmān's birth in chapter 1. The narrator pays great attention to this issue, since heroes usually boast a noble lineage and a memorable birth. The boy's genealogy, instead, does not respond to these canons. It may be compared to the opening of *al-Waqāʾiʿ al-gharība*, in which Saʿīd parodies the style of the epics and admits that he was born again when a donkey saved his life during the 1948 *nakba*.

The narrator illustrates his findings about Nuʿmān's birth three times, repeating the same scheme based on digressions:

I. relevant historic events (international or national)

II. reports about local events

III. a footnote expanding one of the above-mentioned reports

IV. conclusion

The first attempt to establish Nuʿmān's date of birth is the opening of the novella, which is quoted below and marked according to our scheme:

> [I] No one in this world can pinpoint the year in which Nuʿman was born. It is certain that Germany's Reichstag had been burned down as Adolf prepared to rid himself of the opponents of the Third Reich, and that Lenin had died and handed socialist Russia over to his obdurate successor. On the other hand, we find it difficult to credit that Chamberlain had yet taken over the reins of power in Britain, Greatest of them all, [II] and it cannot be confirmed that my paternal uncle Mihimmad (so pronounced) had yet left the prison where he had been incarcerated for sowing poppies amid the cotton, which happened in parallel

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[254] For the structure of classical biography, see: Letizia Osti, 'A Grammarian's Life in his own Voice. Autobiographical Fragments in Arabic Biographical Literature', in *ʿAbbasid Studies IV. Occasional Papers of the School of ʿAbbāsid Studies - Leuven, July 5-July 9, 2010*, ed. Monique Bernards (Warminster: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2013), 142–79.

with the story of my grandfather, Hajj Mustajab, and the watch.[1] [III] [IV]Thus we may close the parentheses around an approximate date for Nuʿman's birth (and in doing so slap the hands of certain opinions that have sought to detract from our hero's standing), since it appears to be established that Nuʿman was born in one of those days of intense heat when the summer corn is starting to ripen. (117/146)

[1] It is related of Hajj Mustajab that on his way back from the fields at noon on a Friday in summer he came across a round piece of shiny metal, which he then picked up, thanking God for His kindness. However, this piece of metal had two thin wires that jumped about beneath its glass covering and this dismayed the heart of the pious believer, which heart increased in dread when he brought the piece of metal close to his ear, for the satanic thing was ticking. He therefore threw the metal demon to the ground, uttered prayers for God's protection, and then pounded it with his crutch until he was certain that it was completely destroyed. This is a recent tale, not to be confused with the one about Charlemagne's clock and Harun al-Rashid. (125-26/156-57)

This passage is a single long sentence juxtaposing events of different relevance with the same tone. The biographer cannot reach a definitive conclusion: he uses the impersonal form of reported speech and provides "an approximate date" calculated on the agricultural rhythms.

The footnote narrates the anecdote of the grandfather and introduces another account without telling it in full, probably because it belongs to common knowledge. In fact, both historiography and popular tales report that Charlemagne and Hārūn al-Rashīd exchanged embassies. Among the gifts sent by the Abbasid caliph were precious clothes, gold and ivory ornaments, a chess set, an elephant named Abū l-ʿAbbās, and a brass water clock.

The clock chimed the hours by dropping bronze balls into a bowl, while twelve mechanical knights – one for each hour – emerged from little windows. It became memorable, because a similar technology had never been seen in Charlemagne's empire. As Truitt remarks, a Carolingian chronicler described the marvelous effect *(mirifice)* of this mechanical art.[255]

This gift attested the high artistic and technological level of Baghdad's court. Metwally adds, without mentioning his source, that "the monks of the king believed it was inhabited by a demon responsible for its strange movements. In night they destroyed it with the axes."[256] This additional information establishes a clear parallelism with the grandfather's anecdotes. Metwally interprets the footnote as a satirical commentary about the stagnation of the East after a golden age of cultural and scientific advancement.

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[255] E. R. Truitt, *Medieval Robots. Mechanism, Magic, Nature, and Art* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 20. Cf. Giosuè Musca, *Carlo Magno e Hārūn al-Rashīd* (Bari: Dedalo, 1996).
[256] Metwally, 'Footnotes', 173.

As far as we can understand, the footnote juxtaposes two anecdotes of different import concerning the same issue: the confusion between science and marvel, technology and superstition. The anecdote of the grandfather features a traditional character in jokelore, *i.e.* the village yokel shocked by modernity and technology. A similar scene, including the physical reaction, appears in Abū Julayyil's *al-Fāʿil* (see below, 6.4.3.1).

The second attempt to establish Nuʿmān's birthday is found after two paragraphs. It mentions some Egyptian political events [I]: the resignation of the Prime Minister Muṣṭafā al-Naḥḥās (1879-1965)[257] and 'the Troubles' *(al-hawja)*, which may refer to the ʿUrabī uprising, the 1919 revolution, or a local dispute. The latter hypothesis introduces facts of local interest [II].

Two footnotes [III] indicate the sources used to check both the national and local accounts. The narrator resorts to the birth registers and the reports of the military service board, where more than one Nuʿmān appear. This is due to the fact that Umm Nuʿmān had three children bearing the same name who died young. These sad circumstances reveal their absurd side, because two brothers named Nuʿmān lived together until one of them died: "However, these two Nuʿmans survived for a period before one of them died, though we have failed to identify which of the two was." (126/157) The narrator is totally detached and continues to enumerate his evidences.

He concludes that Nuʿmān was born between 1930 and 1938: "It has thus become virtually certain that Nuʿman first saw this world on the bank of the Bahr Yusuf in the period extending up to eight years after 1930, according to the strictest suppositions." (119/148)

The third and final version, told after the protagonist's father's story, mixes natural and historical elements, precisely the warning signs of World War II:

> However, Sheikh Abd al-Hafiz's miracle did not survive for more than a few days, and consequently when [Nuʿman] entered this world he did so on an eroded bank, in a hut made of straw where the winds howled, tracing for the newborn a new and different world, while the waters of the Bahr Yusuf, carrying the good news to the land and the fields, billowed on without attention to those dark clouds that were gathering over the world as it pondered

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[257]Al-Naḥḥās was exiled with Saʿad Zaghlūl in 1921-23 and was Prime Minister in 1928, 1930, 1936-37, 1942-44, 1950-52. The novella reports that the British tanks surrounded ʿAbdīn palace at the time of his resignation, probably referring to 1944.

the first signs of the Second World War (for it is said that, at precisely the same time, Mussolini's warship began to pound the shores of Abyssinia). (125/156)

### 3.4.1.2 Education

The second episode of interest is Nuʿmān's education. Even though he does not receive any formal education, the narrator follows his achievements year after year. His abilities are indirectly compared to the mastery of a famous genius, with a ridiculous effect.

In the fields, Nuʿmān interacts with modernity embodied by the few passing cars and an aircraft. He chases the aircraft, as if he were playing a game, curses the pilot, and falls down. To explain his behaviour, the narrator reports in the footnote a "trustworthy account", but eventually dismisses it because it sounds like a well-known story. As Metwally notes, it resembles an episode of Leonardo Da Vinci's childhood:

> Also, when he was eight, […] had stoned all the (few) cars that passed along the nearby highway, and had pursued a hovering aircraft, maintaining, in a loud voice, a flow of insults against its pilot till he (Nuʿman) fell into a fissure in some unflooded land.[1] (130/162)

> [1] There is a trustworthy account of the reason for Nuʿman's habit of chasing aircraft, which is that a kite snatched Nuʿman in his first year, while he was lying quietly in his swaddling bands at the bottom of a dry canal; that the kite, scared off by the terrible scream released by Umm Nuʿman, was unable to complete its mission; and that Nuʿman suffered from bloody wounds to his right temple and left arm that did not heal for many long months thereafter. We have deliberately overlooked this incident, as it occurs in similar form in Dr. Ahmad Ukasha's book on Leonardo Da Vinci. (135/167-8)

Once again, the second incident is given as a piece of shared knowledge. In his notebooks, Leonardo said that a kite inserted its tale in his mouth, when he was a child. Freud interpreted this episode as the manifestation of adult fantasies in his one of his essays, translated into Arabic by ʿUkāsha.[258]

Metwally points out that "[t]he fantasy about an incident of childhood as an omen of adult fortune or genius is an established literary pattern",[259] that appears both in biographies and folktales. An alert reader may have recognized this pattern since the

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[258] Sigmund Freud, *Eine Kindheitserinnerung des Leonardo da Vinci*, ed. Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1995 [1910]). Translation from English into Arabic: Sigmund Freud, *Leonardo Da Vinci: dirāsa taḥlīliyya li-Sigmund Freud*, trans. Aḥmad ʿUkāsha (Cairo: Anglo-Egyptian Bookshop, 1970).

For a study of Freud's essay, see: Meyer Schapiro, 'Leonardo and Freud: An Art-Historical Study', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 17, no. 2 (1956): 147–78. Schapiro explains that Freud's interpretation was based on the assumption that the bird was a vulture, due to a wrong translation.

[259] Metwally, 'Footnotes', 176.

beginning of the footnote; when the narrator confirms his/her impression, the reader feels involved in an intellectual game. Furthermore, the parallelism between Nuʿmān's miserable situation and Da Vinci's great achievements turn the first into an anti-hero: the anecdote foreseeing a bright future for him is only a constructed story. This causes a sudden collapse into the ordinary.

A similar strategy is employed to portray Nuʿmān's fatherlessness. At the beginning of chapter 3, the narrator argues against a fictional opponent who believes that the boy's fatherlessness is just a literary convention. This convention would allow to compare him with "prodigy performers and miracle workers", in particular "a certain person who didn't even have a father to begin with." (136/169) This is a reference to Jesus and, according to Malti-Douglas, to Prophet Muḥammad. Even though the narrator refutes this argument, the imbalanced comparison reveals the artificial and pompous nature of this debate. Another Biblical reference is found in the comparison between when Nuʿmān's painful journey after the circumcision and the flight of the holy family into Egypt (178/221).

## 3.4.2 Interrupted rituals

After looking at the way the protagonist is introduced, this section examines three key episodes in which he is involved: the father's burial (chapter 1), the therapeutic burial (chapter 6), and Nuʿmān's circumcision (chapter 7).[260] Malti-Douglas relates them to the morphological category of the interrupted ritual and divides their structure into three phases: I) the ritual begins; II) an external factor intervenes; III) the ritual remains unaccomplished. She concludes that these episodes break the rules of life and social expectations.

Subverting the order of things is a central aspect in Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque;[261] therefore, we shall look at the liberating power of humour. While Malti-Douglas conducts a structuralist analysis, we shall examine the stylistic choices which reinforce the meaning and the comic effect.

*The father's burial*

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[260] Nuʿmān is not directly involved in the first episode, but it negatively affects his reputation.

[261] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rebelais and His World*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1984 [or. 1965].

Nuʿmān's father, ʿAbd al-Ḥāfiẓ Khamīs, dies on the last Friday of Ramaḍān. Since those buried on this day are believed to be blessed, the village changes its mind about the father, previously considered an outlaw and now turned into a noble sheikh. Their opinion is confirmed by the miracle that happens during his funeral, when the bier does not want to be buried and drags the mourners behind it:

> The strange thing is that the village that declared him an outlaw was the very same village that went out as one man to walk his funeral procession, for the day of his burial happened to be the last Friday of Ramadan, and there is a belief among the common people that anyone who goes to meet his Maker on such a day is, without doubt or exception, blessed. They therefore said the prayers over Abd al-Hafiz Khamis at noon of the last Friday of Ramadan in the mosque of Amir Sinan, built by the Sharif Hisn ibn Thaʿlab, a companion of Amr ibn al-ʿAs, and it is said that the bier went round and round from place to place in the village and refused to head for the burial ground, and that the sheikhs pleaded with it to make its way to the grave but were compelled to bring it drums and pipes to make it happy, and that the women started ululating, so that it became a noted day, for the bier dragged the mourners along in its wake not just within Dayrut al-Sharif but to the neighboring villages, the men panting after it and pouring sweat, and people of consequence got in touch with the district chief, who brought his soldiers in an attempt to bury the noble body by force, but the bier continued to resist, dragging the chanting, praying, drumming, and ululating masses along behind it. (123-24/154)

This scene is amusing because fantasy and reality, science and superstition overlap. An inanimate object is attributed a human or even supernatural will, as expressed by the verbs "refused", "pleaded", and "resist". On a semantic level, the inability of the religious authorities and the soldiers to restore the order indicates that the power relations are subverted. Furthermore, the bier ridicules those who despised ʿAbd al-Ḥāfiẓ Khamīs, when he was alive, and changed their mind after his death, out of a spiritual afflatus or interest. The targets of satire are summarized in the closing sentence, in which juxtaposition and repetition emphasize the absurdity of this episode.

This scene marks the beginning of the ritual. The bier is buried in an ordinary tomb, waiting to be moved to a holy shrine that is being built:

> After no more than four days (six, according to the version of Hajj Muhammad Hasanayn) they had built the tomb, whitewashed it, raised its headstone to a height of five meters, and drawn on its walls horses, swords, ships, and a camel (a huge one, whose voice could be heard seven cemeteries away). (124/155)

However, the ritual is interrupted by some wild animals that open the first tomb and tear the corpse apart, a scene described with macabre images which tend to be grotesque. As a consequence, both the first tomb and the holy shrine are left empty and the initial

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situation is reinstated: ʿAbd al-Ḥāfiẓ Khamīs's prestige is dispelled and he is again a troublemaker and the object of mockery.

*Therapeutic burial*

The continuity between the first and the second ritual is indicated by the same location, since Nuʿmān settles in an empty tomb that probably coincides with his father's shrine, as it can be inferred by this description:

> so that we find Nu'man in the end quite simply taking up residence in a tomb of unknown ownership with an exceedingly elegant superstructure whose walls were tattooed with ships, horses, airplanes, steamboats, and a camel (a camel whose roar you could hear seven graveyards away). (162/202)[262]

A woman goes to the graveyard to cure a skin irritation in her private parts caused by demons. Once again, the bodily and the spiritual dimensions are interconnected. Devils, *jinn*s, and angels create a supernatural atmosphere, whereas Nuʿmān is afraid of the lady.

The ritual begins according to the prescriptions enumerated in the bulleted list. One rule forbids uncircumcised men to take part into the burial. When the woman is buried in the sand with only her head left outside, the external factor intervenes. She realizes that the boy is not circumcised:

> The woman felt she was being throttled, and Nu'man realized that the devils were trying frantically to get out. Then the woman sneezed, and it became clear that the treatment was working according to the plan. Next, Isma'il the Gravedigger ordered Nu'man to level the ground around the tomb so that the angels should not be harmed. Nu'man took off his jellabiya so it wouldn't get in his way as he carried out the leveling. His body was pouring sweat and he bent over with the remains of a palm branch to tidy the place as the woman's *constricted head* beseeched God to grant her recovery. […] Finally, Nu'man sat down next to the woman's *head*.
>
> The most distressing thing is that the cry from the woman's *constricted head* did not arise as the result of the bite of a snake or scorpion, or the sudden onslaught of a devil, or a poke from an angel. It was the result of a sharp glance of the *eyes* at Nu'man's body, the result of which was that the accursed woman awoke to the presence of the topknot rising like a mushroom above Nu'man's *head*. She asked him – in the midst of her entreaties – about his mother, about his father, and about the sheikh to whom the shaving of his topknot was dedicated. Then, in terrified silence, she turned *her head* till *her weary eyes* were able to take in, in the weary dark, Nu'man's *thighs,* and she whispered, "God forbid, my son, that you be not circumcised!" (166-67/208-9, emphasis added)

The focus is on the parts of the body that are a metonymy for the whole subject: Nuʿmān's thighs and topknot reveal that he is not circumcised, while the woman's head

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[262] See above, the afore-mentioned quotation describing the holy shrine (124/155). A similar description appears in the previous chapter (159/198).

is constricted by the treatment, and her mobility is limited to her eyes. At the same time, the parts are described as autonomous items, subject to mechanical movements. This mechanical appearance and the extremely objective description of physical details are ludicrous.

The external event is introduced by the woman's question in Egyptian Arabic, which is one of the few dialogues in the novella. Nuʿmān unintentionally breaks a rule due to his ignorance of rites and traditions; conversely, the other characters and the narrator know this rule, but ignore the meaning of the boy's topknot. The reader has probably guessed its meaning, or at least its relevance, due to the several repetitions. His/her knowledge determine a feeling of superiority toward the gullible characters and narrator.

The ritual remains unaccomplished, since the woman remains possessed by the demons, emerges from the sand as a monstrous creature, and runs away:

> The woman's *head* continued to shiver and shake above the sand, refusing to submit to all the recitations of Ismaʿil the Gravedigger and his entreaties to the jinn. Then the shuddering overwhelmed the rest of the thrashing *body* […] but the devils had opened a fissure in the calm and her *body* was drawn up put of the enfolding hole – strong, hard, naked, bloody bottomed, and screaming – and the woman, raging, set off immediately along the road. (167-68/209-10, emphasis added)

The focus shifts from the head to her whole body, with a final sentence summarizing her features. This monstrous creature is not really dreadful: it terrifies the dead and the angels, but does not bother the village, which sleeps undisturbed.


### Nuʿmān's circumcision

The previous incident leads Nuʿmān's family to plan his circumcision, which had been delayed due to Umm Nuʿmān's straitened circumstances. They substitute the original location with a closer one, in the village of Amshūl. The ritual begins, the barber shaves the topknot and cuts the tip of the foreskin.

However, the festive atmosphere is interrupted by an inhabitant of Amshūl who wants the barber to respect an agreement, according to which barbers should perform the circumcision only in their villages (174/217). This short dialogue is in Egyptian Arabic.

The scene does not employ the imagery of horror, as in the previous episode, but parodies tragedy thanks to some stylistic features. Firstly, the initial happiness with the final drama are contrasted by means of parallelism:

- "[The Barber] continued rubbing and then pulling on the foreskin amid the yells of Nuʿman, the ululations of his mother, and the joking comments of Ismaʿil the Gravedigger (174/216).

- Nuʿman, therefore, had his circumcision, Umm Nuʿman her dancing, and Ismaʿil the Gravedigger his straining on Nuʿman's shoulders halted. (174/218)

Secondly, anaphora exaggerates the characters' reactions, as in this case:

It appeared, at this point, that things would be difficult to fix. Eid the Barber was furious but powerless to act. Umm Nuʿman wavered back and forth between curses and entreaties. Ismaʿil the Gravedigger tried to calm the man down while other individuals tried to stir him up. Nuʿman tried to stand, but felt another savage and powerful flood of pain, and he wept. (175/218)[263]

Thirdly, the dramatic tension focuses on a single part of the body, the tip of the prepuce, which is almost reified. At the beginning, Umm Nuʿmān places it over her head and dances with it; when the rite is interrupted, she clutches it in her "terrified hand"; at the end, it is the symbol of the whole tragedy: "On the site of the tragedy they left a palm branch with plaited fronds, the skin of a rabbit of large size, broken biscuits, a great deal of blood, and a prepuce wallowing in blood and dust." (176/219).

The final description evokes the crime scene in horror or detective films. It oscillates between the epic tone of tragedy and the scientific precision.


*Expedition*

As Malti-Douglas notes, the following chapter does not provide the conclusion of the ritual, despite its title ('On How the Circumcision Was Completed'). While she does not analyse this episode, we have identified some humour-generating strategies related to the depiction of interrupted rituals. The continuity between chapter 7 and 8 is marked by some formulaic phrases, such as "tragedy" and "the thing between his thighs". Tragedy turns into a tragicomedy that involves the whole village.

When Nuʿmān, his mother, the Barber, and the Gravedigger return to the village riding their donkeys, they are accosted by ʿAbd al-Ḥāmīd ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz (or his brother Aḥmad), who seeks revenge for the village's offended pride. The village organizes an expedition, described with military and religious terms.[264] The magnitude of the project is conveyed

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[263] The verb *'ẓalla'* is repeated twice, but is not made explicit in the English translation; the verb *'ḥāwala'* is repeated three times.

[264] The expedition is described as: "a blessed procession" *[al-masīra al-mubāraka]* (180/224); "the expeditionary force" *[al-ḥamla al-musallaḥa]* (180/224); "the march of zeal and determination" *[riḥlat*

by metaphors referring to the human body (the village is a single body raising its head) and by the parody of the military discourse. In the following passage, the narrator adopts the perspective of a military chief who incites its army:

> We had never realized that our village loved Nuʿman so much. We had never imagined for an instant that his love could be translated, and with such a speed, into this host, armed with rifles, sickles, and knives. It was up to Amshul to rethink what it had done. Nuʿman was an orphan, true enough; yet Dayrut al-Sharif was his village, his home, and his father. Nuʿman was poor, true enough; yet Dayrut al-Sharif was his lineage, his strength, and his wealth, and though faced by a thousand villages and a thousand armies, Nuʿman's forces would defeat them all. (181/225)

The exaggeration between the military discourse and Nuʿmān's circumcision is conveyed by some dramatic images, hyperbole, and comical counterpoints. For instance, the village intervenes because it sees its pride haemorrhaging from Nuʿmān's wound, with blood breaking through "the dams of coffee grounds and dirt" (179/223). Coffee grounds and dirt are traditional remedies, not so effective as to be compared to dams. Another example is the word 'pride' repeated several times. It first appears in a quotation attributed to a blind *shaykh*, who is closer to existentialism than to Nuʿmān's cultural environment (183/227, chapter 7, fn. 3 in the novel). Finally, the village gathers an army of a thousand, or two thousand, or three thousand men that march with military discipline behind a donkey, an iconic animal in the humorous tradition (180/224).

The armed expedition fails and Nuʿmān is brought back to Dayrūṭ:

> At this point, Abd al-Hamid the leader shouted his apology to the people, proclaiming his utter gratitude to Amshul and the men of Amshul, and swore on the divorce of his wife that there would be no circumcision for Nuʿman anywhere but in Dayrut al-Sharif, their mighty village.
> The two jennies [bowed] their heads and the army followed behind them. Nuʿman fainted, throbbing with pain, silence, and shock. Eid the Barber hurried, between each leg of the journey, to uncover the swelling wound between Nuʿman's thighs and bank up the blood with dirt. And Abd al-Hamid, the leader, proceeded at the front of his people, his head held high. (182/226-27)

This closing passage subverts all the elements of this chapter. Firstly, ʿAbd al-Ḥāmīd makes a solemn promise to divorce his wife if the boy is not circumcised in Dayrūṭ, whereas he previously swore to divorce if the boy was not circumcised in Amshūl. His vow is exaggerated and nonsensical. Secondly, he keeps his head held right, but he is described as an opportunist in a footnote (fn. 4, 183/228). Thirdly, the image of the head

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ḥamiyya wa-iṣrār] (180/224); "this doomsday procession" [yawm al-ḥashr] (180/224); "army" [jaysh] and "forces" [ḥamla] (181/225).

subverts the initial situation, since the donkeys bow their heads, whereas the village had raised it before. The donkeys ride back and forth on a bumpy road, in an aimless and repetitive way, which increases the humorous effect. Finally, the Barber's action is repeated four times. In one of these occurrences, he checks "the mess between his thighs" (178/221). In the original Arabic, 'the mess' is *al-mahzala*, meaning a farcical or comical situation.

The desecrating effect of the three interrupted rituals lies both in their content and form. On a semantic level, they are religious rites with a social meaning, concerning significant aspects in one's public life, *i.e.* death, disease, and masculinity. The ritual's spiritual meaning and codified rules are disrupted by a minor external factor, which intervenes suddenly and unexpectedly. Thus, the prescriptions are subverted and the social expectations are disregarded.

On a formal level, the absurdity of the situation is conveyed by the parallelism, the summarizing final sentence, and the parody of the military, horror, and tragic discourses. Since the body is at the centre of these rituals, irony is achieved through its objectification. The repetition of the same structural pattern in all three rituals prepares the reader to something unconventional and ultimately hilarious. Malti-Douglas applies this pattern also to the novella's title, which announces a partial account of an interrupted biography.

We suggest to extend this pattern to the final episode, leading to opposite results, which is not examined by Malti-Douglas. Like the circumcision, the wedding night regards the social dimension of sexuality. The continuity is symbolized by the Ursa Major and Ursa Minor appearing in the sky, like in the therapeutic burial. In Arabic, these stars are called *banāt al-naʿsh*, literally the daughters of the bier, probably implying a reference to the first ritual.

The ritual starts with the village's celebrations. Then, the bride is carried into the groom's room, where the midwife helps Nuʿmān to deflorate her with his finger. The first attempt is only partially successful, but the midwife supervises the ritual and, after cursing Nuʿmān, helps him to accomplish his duty. In this case, the accomplished ritual responds to the social expectations. It marks the end of Nuʿmān's early life and gives the story its happy ending.

## 3.5 Social satire

### 3.5.1 Ignorance and superstition

As illustrated above, Nuʿmān is the protagonist of absurd situations that reveal his anti-heroic nature. In these episodes, his native village is always present, either witnessing the scene or intervening. The boy is the butt of humour for his mishaps and, at the same time, the vehicle of the author's social satire towards the village's mentality. The main aspects criticized by the implied author are ignorance and superstition, as can be seen in two episodes revolving around "medical treatments not founded on a scientific basis."[265]

In the first episode, examined also by Metwally, ʿĪd the Barber uses coffee grounds and smooth dirt to stop Nuʿmān's bleeding after the circumcision. The Barber, the Gravedigger, and Umm Nuʿmān tell some stories to confirm the efficacy of these traditional remedies. However, the only two accounts narrated in full contradict one another. In the main text, the narrator reports that the Barber tells that his niece "had been saved by coffee grounds and only died after envious and ignorant people had misled her family into taking her to the hospital." (178/221) The Barber believes in traditional remedies and superstition (the evil eye), but mistrusts the health service. The footnote, instead, reports the incident of a girl whose bleeding was treated with dirt, straw, and scraps of clothes. When she was brought to the hospital, no cure could save her torn body.

The two stories are told with the same detached attitude, but the former has a defensive aim, while the latter denounces the inhuman treatments and discredits the first anecdote. Its criticism is strengthened by the following details: the girl got married when she was nine years old and her pregnancy caused the haemorrhage; moreover, the relative responsible for her was a former school principal, thus an educated person.

Nuʿmān's inflammation is cured with other traditional methods, whose non-scientific basis is revealed in the footnotes.[266] Only the majestic lady can solve his problem. When she sees the wound, she curses ignorance *(al-jahl)* and sends him to the city's doctor.

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[265] Metwally, 'Footnotes', 176.

[266] "Spinal-cord cauterizers" are defined in fn. 3, 189/236; *al-rāsakht*, a powder, is defined in fn. 4, 189/236; *zār*, the practice of exorcising spirits from possessed individuals, is not mentioned in a specific footnote, rather in the main text; in the next chapter, fn. 2, p. 196/245 describes how the village people used penicillin, sprinkling it onto the wound instead of doing an injection, to avoid the sting of the needle.

In an earlier episode, Nuʿmān falls ill when he is a child. Umm Nuʿmān performs a ritual against the evil eye, then carries her son to the far-away government hospital. To comment her prompt decision, the narrator mentions Camus: "Albert Camus, or one of those people, says that if you die this year, death will avoid you the next. Umm Nuʿman, not being concerned with the sayings of Albert Camus, wasted no time […]" (132/164). This is ironic because Camus is totally alien from the woman's environment and his existentialist philosophy is summarized in a maxim that sounds like dark humour.

When Umm Nuʿmān reaches the hospital, the doorkeeper treats her unfairly and she fights with him, losing her chance to see the doctor. Finally, she returns to the village and entrusts her son to the cures of a local *shaykh*, who mixes religious formulas and magical rituals against the spirits. The incongruity emerges from the *shaykh*'s quotations of the Qurʾān followed by his abrupt request of being paid twenty piasters for the treatment. The spiritual content and the solemn language of the Qurʾān, with footnotes indicating the precise reference, contrast with the direct language of the material request.

Both episodes raise the question of who is responsible for the villagers' ignorance. In the first anecdote, the educational institutions are criticized, whereas in the second one the religious authorities are attacked for their greed and lack of real knowledge, reviving a long tradition in Arabic humour.

Another common feature is the journey from the village to the city leading to a misunderstanding. As soon as Umm Nuʿmān, her son, and the watchman reach the town, they are stopped by a policemen and then by a crowd of political supporters. Nuʿmān is taken for a great guest and is forcibly involved in the celebrations. A picture of his mother appearing on the newspapers highlights the non-sense of this scene, with ordinary people turned into heroes in the least appropriate moment.

The episode of the hospital, instead, reveals the mutual hostility between the city and the countryside. When Umm Nuʿmān reaches the hospital, the doorkeeper treats her badly because of her filthy appearance, which may cause him problems with his boss. The crowd of local people sympathizes with the doorkeeper, but the reader probably sympathizes with the mother for her big efforts. Nevertheless, she is not able to defend

herself, but only to curse "every job and position included in the hospital's administrative chart, from the head doctor to the doorkeeper." (133/165).

The same chapter depicts this hostility with two images: urban architecture (see above, 3.2.1.1) and urban formal education. The city is ironically placed on the same level of the village's ignorance and superstition, because each of them has its own defects. At the beginning of the chapter, the narrator defends Nuʿmān's informal education against formal education in a flowery sentence with a rhetorical accumulation of terms:

> Those who have no love for Nuʿman have put it about that he received no formal education in his childhood, though these theorists ought to elevate their ideas to take into account the fact that many children of teachers, army officers, government employees, merchants, lawyers, and politicians spend their childhoods in pedagogical crises of extraordinary complexity inside walls decorated with photographs of actresses, their families providing them with no experiences to add to their childhood memory albums more important than a few superficial cuts caused by mishandling a bicycle, falling off the back of a streetcar, or the collapse of a stairwell banister, since they rarely have the opportunity to climb a tree, or even play with a cat. (129-30/161)

Then, a concise punch mocks the possibility of applying formal education in the countryside: "and that his mother was compelled to strike him, thus breaking the rules of modern parenting" (131/163).

To sum up, the implied author expresses his criticism of ignorance, superstition, and opportunism in an indirect way, through the narrator's matter-of-fact style, the footnotes providing counter-information, jibes directed at minor characters, and the contrast between the city and the village.


## 3.5.2 Entertainment for the elite

The city and the village are contrasted for their values, forms of entertainment, and wit in the night that Nuʿmān spends at the lady's house, when he is nine years old. The lady hosts night gatherings with local men of the middle class, who enjoy drinking, chatting, and joking. This section explores how Nuʿmān contributes to their merriment and which stylistic elements convey the absurdity of the situation.

The entertainment at the lady's house revolves around her guests' witty talk. The various topics are juxtaposed in a sentence and later in a bulleted list of eleven elements:

> - Madame Fawqiya had not become disheartened, but had opened her luxurious hose at night to people of standing, excellence, and eminence, there to quaff draughts of scholarship, conversation, ease, food, and literature and to discuss such topics as al-Naʿisa,

Diyab, Abu Nuwas, the Constitution, the British, Imam al-Shafi'i, Makram Ebeid, and Najib al-Rihani. (138/171)

> - while conversation continued among the assembled persons on the following topics:
> […] j. Extensive and impolite discourse on the subject of Abu Nuwas and the slave girl Jinan.
> k. The tale of how a ruler of olden times had been castrated at the hands of his slaves. (140-41/175-76)

The two lists include the following topics: contemporary Egyptian politics; Islamic history and jurisprudence; topics of local interest, such as crimes, prices, and business with some village's professionals; oddities, with a focus on sexual perversion; and various literary genres. Al-Nāʿisa and Diyāb are characters from *al-sīra al-hilāliyya*, a famous folk epic (see below, 6.4.3.2); Abū Nuwās is the epitome of court wine poetry; Najīb al-Rīḥānī (1892-1949) was one of the major Egyptian actors and comedians of the first half of the 20th century (see below, 4.4.3);[267] the tale of the castrated ruler, mentioned above (k), exemplifies storytelling. This macabre tale revolves around the subversion of hierarchies linked to the sexual sphere.

This literary references, which draw on the Arab cultural heritage, anticipate the delightful atmosphere: the tales suggest the participants' taste for the odd, whereas the sexual allusions place pleasure at the centre of entertainment. Abū Nuwās is the literary counterpart of the guests, who enjoy wine and bawdiness. In other words, their conversation anticipates their actions.

The first hilarious moment is on the level of discourse, since it portrays a *shaykh* ridiculing another *shaykh* in a witty repartee. The learned *shaykh* ʿAlī argues with *shaykh* Abū Tisʿa about the meaning of his nickname, literally 'He of the Nines'. The latter falls into the trap of explaining the issue with great eloquence: he mentions some verses from the Qurʾān containing the number nine, then pleads God to grant him a numerous offspring based on the multiples of nine. His antagonist turns religious knowledge and rhetoric against him:

> To this, Sheikh Abu Tis'a added that his father had nine boy children and nine girls, that he himself had fathered seven, and that he prayed to God to extend His blessings so far as to allow him to follow the example of His Miraculous Verses and father nine, or, if He were not feeling stingy, nineteen, or even, were He feeling expansive, ninety-nine.
> At this, Sheikh Ali cried out in challenge to Sheikh Abu Tis'a, "If that is the case, O Sheikh of the Devils, why do you flee God's words in Surat al-Naml?" at which Madame

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[267] Laila Abou Saif, 'Najīb Al-Rīḥānī: From Buffoonery to Social Comedy', Journal of Arabic Literature, 4 (1973), 1–17.

Fawqiya asked delightedly, for the millionth time, "And what does it say in Surat al-Naml, Sheikh Ali?" and Sheikh Ali stood up (the seat pad of the chair falling as a result between his feet) and recited, "There were nine men in the city who spread corruption in the land!"

At this exquisite moment, when the audience had been won over to Sheikh Ali's side and were displaying their unbounded admiration for his cleverness, Madame Fawqiyya caught sight of Nuʿman and his mother in the entrance to the salon and beckoned them into her presence. (139-40/172-74)

This anecdote revives the Arabic humorous tradition of poking fun at futile jurisprudential disputes. Yet, the winner is appreciated for his cleverness. In addition, it evokes the classical trope of scholarly competition *(munāẓara)*. Pre-modern sources, such as biographical dictionaries, contain anecdotes illustrating the methodological and differences between renowned competing scholars. These stories, featuring teachers, students, and patrons, provide a physical context to a scholarly debate, linking it to personal concrete situations.[268] The above-mentioned passage is a description of a *majlis* with two local scholars wrangling in front of an audience. The female patron knows that they are rivals and her question invites them to discuss for the pleasure of her guests.

The second funny episode in this chapter moves to the level of action. One of the drunken guests lifts Nuʿmān up to the ceiling and starts to play a game: the guests form a circle and toss the little boy in the air. Nuʿmān is an inanimate object, a puppet, that provides them merriment *(al-maraḥ)* and pleasure *(al-mutʿa)*, released by their laughter *(al-ḍaḥkāt)*, happy uproar *(al-ḍajja al-saʿīda)*, and ribald talk *(al-kalām al-badhīʾ*, 142/177). The contrast between their excitement and Umm Nuʿmān's fear makes this scene even funnier. Furthermore, the narrator partly adopts the internal perspective of the young boy, who does not fully understand the situation.

While the boy is the object of fun, his reification during the game corresponds to lady's intention to purchase him. This extravagant form of entertainment hints at Madame Fawqiya's weird habits and possible paedophilia. It establishes a hierarchy between the two characters and evokes the magic atmosphere lingering in her house.

The next chapter, in fact, moves to the lady's private apartments. Both chapters employ the main stylistic features enhancing humour in the whole novella. Repetitions convey

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[268] For scholarly competition and personal rivalry in pre-modern bibliographical literature, see: Letizia Osti, 'Scholarly Competition in Third/Ninth Century Baghdad: The Case of Thaʿlab and al-Mubarrad', *QSA*, n.s. 1 (2006): 87–112.

the idea of the mechanical and artificial in the actions and narration: the verb 'to laugh'; the lady's name; the formulaic phrase about Nuʿmān's topknot, repeated with a magical effect when Madame Fawqiya caresses his head; the lady opening and closing the doors.

In addition, the physical description focuses on single parts of the body. For example, the majestic lady is prettier than the women in the village thanks to her life of luxury, but her description in a scientific way makes the sentence obscure:

> The majestic, and also beautiful lady, who had decided to acquire Nuʿman Abd al-Hafiz for her magnificent house was composed of a nose, two lips, two eyes, two eyebrows, two cheeks, and a neck, followed by a chest, two breasts, a navel, and two thighs, which were components rarely found gathered together, and complete, in the women of our village, whose particulars hung loosely by reason of the constant changes in the climate and such factors as erosion, heat, children, mud, dung, cold, and men. (145/181)

In another passage, she is described with a list of her possessions. Both descriptions are followed by an accumulation of stories about her three husbands, lovers, murders, and superstition. As usual, the anecdotes are not told in full and contradictory information is provided in the footnotes. Some accounts are linked to relevant historic events, for instance when Nuʿmān is asked to tell a story.

The horror stories of her father's and husbands' murders become grotesque when Nuʿmān enters her private apartments. In this passage, time slows down and excessive precision is put where is not needed: the boy stops on the twentieth step, and a second time on the twenty-fifth step, where it is said that the lady's father was murdered; the bathroom is damaged because her third husband was stabbed in the shoulder with a lance. The shocking but unclear events contrast with the matter-of-fact narration, which does not attempt to provide any explanation nor moral evaluation.

# 3.6 Conclusion

In *Min al-tārīkh*, humour is based on a number of patent incongruities. The margins become a central element both in the structure, marked by the footnotes, and in the content, which revolves around a marginal character. The oscillation between two distant writing conventions places the story into a disorienting frame, paving the way for further incongruities, such as the narrator's manipulation of the village's gossip and his relation with the main character.

The narrator-historian and Nuʿmān are the two comical characters in the novella. However, they are involved in situations that are not funny *per se*. The young boy lives some dangerous and dreadful experiences, like his circumcision, which may end in tragedy. What makes the account of these experiences humorous is the complex interplay of the three examined levels (form, discourse, and action), enriched by a great attention to the language and abundant intertextual references.

Two episodes are overtly funny thanks to their dramatic construction featuring popular characters: the father's bier dragging the mourners behind it and the debates for choosing Nuʿmān's wife. Another key scene portrays the lady's guests playing with the boy, which allows a critical comparison of a lower and higher social classes.

Through Nuʿmān, the narrator, the village, the lady and her entourage, Mustajāb does not criticize directly the shortcomings of Egyptian society, but rather unmasks the absurdity of life and social relations. Malti-Douglas insists on the nonsensical actions and utterances, whereas Selaiha points out the author's cynicism in his lack of moralistic evaluation and modernist critique of realist mimetic art:

> using the narrative strategies characteristic of a lot of postmodernist fiction, [the novella] recklessly carries the essential ironic nature of the novel as a genre to its extreme outward limits, threatening to destroy it altogether. […]
> Mustagab's irony is morally nihilistic, devastating and thorough, levelling everything on its way.[269]

This representation of life is linked to the Egyptian reality through the historic events, the setting in the village, the tradition of jokelore embodied by folkloric and religious figures, and the few dialogues. It is significant that the narrator's flowery Arabic is interrupted by brief dialogues in Egyptian Arabic in the key moments of the rituals.

Other stylistic features contributing to the humorous effect are repetition, parallelism, hyperbole, descriptions, lists, and accumulation of stories of different import or containing contradictory information. There is a focus on the parts of the body and the sexual sphere. These elements are combined with some peculiarities in the sub-genre of the village novel, such as the magical representation of nature, storytelling techniques, and crime fiction.

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[269] Selaiha, 'From Page'.

# Chapter 4

# A HUMOROUS HISTORICAL NOVEL: *RIḤLĀT AL-ṬURSHAJĪ AL-ḤALWAJĪ* BY KHAYRĪ SHALABĪ

> 'Why did you return, Ram?'
> I lit another cigarette and stood by the window once more.
> 'You told me so many times you love Egyptians. I, too, Edna, but unconsciously, not like you. Egypt to me is so many different things. Playing snooker with Doromian and Varenian the Armenians, is Egypt to me. Sarcastic remarks are Egypt to me – not only the fellah and his plight. Riding the tram is Egypt. Do you know my friend Fawzi? He can never give an answer that isn't witty… and yet he isn't renowned for it. He's an ordinary Egyptian. Last week I was riding the tram with him when a man stepped on his foot. "Excuse me," said the man, "for stepping on your foot." – "Not at all," said Fawzi, "I've been stepping on it myself for the last twenty-seven years"… How can I explain to you that Egypt to me is something unconscious, is nothing particularly political, or… or… oh, never mind,' I said.'[270]

Like *Min al-tārīkh*, *Riḥlāt al-ṭurshajī al-ḥalwajī* was originally published in instalments in *Majallat al-idhāʿa wa-l-talfizyūn* in 1980. Bushnaq reconstructs its multiple editions in book form:[271] a shortened version (eight chapters out of twenty-four) was published by *Kitāb Akhbār al-yawm* in 1981, followed by an edition by Madbūlī in Lebanon. In library catalogues, 1983 usually appears as the year of the first edition, while many reviews indicate 1991. This latter reprint was probably more popular, which may suggest the novel's double reception over the 1980s and 1990s.

*Riḥlāt* follows the story of Ibn Shalabī, an ordinary Egyptian and first-person narrator, who travels through time. Time-travelling generates a humorous effect on various levels. Firstly, all journeys are placed within a frame narrative, in which the narrator tells the odd

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[270] Waguih Ghali, *Beer in the Snooker Club* (New York: Knopf, 1964), 190.
[271] Bushnaq, *Der historische Roman*, 500.

incidents triggering his displacements. Each journey is, thus, like a window opening on the past or an episode in a repetitive structure. Secondly, the cultural distance between past and present leads to comic misunderstandings and allows a critical view of both societies. Finally, the protagonist's identity is always changing, either because he is mistaken for somebody else or he plays a role. Like picaresque characters, he sets out of intricate situations, sometimes taking advantage of them, thanks to his eloquence or good sense.

This chapter will place time-travelling and the construction of the protagonist against the background of previous literary models, such as the *maqāma* and the early modern travelogue aimed at satirical criticism. The second part will illustrate some types of humour (verbal, situational, social criticism, carnivalesque) found in *Riḥlāt*, which is extremely rich in wordplay and comic scenes. Finally, the last part will explore intertextuality with pre-modern historiography to write a historical novel, which can be defined as entertaining and humorous. Our analysis will look at the use of Egyptian Colloquial Arabic as a humour-generating strategy.

## 4.1 *Riḥlāt*

### 4.1.1. Plot

*Riḥlāt* follows the time-travels of Ibn Shalabī, who moves back and forth between the present (1979) and different periods in the past, while remaining fixed in space, since all events take place in the historic districts of Cairo. He cannot control his movements, but only check the date on his wrist-watch, which displays the date according to the Islamic calendar. Travelling to the Fatimid (969-1171), Ayyubid (1171-1260) and Mamluk (1250-1517) periods, he witnesses relevant events in Egyptian history, often related to the construction of monuments, which are now symbols of the urban landscape.

Ibn Shalabī is invited by the Fatimid Caliph al-Muʿizz li-Dīn Allāh (953-975) to a banquet for the first Ramaḍān celebrations in Cairo (973), but he arrives early and witnesses the foundation of the city by General Jawhar al-Ṣiqillī (969). The Fatimids rule from the Great Eastern Palace and build al-Azhar Mosque. When Ibn Shalabī enters the Palace, this dynasty is expelled by the Ayyubids.

In his time-travels set in the Ayyubid period, the protagonists is summoned by Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn (1174-1193), makes fun of the awe-inspiring viceroy of Egypt Qarāqūsh, takes part in the palace inventory as a gem expert, and sees the construction of the Citadel. He never meets Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, but seems familiar with him and calls him by his shortened name Ṣalāḥ (in the English translation, Sal).

Jumping back in time, Ibn Shalabī wants to find a job at the Fatimid chancery. Although the historian Ibn al-Ṭuwayr sponsors him to the post, he fails and is arrested. To get out of prison, he tries to impress the Caliph Manṣūr al-Āmir bi-Aḥkām Allāh (1101-1130) with a 20<sup>th</sup>-century cassette recorder. However, this technological device does not work and Ibn Shalabī is sent to the Storehouse of Banners *(khizānat al-bunūd)*, the prison were high officers are jailed.

The protagonist cannot escape from this place, but finds himself in another time: when the Mamluk Sultan al-Malik al-Nāṣir Muḥammad b. Qalāwūn (1293-94; 1299-1309; 1309-1340) comes back from his campaign against the Mongols, the Storehouse of Banners is used to detain prisoners of wars. Ibn Shalabī lives with these prisoners, including the powerful Emir Khazʿal, who creates a state within the state.

This episode marks the beginning of the second part of the novel, set in the Mamluk period with a few visits to contemporary Cairo. Ibn Shalabī plays the role of the double agent in the Storehouse and the Citadel, working for Khazʿal and at the same time being a *mamlūk*. He is *mamlūk* of Emir Qawṣūn, who deposes Sultan al-Malik al-Manṣūr Sayf al-Dīn Abū Bakr (1340-1341) in favour of al-Malik al-Ashraf ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn Kujuk (1341-1342). Shortly after, Qawṣūn is victim of a plot: the emirs call al-Malik al-Nāṣir Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad (1342) from al-Karak to reign over the land of Egypt.

Ibn Shalabī, given as a present to the merry and jolly Sultan Aḥmad, becomes the court jester. The Sultan is confronted by a conspiracy led by Ṭaqtimur al-sāqī (Tashtamur al-Akhdar), known as *ḥummuṣ akhḍar* (Green Garbanzo),[272] and the Emir Quṭlūbughā al-Fakhrī.

When the Sultan leaves Cairo to go back to al-Karak, the emirs choose his brother Sultan al-Ṣāliḥ (1342-1345). Ibn Shalabī becomes his confident and later the press

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[272] Cooperson explains that this nickname refers to his fondeness for the popular dish made of green chickpeas (Glossary, 'Tashtamur the Cupbearer, called Green Garbanzo', 258).

secretary of the newly appointed viceroy of Egypt, the Polo Master (*al-ḥājj* Āl-malik al-Jūkandār).[273] The Polo Master is an old enemy of the Storehouse who disapproves its immoral conduct and finally destroys it.

The protagonist should join the Storehouse's prisoners, but has a weapon of last resort: time-travelling. He finds himself at the Citadel Square bus stop, just in time to catch the bus to go back home, in the area between al-Basātīn and al-Maʿādī.

## 4.1.2 Structure and narrator

*Riḥlāt* contains twenty-four chapters, which Bushnaq relates to the twenty-four hours of the day, due to the centrality of time.[274] The first part of the novel (chapters 1-7) includes abrupt temporal jumps from the present into the Fatimid and Ayyubid eras, without following a clear chronological order. The second part (chapters 8-24), instead, focuses only on some years of the Baḥrī Mamluk dynasty and follows a linear order. The author devotes more attention to this dynasty because, as he states in the following interview, "the Mamluk period was the one that influenced most the Egyptian people, […] in terms of social system, manners and customs, traditions and way of living."[275]

To indicate the temporal progression or jumps, in each journey the protagonist reads the date on his wrist-watch. Some dates are significant: Ibn Shalabī usually says that he comes from the 14th century and once he mentions the year 1400 AH (1979 AD); at the end of the novel, his watch stops on "Friday, the fifth of Safar, AH 1500: 1 January, AD 2077" (247/267).[276] This date is a round number indicating the turn of the century and corresponding to the beginning of the AD year. This date hints at possible journeys to the future and gives the novel an open ending.

In this closing passage, the protagonist gets on a bus, which may be seen as a kind of time-machine.[277] A crowded bus, the typical Cairene means of public transport, is a good

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[273] Cooperson explains that *jukandar* was a title originally attributed to the official responsible for the sultan's polo equipment and the conduct of games (Glossary, 'The Emir Polo Master', 256).

[274] Bushnaq, *Der historische Roman*, 527.

[275] Abier Bushnaq, 'Reise im Zeitraum. Khairi Schalabi im Gespräch mit Abier Bushnaq', *Lisan. Zeitschrift für arabische Literatur*, 2006, 17. The translation is ours.

[276] The corresponding AD date is added by the English translator. We follow his use of AH and AD for H and CE.

[277] In another passage, Shalabī realizes he is in the wrong time and tells al-Maqrīzī that he will take the direct bus to reach the correct time destination (14/22).

image for the experience of urban (post-)modernity, as the train and tramway in early Egyptian novels represented the trajectory of the self in the modern nation-state.[278]

The story is told by a first-person narrator who is a participant observer: while experiencing odd incidents, he comments about his status and what he sees. In 4.3, we shall examine some narrative strategies, such as duplicity and little distance between the narrator and implied author, as a re-elaboration of previous literary models.

The narrator's duplicity is created also by the frame narrative, since the journeys are tales within the tale. This frame is more explicit in the first part of *Riḥlāt*, in which multiple journeys take place, making the reader familiar with the literary device of time-travelling. The narrator marks clearly the beginning and the end of each journey and narrates the odd incidents causing his displacement, including running out of a café without paying the check, climbing up the steps to a pedestrian overpass, wandering in the city's alleys, walking among the crowd, or hitting his head.

These episodes are humorous for their incongruity and ability to point at the fantastic in everyday life. In addition, their effect is heightened by the overall structure and construction of the protagonist, which evoke some antecedents in the Arabic literary tradition.


## 4.2 Literary models

Time-travelling linked to social criticism and comic effects is not new in modern Egyptian literature. The most famous antecedent is *Ḥadīth ʿĪsā b. Hishām, aw Fatra min al-zaman* (1907; *A Period of Time*, 1992) by Muḥammad al-Muwayliḥī,[279] which is in turn is indebted to the pre-modern narrative genre of the *maqāma*. This section illustrates the features of *Ḥadīth* and the *maqāma*, providing a background for time-travelling, the episodic structure, and figure of the trickster in Shalabī's *Riḥlāt*.

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[278] We find the image of the crowded bus (on mini-bus) in two Egyptian novels that rely on dark humour: *al-Lajna* and *An takūnᵃ ʿAbbās al-ʿAbd*. Other means of transportation give the title to two recent Egyptian popular books: the afore-mentioned *Tāksī* and the graphic novel *Mītrū* (2008; *Metro: A Story of Cairo*, 2012).

For the train in early novels, see: Casini, Paniconi, Sorbera, *Modernità arabe*, 23.

[279] See above, 2.1.1. We have mentioned al-Muwayliḥī among the pioneers of Egyptian fiction and satirical writing.

### 4.2.1. *Ḥadīth ʿĪsā b. Hishām*

Al-Muwayliḥī published the episodes that were going to build up *Ḥadīth* as newspaper articles on *Miṣbāḥ al-Sharq* (Light of the East), the magazine he created with his father Ibrāhīm (*ca.* 1844-1906). These articles started to appear in 1898 and were collected in book form in 1907.[280]

The narrator ʿĪsā b. Hishām accompanies the Pasha (Aḥmad Bāshā al-Maniklī) along the streets of Cairo. Appointed Minister of War in 1862, the Pasha comes back to life after some decades in which relevant socio-political changes have occurred, not least the ʿUrābī revolt. Therefore, the Pasha cannot recognize the city where he used to live: his encounter with this new, yet familiar, reality triggers some comic episodes and commentaries on various aspects of society, based on a comparison of past and present.[281]

Roger Allen, who translated *Ḥadīth* into English, balances its literary and historical merits by defining it as "a bridge work between the classical narrative prose genres and the emergence of a tradition of modern Arabic fiction" and an accurate source for reconstructing the social condition of Egypt at the turn of the century.[282]

Allen examines the literary antecedents which *Ḥadīth* combines in an original way:[283]

1. the *maqāma* in its classical form and in its re-elaboration over the *nahḍa*, for instance by Nāṣīf al-Yāzijī (1800-1871), who applied the principle of imitation in his *Majmaʿ al-baḥrayn* (1856; The Meeting-point of the Two Seas), and Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq (d. 1887), who parodied the *maqāma* style in *al-Sāq ʿalā al-sāq fīmā huwa al-Fāryāq* (1855; *Leg over Leg*, 2013-2014);

2. travelogues activating social criticism through the description of a different society, such as *Takhlīṣ al-ibrīz fī talkhīṣ Bārīz* (1834; *An Imam in Paris*, 2004)

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[280] *Ḥadīth* was adopted as a school text in secondary schools in Egypt in 1927, in its fourth edition which includes *al-Riḥla al-thāniyya*, *i.e.* the episodes reporting the visit of the *Exposition Universelle* in Paris in 1900.

[281] Among these comic episodes, we can mention the following scenes: the Pasha ignores that a password is no longer needed to enter the city gates at night, beats a donkey driver and is arrested, and reclaims his family endowment.

[282] Roger Allen, *A Period of Time: A Study and Translation of Hadith 'Isa Ibn Hisham by Muhammad al-Muwaylihi* (London: Ithaca Press, 1992), xii and xiv. See also: Muḥammad al-Muwayliḥī, *What 'Īsā Ibn Hisham Told Us, or, A Period of Time*, ed. and trans. Roger Allen, vol. 1 (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

[283] Allen, *Period*, 15-31.

by al-Ṭahṭāwī (1801-1873) and *ʿAlam al-dīn* (1882; The Sign of Religion) by ʿAlī Mubārak;[284]

3. fictionalized essays by Ṣanūʿ and al-Nadīm satirizing the political institutions and social attitudes of their day;

4. sociological essays about education and progress in Egypt, reflecting the intellectual debates of that period;[285]

5. the fictional device of resurrection, as in the writings of Volney (1757-1820) and Edmond About (1828-1885).

While Allen overviews *Ḥadīth*'s intellectual references and writing models in the context of the *nahḍa*, Cooperson explores its antecedents to identify "shared themes that recur in stories about time travel and other kinds of displacement."[286] By placing *Ḥadīth* within time-travel literature, this essay provides useful insights to read *Riḥlāt*, which employs a similar narrative device almost eighty years later.[287]

Cooperson examines the following time-travel stories: *L'An 2440* (1788) by Mercier (1740-1814), one of the first novels using this device; *El Anacronópete* (1887; *The Anacropete*, 2012) by Gaspar (1842-1902);[288] *The Chronic Argonauts* (1888) by Wells (1866-1946); *Les Ruins ou Méditations sur les révolutions des empires* (1791) by Volney; *Takhlīṣ* by al-Ṭahṭāwī; *Lumen* (1865) by Flammarion (1842-1925); *A Connecticut Yankee*

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[284] The latter also includes a fictional framework, albeit tenuous. ʿAlī Mubārak is the author of *al-Khiṭaṭ al-tawfīqiyya al-jadīda*. See above, 2.3.2.2 and see below, 4.5.1.

[285] Among these essays, Allen mentions Aḥmad Fatḥī Zaghlūl's translation and introduction of *A quoi tient la supériorité des Anglo-Saxons* (1898) by Edmond Demolins and Muḥammad ʿUmar's *Ḥāḍir al-miṣriyyīn aw sirr taʾakhkhurihim* (1902). Like Ṣanūʿ, al-Muwayliḥī and his father were familiar with the ideas of the Egyptian reformists Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (1837-1897) and Muḥammad ʿAbduh (1849-1905). They frequented the same circles.

[286] Michael Cooperson, 'Safar. The Early History of Time Travel Literature: Al-Muwayliḥī's *Ḥadīth ʿĪsā b. Hishām* and Its Antecedents', in *Classical Arabic Humanities in Their Own Terms*, ed. Beatrice Gruendler and Michael Cooperson (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008), 421.

In this essay, Cooperson reviews previous studies exploring the antecedents of *Ḥadīth*: Allen, *Period*; Saadeddine Bencheneb, 'Edmond About et Al-Muwailihi', *Revue africaine*, no. 88 (1944); and Henri Pérès, 'Les origines d'un roman célèbre de la littérature arabe moderne: «Ḥadīṯ ʿĪsā ibn Hišām» de Muḥammad al-Muwailiḥī', *Bulletin d'études orientales* 10 (January 1944): 101–18.

[287] On time-travel literature in Arabic, see also: Michael Cooperson, 'Remembering the Future: Arabic Time-Travel Literature', *Edebiyat* 8, no. 2 (1998): 171–89. See also: *Der historische Roman*, 490-94. Bushnaq mentions also literary texts in which historians travel to the future.

Cooperson is also the English translator of *Riḥlāt*.

[288] Cooperson wrote the introduction to the English translation.

*in King Arthur's Court* (1889) by Twain (1835-1910); and *Jadis chez aujourd'hui* (1892) by the French illustrator Robida (1848-1926).

Before the insertion of proper time-machines in fiction by Gaspar and Wells, displacement was achieved with other strategies, such as the narrator's protracted sleep in Mercier and the spectre in Volney. *Les Ruins* was translated into Arabic as *Āthār al-umam* by Shākir Shuqayr only one year after its publication. It is likely that al-Muwayliḥī read the original French or the Arabic translation. Among the ruins of Palmyra, a pensive narrator meets a spectre, called the Genius. Prompted by the narrator's questions, the Genius expresses his meditations on history and functions as a time-machine when he leads the narrator to a congress of nations taking place in the future.

Allen notes that the opening scenes of the resurrection in *Les Ruines* and *Ḥadīth* are very similar. In addition, al-Muwayliḥī exploits the mechanism of two characters discussing different aspects of life through a process of question and answer, with a certain didactic intent and, at the same time, a satirical criticism of society.[289]

In this respect, Cooperson points at the trope of the double and the Genius as both spectre and time-machine. He argues that the Genius is disembodied and omniscient, while the Pasha is resurrected and unaware of the changes. The Pasha is not a mere expository device explaining history, but wanders with the narrator through a multifaceted social world: his misadventures are the pretext for satirizing the institutions and the population.[290] Cooperson notes that, when action in *Ḥadīth* gradually decreases, the Pasha almost becomes a voice commenting on social issues; in the second part, the displaced creature is al-ʿUmda, *i.e.* the representative of the countryside in contrast with the city.

Cooperson finds the tropes of the double and displacement in another antecedent mentioned also by Allen, *i.e.* al-Ṭahṭāwī's *Takhlīṣ*. Even though this is not an example of time-travel literature, al-Ṭahṭāwī experiences a "*décalage*, that is, a gap between where (or when) he is and where (or when) he is supposed to be."[291] He is the representative of a civilization whose glory lies in the past and a trans-historical observer of the spectacle of history embodied by modernized France. Beneath the main character is the young al-

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[289] Allen, *Period*, 29-30.
[290] Cooperson, 'Safar', 422.
[291] Ibid., 435.

Ṭahṭāwī who travelled to Paris and the experienced al-Ṭahṭāwī who wrote the travelogue.[292]

Another issue under scrutiny is the interplay between the displaced subject and history: Flammarion's *Lumen* is a dead scientist who repeatedly arrives on Earth from a distant planet and visits various periods in the past with his disembodied soul. In one of his journeys, Lumen (the spectral self outside history) sees himself as a child (his double, the non-spectral self who participates in history) and is discomforted by the wretched status of his childhood's days. Cooperson's considerations about the relation with history are valid both for *Ḥadīth* and *Riḥlāt*:

> In other words, the specter is a metaphor for that sense of history whereby one has a sense not only of the present as history but also of oneself as present *in* history. In a proper time-travel novel, one can achieve this effect simply by moving the protagonist physically to another time. The multiplication of selves, and the realizations that follow from it, can thus be achieved without the use of specters and apparitions. Certainly, being pulled out of one's native time makes one more representative of one's native time than one can ever be while one is in it.[293]

Once the conventions of time-travelling literature were established by the end of the 19th century, some authors exploited the humorous potential of this model in structure, characters, and anachronism. Cooperson exemplifies this turn with Twain's novel and *Jadis chez Aujourd'hui*, a comic sketch by Robida. The protagonist of *Jadis* transports Louis XIV and his court (the past) into the present with a time-machine. Like al-Muwayliḥī's Pasha, these rulers travel with their bodies, are a relic of their time, and explain everything in anachronistic terms, with comic effects.

The court of Versailles had already appeared in *L'An 2440* (1788), whose narrator travels to a better future society (uchronia) and visits Versaille, where he finds only ruins and an old Louis XIV (the present) denouncing the follies of his times. This text, published nineteen years before the French revolution, was considered prophetic in its representation of historical change.

To sum up, Cooperson illustrates some tropes that al-Muwayliḥī's *Ḥadīth* combines in an unanticipated way: the spectre (resurrection with body and soul), the double, ruins, temporal displacement to de-familiarize the present and show its absurdities, and one

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[292] Cooperson notes that the image of the mirror, recurrent in *nahḍa* literary texts, expresses al-Ṭahṭāwī's duplicity.

[293] Cooperson, 'Safar', 432.

historical order used as the basis for criticizing another. This allows a two-folded criticism of past and present:

> At first glance, [the Bāshā] might be read as a metaphor for the Egypt of 1898: a bumbling relic bewildered by modernity. But the story already contains many Egyptians native to 1898, including the narrator. Therefore, the Bāshā must serve another (not necessarily exclusive) purpose. One might then guess that he represents Egypt's recent and relatively glorious past and that his misadventures in the 1890's are meant as a critique of that period, not his own.
> As it happens, both readings can be sustained. Unlike any of its French predecessors, the *Ḥadīth* places the past and the present in a relationship of dialogue that valorizes neither, at least not for long.[294]

Time-travelling is a suitable device to represent historical change and the passage of the self into modernity, two central themes in the early Egyptian novel.

Shalabī's *Riḥlāt* is not the direct descendent of *Ḥadīth*, rather it incorporates multiple literary conventions, as Bushnaq notes: the picaresque story, travelogue, utopia, mirror for princes, fantasy, and science-fiction.[295] In this respect, *Ḥadīth* remarks the existence of an Arabic tradition of time-travelling literature and provides a model for our analysis.

The link between *Riḥlāt* and *Ḥadīth* is emphasized in the "Prelude" to an anthology of literary representations of Cairo in modern Egyptian fiction. The editor, Samia Mehrez, chooses *Ḥadīth*, *Riḥlāt*, and Najīb Maḥfūẓ's *Awlād ḥāratinā* (1959) to introduce the reader across the gates of Cairo. Mehrez argues that these novels fictionalize a similar relation between writers and urban space, since all narrators are rogue-like characters who introduce themselves as writers, but are not recognized as such. From their apparent marginal status, they map the city's transformations, thus becoming underground historians and geographers of Cairo.[296]

These features (mobility, representation of urban society, and rogue-like characters) can be traced back to the *maqāma*, a pre-modern prose narrative which Allen indicates as one of the antecedents of *Ḥadīth*. The next section overviews recent scholarship about this genre and its modern adaptations.

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[294] Cooperson, 'Safar', 443.

[295] Bushnaq, *Der historische Roman*, 494. On Arabic science-fiction, see: Ada Barbaro, *La fantascienza nella letteratura araba* (Roma: Carocci, 2013).

[296] Samia Mehrez, *The Literary Atlas of Cairo. One Hundred Years on the Streets of the City* (Cairo and New York: AUC Press, 2010), 13-15.

## 4.2.2 *Maqāma*

In its classical form, the *maqāma* developed between the 10th and 11th centuries.[297] Badīʿ al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī (d. 1008) wrote fifty-two *maqāmāt* with ʿĪsā b. Hishām as narrator and Abū l-Fatḥ al-Iskandarī as protagonist. His writings became popular and were imitated, among others, by al-Ḥarīrī (d. 1122). In his fifty *maqāmāt*, the narrator is al-Ḥārith b. Hammām and the protagonist is Abū Zayd al-Sarūjī. Originated in Iran and Iraq, this literary model travelled to other languages and cultures in the East (in Persian, Syriac and Hebrew) and the West (Andalusia and North Africa).[298]

The *maqāmāt* are collections of brief episodic texts, each set in a different city of the Islamic world, in which "a clever and unscrupulous protagonist, disguised differently in each episode, succeeds, through a display of eloquence, in swindling money out of the gullible narrator [or a third part], who only realizes the identity of the protagonist when it is too late."[299]

The stories usually follow this scheme, which Stewart elaborates on the basis of Kilito's and Monroe's studies:

1. The transmitter arrives in a city;
2. Formation of an assembly or gathering for learned discussion;
3. The protagonist enters the assembly;
4. The protagonist undertakes an eloquent performance;
5. Rewarding of the protagonist by the transmitter or other character;
6. The protagonist leaves assembly, which breaks up;
7. The transmitter realizes the protagonist's true identity;
8. The transmitter follows the protagonist;
9. The transmitter accosts or reproaches the protagonist;
10. Justification by the protagonist;
11. Parting of the two;

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[297] Maqāma is usually translated into English as 'assembly/session' and into French as 'séance'.
On the semantic evolution of this term, see: Charles Pellat, 'Maḳāma', *EI2*, vi, 107–15.
Abdelfattah Kilito, *Les Séances: récits et codes culturels chez Hamadhânî et Harîrî* (Paris: Sindbad, 1983); James T. Monroe, *The Art of Badīʿ az-Zamān al-Hamadhānī as Picaresque Narrative* (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1983); Jakko Hämeen-Anttila, *Maqama: A History of a Genre* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2002); Philip F. Kennedy, 'The *Maqāmāt* as a Nexus of Interests. Reflections on Abdelfattah Kilito's *Les Séances*', in *Writing and Representation in Medieval Islam: Muslim Horizons*, ed. Julia Bray (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 153–214; Maurice A. Pomerantz and Bilal W. Orfali, 'A Lost Maqāma of Badīʿ al-Zamān al-Hamaḏānī?', *Arabica* 60, no. 3–4 (January 2013): 245–71.

[298] The influence of the *maqāma* on Spanish picaresque literature is still debated.

[299] Devin Stewart, 'The Maqāma', in *Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period. The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*, ed. Roger Allen and D. S. Richards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 145.

12. Departure of the transmitter from the city (implicit).[300]

The plot can be divided into a public part (no. 1-6) and a private one (no. 8-12), after the moment of acknowledgement (no. 7). Neuwirth, who considers the *maqāma* as a pre-modern dramatic genre, labels the two parts as 'drama' and 'post-drama' respectively.[301] The centrepiece of each story is the eloquent display (no. 4), which may consist of an invective, panegyric poem, sermon, eloquent description, literary criticism, prayer, or debate.

The *maqāmāt* are written in elaborate rhymed and rhythmic prose *(sajʿ)*, embellished by rare vocabulary, neologism, and ornate rhetorical figures (metaphors, similes, hyperboles), and sound figures based on parallelism (repetition, assonance). Al-Ḥarīrī brought the level of verbal acrobatics to its maximum. Thus, this genre acquired the didactic purpose of teaching grammatical norms, rhetorical skills, obscure vocabulary, and eloquence.

Besides their didactic side, scholars identify a humorous dimension. Firstly, the structure exploits dramatic irony, since the narrator is unaware of the protagonist's tricks, while the audience is totally aware. Due to the repetitive structure of the episodes, the audience is curious to know which ruse the rogue protagonist will employ in the next episode. Secondly, there is a game between the gullible naïve narrator and the eloquent and clever, though dishonest, protagonist, who follows a materialistic and opportunist philosophy. For instance, Kennedy defines al-Hamadhānī's narrator "half dupe, half savvy".[302] Thirdly, the eloquent display activates humour because it imitates the conventions of a discourse in a parodic way. Furthermore, this eloquence does not serve

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[300] Ibid., 145. Hämeen-Anttila, *Maqama: A History*, 45, suggests another pattern for the structure: 1. *isnād*; 2. general introduction; [link]; 3. episode; 4. recognition scene *(anagnorisis)*; 5. envoi; 6. finale.

[301] Angelika Neuwirth, 'Ayyu ḥarajin ʿalā man anshaʾa mulaḥan? Al-Ḥarīrī's plea for the legitimacy of playful transgression of social norms', in *Humor in Arabic Culture*, 242.

At the same page, Neuwirth adds that: "The plot, thus, with striking regularity reiterates the model of crime and rendering account. Yet, the *maqāma* plots are hardly intended to criminalize Abū Zayd."

For the relation between *maqāma* and drama, Neuwirth refers to: Marianne Chenou, 'Dramatische Strukturen in den Maqāmen al-Hamadānīs und al-Ḥarīrīs', in *Gesellschaftlicher Umbruch und Historie im zeitgenössischen Drama der islamischen Welt*, ed. Johann Christoph Bürgel and Stephan Guth (Beirut and Stuttgard: Beiruter Texte und Studien 60, 1995), 87–100.

[302] Kennedy, 'The *Maqāmāt* as a Nexus', 160.

a laudable purpose and is sometimes presented as void or false. Some scholars examine also the *isnād* in terms of parodic imitation of the prophetic tradition.[303]

The urban setting of the *maqāma* and the trope of the journey are also relevant. These stories provide a lively portrait of urban life in the Abbasid period, as displayed in markets, mosques, and caravansaries. The city dwellers belong to various strata: merchants, scholars, but also beggars and vagrants. In each episode, the narrator and the protagonist travel to a different city, which gives the *maqāma* its title.[304] The urban reality is always changing, yet still familiar. Altogether these cities do not create a route and there is no chronological order.

In addition, slyness and gullibility are not associated with the stereotypical image of a certain people. As Kilito notes, "Abu al-Fatḥ hails from Alexandria, but who can tell us where this city is situated? Many are the towns built by Alexander the Great that now carry his name. We may as well be saying of Abu al-Fatḥ that he came from anywhere and everywhere."[305]

Neuwirth states that geographic and cultural mobility was a core attitude of pre-modern Arabic and Islamic culture. She suggests that the *maqāma* exploits the trope of mobility on many levels: geographically, the protagonists are constantly travelling, not in search of established knowledge (*riḥla fī ṭalab al-ʿilm*), rather in search of the extraordinary and the miraculous (*riḥla fī ṭalab al-istiṭrāf*); artistically, the text transcends the borders between different genres; conceptually, the anecdotes express unconventional ideas, sometimes breaking social norms, and give an innovative representation of gender relations.[306] To examine some of these transgressions, Neuwirth refers Bakhtin's carnivalesque laughter which underlies the aesthetics of the grotesque.[307]

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[303] The function of the *isnād* in pre-modern Arabic prose is presenting fiction in the garb of facts by mentioning a chain of reliable sources. Al-Hamadhānī uses the brief formula *ʿĪsā b. Hishām ḥaddathanā* (ʿĪsā b. Hishām reported to us), breaking the tradition of the long chain of transmitters. The only transmitter is narrator, witness, and protagonist. Monroe suggests that the author intended to create a counter-genre of the prophetic tradition, whereas Kennedy ('The *Maqāmāt* as a Nexus', 159) argues that this kind of *isnād* does not guarantee the authenticity of the statements, rather calls attention to the incredible fictions.

This issue, as well as the difference between *ḥaddathanā* (reported to us) and *ḥaddathanī* (reported to me) is nuanced and still debated.

[304] Most of the titles derive from names of place, even though it is uncertain whether they were later additions.

[305] Kilito, *Séances*, 20 quoted in Kennedy, 'The *Maqāmāt* as a Nexus', 157.

[306] Neuwirth, 'Ayyu', 241.

[307] Bakhtin, *Rebelais*.

Finally, Hämeen-Anttila identifies the picaresque element as the most developed motif amongst some sub-categories, partly overlapping, in al-Hamadhānī's *maqāmāt*. Hämeen-Anttila uses the term picaresque in a looser sense than the corresponding definition in European literature, "emphasizing the trickster nature of the main character (hero or antihero), in contrast to criminality (although in later maqamas we may see how the trickster sometimes becomes a rogue)."[308]

Literary critics claim the *maqāma*'s influence on modern literary genres which developed over the *nahḍa*: drama, novels, short stories, and even newspaper articles. While al-Yāzijī aimed at preserving the eloquent style in his collection *Majmaʿ al-baḥrayn*,[309] other authors developed the dramatic, humorous, and parodic features of these stories.

Al-Muwayliḥī, for instance, drew on this prestigious tradition for his modern concerns. *Ḥadīth* reproduces the following formal elements of al-Hamadhānī's *maqāmāt*: the narrator's name; the opening formula *ʿĪsā ibn Hishām ḥaddathanā* in all articles later collected in the book; rhymed prose at the beginning of each chapter; innovative and recherché vocabulary, leading to the inclusion of a glossary after the text; a participating narrator who enjoys little narrative distance from the author.

In addition, *Ḥadīth* develops the picaresque-comic dimension, especially in the Pasha's misadventures and the trope of mobility. The two protagonists, in fact, walk in various districts of Cairo and visit Alexandria, even though they do not delve in the urban underworld nor portray the lower strata.

In this respect, Ouyang notes that these characters move from one public space to another, on a journey of negotiations of power and identity in the first decades of the British occupation of Egypt: the narrator is an apparent insider, occupying a marginal position in the network of power relations; the Pasha loses his privileges and becomes an

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[308] Hämeen-Anttila, *Maqama: A History*, 55-56. He lists the following sub-categories (which he calls sub-genres): picaresque and comic; beggar; philological and aesthetic; exhortatory; panegyrical; a group of uncategorizable *maqāmāt*.

[309] Ibid., 351-57. Hämeen-Anttila rejects the idea that al-Yāzijī resurrected a forgotten genre, since copies of the manuscripts continued to circulate and *maqāmāt* were written also in the previous centuries. In the 19th century, al-Yāzijī was the most prominent author of this genre, but other authors composed *maqāmāt* in the earlier part of the century: al-Rāfiʿī, al-Barbīr, al-Tirmānīnī, and Ḥasan al-ʿAṭṭār, al-Ṭahṭāwī's mentor.

ordinary citizen; another character, the ʿUmda, seeks social recognition among the elite. Ouyang concludes that:

> *Ḥadīth ʿĪsā ibn Hishām* can thus unproblematically inherit the *Maqāmāt*'s freedom of mobility. The geographical, historical and intellectual wanderings of the narrator and protagonist are an expression of relative marginalisation not complete powerlessness. Where powerlessness is complete, freedom of mobility is lost too.[310]

Finally, *Ḥadīth* evokes the *maqāma* for its episodic structure. While this fragmentation is due mainly to *Ḥadīth*'s publication as a series of newspapers articles, Allen argues that the author did not entirely eradicate this feature from the thoroughly revised book form, in order to preserve the factual nature of his work.[311]

Al-Muwayliḥī's contribution to this genre inspired other writers in producing what critics call neo-*maqāma*: Ḥāfiẓ Ibrāhīm (1871-1932), Bayram al-Tūnisī, Najīb Ḥankash (d. 1977; *al-Maqāmāt al-ḥankashiyya*, 1964), and ʿAbbās al-Aswānī (1925-1977; *al-Maqāmāt al-aswāniyya,* 1970). Being the only recognized native novel-like genre, the *maqāma* was revived for its prestige. However, its new form – according to Jacquemond – often lost the fictional dimension to concentrate on socio-political satire.[312]

Jacquemond suggests that *Ḥadīth* already contains the ingredients for the development of both the social-realist Egyptian novel and satirical writing. The familiarity of this model with the audience is confirmed by recent bestselling books, which belong to either of the two genres. He argues that contemporary satirical literature draws from *Ḥadīth* the picaresque element and all-encompassing social criticism.[313]

For instance, al-Khamīsī's *Tāksī* evokes the *maqāma* and the satirical travelogue. Its subtitle in Egyptian Colloquial Arabic, *Ḥawādīt al-mashāwīr*, summarizes the idea of the book: a series of oral accounts collected by the first-person narrator (and novelist's *alter ego*) in his taxi rides. Jacquemond reports that al-Khamīsī had originally thought of a subtitle recalling even more directly the established models: *maqāma ḥadītha* (modern *maqāma*).[314]

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[310] Wen-chin Ouyang, *Poetics of Love in the Arabic Novel: Nation-State, Modernity and Tradition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 86-97.
The last sentence of this quotation introduces the analysis of Ḥabībī's *al-Waqāʾiʿ al-gharība*, whose protagonist is often described as a *maqāma*-like picaresque figure. Ouyang notes that he does not enjoy mobility, since he is imprisoned in his own country

[311] Allen, *Period*, 41.

[312] Jacquemond, *Conscience*, 155.

[313] Jacquemond, *'The Yacoubian Building'*.

[314] Ibid, 154.

## 4.3 Reviving humorous models

*Riḥlāt* evokes some conventions of the literary models discussed above, exploiting their comic dimension and ability to portray society. This section applies the tropes of displacement, double, picaresque story, and subversion to the analysis of three aspects of the novel.

### 4.3.1 Time-travelling

Like al-Muwayliḥī's Pasha, the protagonist and narrator of *Riḥlāt* travels of with his body and soul, hence "embodies (in the story-world, at any rate) the manners and morals of people of his time."[315] Since Ibn Shalabī partly ignores the customs of the past and applies his modern way of thinking and speaking, displacement and anachronism have a comic effect. Yet, he does not find the past society totally unfamiliar, because he travels in Cairo within a Muslim society (the journeys are usually set in the holy month of Ramaḍān), learns from his previous journeys, and carries his historical knowledge with him.

His historical knowledge turns him into an acute social observer. Both past and present are subject to criticism, but *Riḥlāt* points at continuity rather than change: the narrator provides a simplified, but never idealized, reconstruction of the past in search of the causes of contemporary social attitudes. Like Flammarion's *Lumen*, Ibn Shalabī makes multiple journeys and sees himself as present *in* history. Pulled out of his native time and surrounded by several doubles, he becomes the best representative of his own society.

Cooperson notes that travelogues originally served the purpose of reporting back from other lands, while early modern time-travel literature, including *Ḥadīth*, narrated the experience of modernity and expressed the need for social reform. In this respect, we can add that Ibn Shalabī lives in a post-modern society, where there is little room for change. Bitterly disillusioned, he says: "In short, I had assumed the role of the observer, though without seeing anything" (204/221).

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[315] Cooperson, 'Safar', 444.

Besides the protagonist, some chroniclers and contemporary intellectuals can travel. These displacements are presented as ordinary facts and people of different eras meet (if we consider the real persons these characters are based on). Chroniclers and intellectuals give Ibn Shalabī some historical explanations and directions, but they also play tricks on him. They evoke the trope of the double, which activates dramatic irony in the *maqāma* and social commentary in *Ḥadīth*, with the mechanism of question and answer between a guide and a learner.

The narrator himself may be seen as a double. He is both a naïve participant, who experiences the past with curiosity and needs explanations to understand it, and a knowledgeable observer, who compares the two eras thanks to his command of history. He is able to laugh at his double positioning: "The Son of Shalaby who had asked the question said that the Son of Shalaby who had answered it was harebrained and shortsighted. But the Son of Shalaby who was both of them – that is, me – laughed at them both." (127/140)

As has been seen above, Cooperson examines some examples of time-travel literature in which rulers are displaced. Usually moving from the past to the present, they are ridiculed for their excesses or anachronism; sometimes, they also raise a sense of melancholy for a lost past.[316] In *Riḥlāt*, the protagonist meets the rulers in their own time and observes them from his modern perspective. Using the portraits of these rulers found in official historiography, the narrator adds some ridiculous details and heightens their stereotypical traits. Turning historical figures into laughable characters plays with the conventions of historical writing and activates a shared encyclopaedic knowledge, since depicting power relations is a way of portraying society at large.

While there is little plot progression, the multiple episodes are kept together by the framework narrative. This fragmentation is probably due to Shalabī's re-elaboration of oral storytelling.[317] Thanks to the anecdotes' brevity and the mechanism of repetition/variation, this narrative structure elicits humour.

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[316] Cooperson, 'Safar', 439.
[317] Al-Muwaylīḥī published his articles at regular intervals, while *Riḥlāt* was already a complete novel, when it was published in instalments.

The Italian critic Brioschi considers the literary sketch or vignette *(bozzetto)* as the typical narrative unit in Italian humorous literature: while the short story relates the progression from an initial situation to one or more situations in an organic way, the sketch depicts the phases of a single situation, usually with an exemplary purpose and a playful morality. Brioschi finds this structure in some novels whose weak plot (a juxtaposition of narrative units) is balanced by the regularity of the character(s).[318]

If we apply this reading to *Riḥlāt*, the episodic repetitive structure challenges the conventions of the modern progressive novel, but relies on the tradition of the *maqāma* and popular storytelling, revived by Egyptian experimental novelists since the 1970s. The juxtaposition of narrative units is balanced by a recognizable character, whose clearly defined traits we shall examine in the next section.

## 4.3.2 Protagonist

The protagonist introduces himself as follows: "Ibn Shalaby, a Hanafi, an Egyptian, a seller of pickles and sweets, and a writer." (55/66) He is known with his *shuhra*, a recurrent feature in pre-modern writings. Thus, the main character travels to the past also thanks to his name.[319]

One of his main features is duplicity: he is the quintessential Egyptian on the one hand, while on the other he claims his uniqueness. The identification with ordinary Egyptians is heightened by his name, used as a synonym of *ibn al-balad* and extended to the rest of the population, collectively called *banū Shalabī* (Sons of Shalaby). The main character is a genuine *(aṣlī)* representative of the flaws and virtues of ordinary Egyptians.

He praises their generosity, common sense, and capacity to adjust to the situation. He is witty, but sometimes plays the fool or is labelled as a fool. For example, a woman in the Storehouse tells him:

> "You are *such* an Egyptian," she said, smiling. "You're a big idiot." *["Miṣrī anta ḥattā l-nukhāʿayy annaka ʿabīṭ$^{un}$ kabīr$^{un}$"]*
> "And a Son of Shalaby, too!"

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[318] Franco Brioschi, 'Letteratura umoristica e umorismo letterario', in *La mappa dell'impero* (Milano: Il Saggiatore, 2006), 115–28.
[319] Another way of linking the time-travels to the cultural heritage is measuring time according to the Hijra calendar.

"You are so stupid," she said, "that you help your enemies and treat them with respect because you consider them guests in your country. You've played host to your enemies for a long, long time, Ibn Shalaby." (89/ 99)

Furthermore, he is an opportunist who cannot enjoy the same privileges of the rulers, hence he sides with the strong against the weak. This is a lesson, more precisely "the equivalent of several degrees" (85/95) he has learnt from the school of life.

Ibn Shalabī's belonging to the urban lower-middle class is confirmed by his humble profession (a seller of pickles and sweets), which represents the opposition between sweet and sour in everyday life:

Having been a pickle-seller for a long time, I've come around to selling sweets: that is, I drank enough brine to cure myself of being a sourpuss, and now I'm a total sweetie. Rather than believe anyone or anything, I put absolute trust in reality. […] I buy it. (170/186)

However, he does not belong to the underworld, even though he is sympathetic with vagrants, petty criminals, and the urban poor. Neither does he belong to the crowd and fears its rebellion, even though he is attracted by its culture of laughter. He is a picaresque character, rather than a *ḥarfūsh* or one of the rabble.[320]

On the opposite pole, Ibn Shalabī boasts about his superiority: as a writer/journalist who is acquainted with other intellectuals and has a better understanding of power relations. His internal perspective on the intellectual community allows a certain degree of self-mockery. For instance, his Samsonite briefcase ridicules consumerism, westernization, and the stereotypical image of professionals. This briefcase loses its practical function to become a status symbol and a magical device to set out of troubles, as in the following passage:

I heaved my Samsonite briefcase into his range of vision. That briefcase, as far as I'm concerned, is worth its weight in gold. If I wave it at taxi drivers, they always stop. If I snap it open and shut, salesman and petty brokers treat me with respect. But the Persian guardsman, far from deferring to my briefcase, regarded it with contemptuous disdain. Surprised that American industry had lost its magic touch, I made a mental note to report the incident to the Arab oppositional paper so they could use it as an example of the disappointing performance of foreign imports. (42/53)

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[320] *Al-ḥarfūsh* is a vagabond, but also a ruffian or rascal. This word appeared in Mamluk chronicles to indicate the lowest strata of society, forming groups of professional beggars, entertainers, and looters in the urban centres. They belonged to a guild-like organization and allied themselves with various elements in the government. See: W.M. Brinner, 'Ḥarfūsh', *EI2*, iii, 206; and Glossary in *Riḥlāt*, 'harfush', 256.

In modern fiction, this term can combine the negative connotation with a positive one (referring to common people). See: Catherine Cobham, 'Enchanted to a Stone: Heroes and Leaders in *The Harafish* by Najīb Maḥfūẓ', *Middle Eastern Literatures* 9, no. 2 (2006): 123–35.

As the writer's *alter ego*, Ibn Shalabī meets Khayrī Shalabī's colleagues and friends. His opinion about intellectual circles are also tinged with irony. In the following passage, Ibn Shalabī talks to the historian Ibn al-Ṭuwayr, who rewards him with a job in the chancery for his eloquent display. In his speech, Ibn Shalabī expresses his non-laudable intentions to swindle gullible writers:

> "I work as an editor at a newspaper," I said. "I own a famous pickling plant and a confectionery, too. And I'm thinking of opening a broad-based literary agency."
> "What's a 'literary agency'?"
> "I'd bring in writers, editors, and artists from around the world and sponsor them to work in different countries, all in return for a hefty commission from both parties. I'd also collect essays, short stories, and investigative pieces written by people who don't like to travel. I'd sell them to more than one paper, and use the proceeds to expand the pickling plant and the confectionery. If the authors insist on being paid, I would claim that the piece never sold and give them ten pounds to keep them from bothering me. No one would ever find out because I would only sell to newspapers, magazines, and journals that aren't distributed here."
> "I don't know what you mean by 'magazines' and 'newspapers,'" he said, "but I think you're qualified to work in the chancery." (48/59)

This passage exemplifies the protagonist's picaresque nature. Like other tricksters and the protagonist of the *maqāmāt*, in each episode Ibn Shalabī presents himself in the guise of or is mistaken for somebody else.[321] To solve these misunderstandings, he reveals or is asked to reveal his true identity. Sometimes taking on a false identity serves to get out of trouble. For example, the protagonist enters the Fatimid palace without authorization during the Ayyubid pillage, yet he can move around freely claiming that he is a member of the inventory committee.

Do to the repetitive structure, the reader is curious to know which identity the protagonist will take on in the next episode and which ruse he will employ to fool his antagonists or simply to survive. According to the situation, Ibn Shalabī plays clever tricks or plays the fool, as in the following scene:

> "All you interrogators are the same," I answered "You put us in a delicate situation and then you trap us. What do you want from Ibn Shalaby?"
> "Write down exactly what you just said and hand it to me."
> "Write?" I shrieked in alarm. "You've got to be kidding. So forced confession dates back to you guys? Anyway, *I don't know how to write*." (58/69; emphasis added)

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[321] Ibn Shalabī is a slave preparing a banquet for the Caliph, an official in charge of the Storehouse window, a secret agent, a mamlūk, a court jester, the Sultan's counsellor and confident, and the viceroy's press sectary. He is mistaken for a Crusader/a Turk/a Daylami, a servant, a spirit/devil/genie, the agent of Baldwin the Frank, a sorcerer, an impostor (when the cassette recorder does not work), and a tourist.

In this passage, Ibn Shalabī, who is a journalist, pretends to be unable to write as a surviving strategy. Thus, he acts like a wise fool, a quality attributed to ordinary Egyptians and epitomized by the proverbial trickster Juḥā.[322] The protagonist revives another stock character, *i.e.* the court jester or clown *(bahlawān)*, who provides entertainment *(tasliyya, musāmara)* to the merry and jolly Sultan Aḥmad *(al-sulṭān al-mariḥ).* For the Sultan and the court, fun means laughing as well as teasing *(mudāʿaba)* the performer.

While reviving this traditional type, Ibn Shalabī exploits the popular entertainment of his time, since he performs like comedy actors and singers. His repertoire includes the imitation *(taqlīd)* of waiters serving the coffee in popular cafés,[323] funny gaits, obscene gestures, lunacy *(junūn)*,[324] and bizarre antics. He tells jokes circulating among students or crafted by professional comedians, but these jokes fall flat.[325]

In fact, the members of the court appreciate the novelty of his show, but do not get all contemporary cultural references. Yet, these references are shared by the implied reader, increasing his/her appreciation of humour.

Thanks to his role as court jester, the protagonist becomes intimate with the Sultan. When the Sultan asks him for some advice, he answers with a proverb, thus resorting to popular wisdom:

> I found myself saying to the Sultan, "Listen, chief! You want to know my advice? Two wrongs don't make a right, so kill 'em with kindness!"
> The Sultan laughed so hard he fell backward in his seat. *[fa-ḍaḥaka al-sulṭān ḥattā istalqā ʿalā qafāhu]* "You sit down with sultans and the best you can do is cite the wisdom of the rabble in the street? That's all well and good if you're hungry and weak, but you're sitting with the fat cats now!" (183/199)

The Sultan bursts laughing because Ibn Shalabī's reply is incongruous with his standing and etiquette. The formula used to describe his laughter is taken from pre-

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[322] The protagonist claims his nature of wise fool also in the novel's prologue, which echoes the premodern recherché style: "By the Pen of God's Neediest Creature / The Knowing but Unlearned / The Tutored but Unwise / Ibn Shalaby, the Hanafi and Egyptian / The Seller of Pickles and Sweets / May God Guard Us from His Ignorance, Amen!"

[323] The protagonist acknowledges the sources of his performance and the comical potential of life in popular neighbourhood: "when I served the coffee, all I had done was imitate any waiter at any street café in the Land of Egypt in my own fourteenth century ᴀʜ. What if I had imitated the waitresses at the Sheraton, the Hilton, or the Meridien?" (153/167)

[324] 157/172. Interestingly, Ibn Shalabī sings Aḥmad al-ʿAdawiyya's song *Majnūn* (153/168).

[325] He mentions the following comedians: Sulṭān al-Jazzār, Ḥussayn al-Fār, and Ḥamāda Sulṭān (179/195).

modern anecdotes and is found also in the *Nights*.[326] Thus, the humorous tradition of stock characters and the historical setting are reinforced by the insertion of classical formulas into the narrative.

Having examined the device of time-travelling and how the protagonist revives stock characters, the next section looks at the representation of urban space, keeping in mind that the urban setting and mobility are two features of the *maqāma* and *Ḥadīth*.

### 4.3.3 Space representation

Ibn Shalabī defines himself as *ḥawārjī* (147/161, pavement-pounder), a neologism coined by adding the suffix denoting a profession -*jī* to the word *ḥawārī*, occasional plural of *ḥāra* (alley). This word expresses the protagonist's love for his city and his passion for wandering in the alleys of Old Cairo. His favourite neighbourhood is *ḥayyī al-Ṣalība*, with the mansions built by the Mamluks, while his (and the implied author's) literary mentors for depicting the city are Maḥfūẓ and Yaḥyā Ḥaqqī (1905-1992).[327]

In *Riḥlāt*, time and space are constantly intertwined. While walking in the streets, Ibn Shalabī reconstructs the history of districts and monuments. The novel opens with the foundation of Cairo by the Fatimids, when planet Mars, the Conqueror *(al-qāhir)*, was rising. This astrological coincidence gave the name to the city.[328] The narrator witnesses this episode and rewrites it from his comic perspective, combining historical sources in an original way.

In addition, monuments embody Ibn Shalabī's conception of history, seen as many layers one on the top of the other. When the protagonist stands in front of a monument, before or during one of his journeys, he digs beneath its modern appearance to reveal its history under subsequent dynasties. For instance, the Storehouse of Banners partly

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[326] Kathrin Müller, *Und der Kalif lachte bis er auf den Rücken fiel: ein Beitrag zur Phraseologie und Stilkunde des klassischen Arabisch* (Munich: Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1993). The above-mentioned formula exemplifies a technique in pre-modern writing which consists in expressing emotions in a physical way.

The narrator of *Riḥlāt* often describes the characters' laughter. See, e.g, the description of Najīb Maḥfūẓ's laughter (162/177).

[327] See, e.g.: "across Ibn Tulun Street toward Duhdeyra, the place my teacher Yahya Hakki loved to describe." (144/157)

[328] Cf. *Kitāb al-ṭughrā* (2011; *The Book of the Sultan's Seal*, 2015) by Yūsuf Rakhā (b. 1976). This contemporary Egyptian novel, constructed around journeys in Cairo, also opens with the foundation of Cairo and mentions historical sources.

coincides with al-Ḥusayn Mosque; the Gates and the canals were the boundaries of the gradually expanding Cairo; the area of *Bayna al-Qaṣrayn*, where Mamluk mausoleums stand, is named after the Fatimid Eastern and Western Palaces.

Only once, Ibn Shalabī tells the full story of a monument in chronological order (chapter 19): al-Ḥākim Mosque was built by the Fatimids, damaged by an earthquake (1303), and partly restored by the Mamluks. The building was in pitiful conditions until the 1980s, when a Pakistani sect (the Bohra) volunteered to restore the mosque at their own expenses. In the fictional account, the protagonist meets the Pakistani volunteers and starts his reconstruction. Like them, Ibn Shalabī saves the mosque from the carelessness of contemporary Egyptians, bringing it back to its splendour with a feeling of nostalgia. While the protagonist is never tired of time-travelling, at the end of this journey he feels exhausted.

In the open-air museum of Old Cairo, monuments are not only the symbols of power, but also the sites of collective memory. Once again, this topic is rendered with humorous images taken from everyday life, merging the figurative level with the literal one: "Time sticks to the edges of human memory like honey, or germs, or glue, or an infection. There are times when memory cannot easily be disentangled from the stickiness, and times when it searches for the stickiness but cannot find it." (199/216)

Finally, exploring the city becomes a subject for humour when the narrator tackles tourism, a key sector in Egyptian economy. He remarks that tourists often know the history of some buildings (*khān* al-Khalīlī, *maqhā* al-Fīshāwī), while Egyptians ignore it and consider these places only as tourist sites. When Ibn Shalabī is mistaken for a tourist, he comments: "Laughing, I told him that the tourists *[al-khawāja]* knew what it was; but I, being an Egyptian, probably didn't." (190/207)

He also mocks the habit of swindling tourists, by placing modern tourism in an incongruous time. When the members of the Fatimid royal family are expelled from their palace, the protagonist compares them to a group of tourists waiting for their tour bus, introduces himself as an expert tour guide, and asks for some tips.

To sum up, Ibn Shalabī is an ordinary Egyptian, a picaresque character, a wise fool, and a court jester. In addition, he has a close relation with the city of Cairo: he loves walking in its streets (participant), reconstructs its history (observer), and reveals the homology between the urban space and its residents. We have already mentioned some

comic passages blurring the boundaries between serious/non-serious and ordinary/eccentric. The next section focuses on humour-generating techniques and the functions of comedy in the novel.

## 4.4 Humour in the urban world

Although indirectly, *Riḥlāt* revives *adab*-literature in its purpose of edifying while entertaining. Its edifying side is related to exploring Egyptian history, to find the origins of contemporary social behaviours, and wandering through the streets of Cairo, to learn the history of the city. At the same time, this novel aims at entertaining and amusing the reader.

Keeping in mind the narrative strategies discussed above (episodic structure, time-travelling, picaresque character), humour relies on the clear-cut opposition of two groups, *al-awāʾil wa-l-awākhir*, the rulers and the people. The barriers between social groups are blurred by wordplay and a mixture of high and low registers. As Mehrez notes, Shalabī employs "daring narrative strategies that draw on the oral tradition as well as popular storytelling strategies, deliberately using everyday spoken dialect and idiom as an integral part of the literary text."[329]

This section identifies some types of humour in *Riḥlāt*: verbal, situational, and social criticism mainly with a comforting function and sometimes with a subversive function. In all examples, the use of Egyptian dialect makes the puns more immediate and effective.

### 4.4.1 Verbal and situational humour

In *Riḥlāt* language is manipulated to create puns and jokes. The first type of verbal humour is the definition of the same object with two juxtaposed terms, the first taken from common use and the latter more suitable for the historical context. The comic effect is generated by the narrator correcting himself or intentionally degrading the object, as in the following examples:

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[329] Mehrez, *Literary Atlas*, 15.

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- "a personal invitation to break the Ramadan fast at his table – or his dining carpet, as the invitation put it." (1/7)

- "But there was nothing wrong with having [Saladin] wait for me in a hall, or even in a coffeehouse." (31/41)

The second type of verbal humour points at the narrator's difficulty to communicate with creatures of the past, due to cultural distance and linguistic changes. For instance, Ibn Shalabī uses highly local idioms that require an explanation, making the dialogues almost surreal:

- "Are you from Karak?" asked Qutlubugha ominously.
  "Get outta here!" I said impudently.
  "Get outta here?" he said indignantly. "What's that mean?"
  "It means 'Get lost!'"
  Green Garbanzo intervened. "It means that he reproaches you in the strongest terms for suspecting him of being from Kerak." (159/174)

- "when I put my mind to a problem […] I bust it wide open."
  "What does 'bust it wide open' mean?"
  "It means I clean its clock."
  "What does 'clean its clock' mean?"
  "It means I make it comprehensible and clear."
  "Why didn't you say so right away?"
  "The Arabic language, may God preserve and enrich it," I replied, "contains expressions of every kind and species. […]"
  "[...] If it's a matter of property, I'll put my neck on the line for it; and if it's action you need..."
  "What does 'put my neck on the line for it' mean?" he interrupted. (37-38/47-48)

Other techniques for producing verbal humour are: wordplay, hyperbole, word lists, assonance, similes (including similes with animals), metaphors, and colloquial forms of address. The latter include nicknames, proper names chosen for their literal meaning, and expressions mocking the narrator's curiosity.


Situational humour happens when Ibn Shalabī does something inappropriate for the circumstances. We have identified some recurrent topics, such as not paying the check at the café and not paying back the money to the person who lends it. Another recurrent situation is kissing the Sultan's foot in sign of deference: in the first occurrence, Ibn Shalabī does not want to conform to this obligation (72/83), while in the second occurrence, Green Garbanzo kisses by mistake the foot of a page boy between the Sultan's feet (165/170).

Another amusing episode portrays Ibn Shalabī on his mount. The protagonist, who does not know how to ride a horse, portrays himself like an expert rider and a knight. The narrator's self-portrait with epic tones and the clichés of Western films contrasts with his inability to ride, making him the object of scorn:

> The horse stumbled and Ibn Shalaby was nearly hurled to the ground. […] In any event, it was only thanks to the skill of the horse that Ibn Shalaby was spared a fall.
> Honor intact, he crossed the threshold of the storehouse. There he was welcomed by a crowd of whooping children, some of whom followed him in at a run. Led by Khazaal, a group of men, including some of the emirs appeared in the doorway, laughing, cheering, and clapping sarcastically as I rode toward them at a stately pace like a cowboy in a movie. All I needed to complete the thrilling scene was a torrential rainstorm.
> I dismounted with an athletic leap that stirred the envy of most of the onlookers. (127/140)

Situational humour may include scatology. In *Riḥlāt*, there are only few references to this unsophisticated, yet not obscene, physical humour (116/223). Finally, Ibn Shalabī enjoys confounding historical figures by mentioning modern-day phenomena such as drugs, electronics, and tourism.


## 4.4.2 Social satire

Humourists usually do not tell anything new to their audience; on the contrary, jokes are funnier when they are based on a shared cultural background. In *Riḥlāt*, the narrator's displacement allows the comparison of past and present, raising attention to the following socio-political issues in contemporary Egypt:

1. housing crisis. To solve this problem, the narrator suggests to build skyscrapers in the past. The absurdity of his idea is revealed by wordplay, in which the compound noun 'skyscraper' is split into the literal meaning of its two elements, 'scrape the sky':

   > I said, "I know some foreign firms that could take that lot and fill it with skyscrapers."
   > "We have no plans to scrape the sky," he replied scornfully. "Why should we?"
   > "You'd solve the housing crisis!"
   > "The only crisis we're facing at the moment is what to do with you." (75/85)

2. traffic and improper road maintenance: "The road was as long as eternity, and it was filled – like all Egyptian roads – with potholes, bumps, manholes, and sewers, not to mention dust, animal droppings and the like." (21/30)

3. migration: to foreign countries and distant ages (chapter 5).

Referring to a shared cultural background and familiar issues, humour has an affiliative function: it strengthens the sense of belonging to a group, opposed to the Other. *Riḥlāt* constructs a fixed image for each social group to represent the opposition between the poor and the rich, the population and the rulers. The rulers are accused of robbing the country for their own interests, causing poverty and social injustice. However, they are never safe and may be defeated by their rivals. By depicting the repetitive nature of history, humour has a comforting effect on the reader.

At the same time, group affiliation allows a certain degree of self-mockery. Ibn Shalabī makes fun of his own category by using stereotypes and commenting on the social functions of comedy. For instance, at the beginning of chapter 19, the narrator mocks the love-cum-hatred relation of ordinary Egyptians with the rulers:

> There's no doubt about it: Egyptians weep easily. When saying goodbye, especially, they'll cry a river, even when the person leaving is a debauched louse like the merry Sultan Ahmad ibn Qalawun. […] Was I really sad to see him go? Or was it the instinct for flattery, so deeply ingrained in the poor and miserable Sons of Shalaby? The fact of the matter is that we Sons of Shalaby of the Egyptian branch laugh and distract ourselves with jokes even as the boot-heels of our oppressors grind us down. Then, when the bad times are over, we weep, as if our love for good company were stronger than the need for revenge. Our servile ancestors used to say, "Put up with a bad neighbor and wait for some calamity to carry him off, or for him to leave on his own." (188/194)

In this passage, humour is described a safety-valve to endure oppression. The narrator mildly criticizes the passivity of Egyptians, as if it were an innate quality: as they accepted foreign domination in the past, today they are too preoccupied with making ends meet for making a change. However, in other passages, Ibn Shalabī admits that the circumstances make it hard to revolt. The motif of crying at the oppressor's departure is exemplified by the protagonist bidding farewell to Sultan Aḥmad, while it evokes the grieving crowds at president Nasser's funerals.

In addition, humour allows to tackle political issue avoiding the traps of censorship. The protagonist criticizes some practices limiting freedom and suppressing dissent, such as surveillance and political imprisonment. Surveillance is exemplified by the episode of the cassette recorder, which the Caliph considers as an instrument for spying. When Ibn Shalabī is imprisoned in the past, he thinks of prison in his time: "On the basis of things I had read and the testimonies of people imprisoned under Nasser, the mere sound of the word "prison" was enough to give me goose bumps." (52/63)

The same topic serves to comment ironically on the relation between power and intellectuals, since political imprisonment reinforces one's a reputation as independent thinker: "'In my time,' I told him, 'people used to brag constantly about being in prison. Anyone who came out of it was treated like a hero with medals tattooed onto his body. Go figure!' (76/86) The narrator, close to the implied author, mocks with the dynamics of intellectual circles and the conventions of Egyptian literature. Prison literature *(adab al-sujūn)*, in fact, became an established sub-genre in Egyptian fiction in the late 1960s.[330]

Finally, prison is employed as a metaphor for the whole country, whose citizens have been trapped for thousands of years.

### 4.4.3 Comic subversion

A final function of humour in *Riḥlāt* is subversion, of which some examples follow. In chapter 3, Ibn Shalabī meets Bahāʾ al-Dīn Qarāqūsh (d. 1201), viceroy of Egypt during the reign of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn. Based on this historical figure, Qarāqūsh is a stock character representing whimsical foreign rule and unfair justice. Kishtainy points at the vitality of this character in Egyptian political humour, mentions the idiom *ḥukm Qarāqūsh* (Qarāqūsh's justice), and a collection of anecdotes attributed to Ibn Mammātī (d. 1209), an Ayyubid official.[331] The negative image of Qarāqūsh in folk humour overshadowed his positive portrait available in other historical sources, such as Ibn Khallikān.[332]

In *Riḥlāt*, the protagonist belittles this awe-inspiring ruler by playing with his double nature, as historical figure and stock character. Humour is generated by the double meaning of the verb 'to see', meaning to meet someone (a real person) and to watch someone (a fictional character) represented on the stage. The wordplay is repeated all over this episode.

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[330] Elisabetta Benigni, *Il carcere come spazio letterario: ricognizioni sul genere dell'*adab al-suǧūn *nell'Egitto tra Nasser e Sadat* (Roma: Nuova Cultura, 2009).

[331] Kishtainy, *Arab Political Humour*, 54. On Ibn Mammātī, see: Ḥamza 'Abd al-Laṭīf, ed., *Fāshūsh fī ḥukm Qarāqūsh al-mansūb ilā Ibn Mammātī, wa-yalīhi al-Fāshūsh fī aḥkām wa-ḥikāyāt Qarāqūsh bi-riwāyat al-imām al-Suyūṭī* (Beirut: Manshūrāt al-Jamal, 2015); and Shawqī Ḍayf, 'Kitāb al-Fāshūsh', in *Fī l-shiʿr wa-l-fukāha fī Miṣr* (Cairo: Dār al-maʿārif, 1999), 92–99.

[332] Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-aʿyān*, ed. Iḥsān ʿAbbās (Beirut: Dār al-thaqāfa, 1968), 8 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-thaqafa, 1968-73), vol. 4, 91-92. This reference is found in Muhsin al-Musawy, 'Pre-Modern Belletristic Prose', in *Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period*, 101–33.

At the beginning, Ibn Shalabī is talking to a child of the Fatimid family who experiences Qarāqūsh's brutality:

> Gaping, I asked, "*That*'s Qaraqush?"
> "What do you mean?" asked the boy. "You've *never* **seen** him before?"
> "Just once."
> "Where?"
> "At the Rihani Theater," I said. (26/35; emphasis added)

Before meeting Qarāqūsh, the protagonist tries to gain self-confidence with some non-serious strategies. He parodies his rival's attitude, refers to mediatic and political culture, and brandishes his Samsonite briefcase:

> Marching along with a crisp regimental gait, he spotted me and assumed an expression of arrogant contempt, as if all he needed to do to crush me was to thrust out a foot. So I put on my own expression of arrogant contempt – the one I had picked up from the pictures of American politicians I saw in the papers every day. With my left hand in my pocket and my right brandishing the Samsonite briefcase, I addressed him as if he were nobody and I the celebrity. "Excuse me! Where can I find the tawashi Baha al-Din Qaraqush?"
> He stopped with a jolt. To be honest, I thought he was going to fall over. […]
> "Hi there, tawashi! How's it going? Long time **no see**! It seems like forever since I **saw** them play you at the Rihani Theater." (27/36; emphasis added)

At this point, Qarāqūsh is bewildered by Ibn Shalabī addressing him in a very informal way in Egyptian dialect. In addition, *masraḥ al-Rīḥānī* evokes the tradition of Egyptian comedy, since Najīb al-Rīḥānī was a popular comedian and playwright in the first half of the 20th century.[333] It is also a way to map the city: this theatre is located in ʿImād al-Dīn Street, once the heart of Downtown Cairo's entertainment, housing most of the vaudeville theatres and cafés where the artists met.[334]

Finally, Ibn Shalabī tells Qarāqūsh that popular humour will exaggerate his defects to dispel the population's fear of being governed by similar despotic leaders. This explanation about the mechanisms of the comic tradition frightens the owe-inspiring ruler:

> "So where is my lord from? he asked.
> "Your lord is from a time that will see you without understanding you – a time that loves to hate you and greets you in the hope of wiping you out!"
> You're speaking in riddles, you – that is, my lord," he said, catching himself.
> "In the time I come from," I told him, "people will see you as a strong man and a force for justice, even if it's a dimwitted sort of justice. But they won't remember you the way you dream of being remembered. They'll love you for the charming way you have of

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[333] Al-Rīḥānī is mentioned also in *Min al-tārīkh* (see above, 3.5.2).
[334] Ziad Fahmy, *Ordinary Egyptians: Creating the Modern Nation through Popular Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011) and Heba Helmy, 'Streets of Cairo: Emad Eddin, Once a Hub of Entertainment in Downtown', *Egypt Independent*, 21 May 2011.

crushing and smashing everything in your path, which at least kept the country quiet long enough for Saladin to liberate Jerusalem from the Crusaders, for which he honored you in his inimitable manner. **They'll make you a character in books and plays and movies just to make sure no one tries to follow your example**."

Hearing this little speech, the eunuch looked as if he were going to **faint**. (Ibid; emphasis added)

To sum up, at the beginning of the episode, the victims fear Qarāqūsh. Then popular humour is recalled and the situation, as well as historical narration, is subverted, with the leader being afraid.[335]

The second example, taken from chapter 13, challenges historical writing. Even though he is not a chronicler, Khazʿal provides a full historical portrait of Emir Qawṣūn. However, his account breaks the conventions of historiography. It starts with Khazʿal placing the events in an undefined date, while he states the exact year only a few lines later:

"In the year seven-hundred-something," said Khazaal, "Qawsun […]"
"[…] That was in 727."
"You know the date, too, Emir? You're as good as any historian!" (130/143)

Since history is told in the form of a dialogue, Khazʿal interrupts himself to make sure that his interlocutor understands:

"[...] Make sense so far?" *[Ḥilū?]*
"Yup." *[Ḥilū.]* (Ibid.)

In his turn, Ibn Shalabī interrupts him with some commentary both in MSA and ECA, mocking Khazʿal's narrative mode (as in the above-mentioned dialogue, after the date 727). Other commentaries make the content of the story, based on official sources, fall into the ordinary. For instance, the sources and Khazʿal report that Qawṣūn received a big sum of money as wedding present. Ibn Shalabī comments with an idiomatic expression: "Wow! When it rains, it pours." (130/144).

Finally, the narrator reveals that Ibn Taghrībirdī is the source of Khazʿal's account and the hypotext of the whole novel:

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[335] The victims and Ibn Shalabī's fear is conveyed by the following expressions: panic (*dhuʿr*); trembling in terror; trembling and weeping; Trying to stop my knees from knocking; Feeling only half courageous. Instead, Qarāqūsh's bewilderment and fear are rendered as follows: He stopped with a jolt. To be honest, I thought he was going to fall over; frightened; deferential tone; tremble; This remark left him speechless. Then I delivered the knockout blow.

Qarāqūsh's reputation as despotic ruler is ironically recalled by Ibn Shalabī's remark: "Marvelous," I said, "The genius of the exterminator!"

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Those words sounded familiar and I said so.
"Everyone knows the story of Qawsun," said Khazaal.
I told him that I heard the same story word for word from my friend Ibn Taghribirdi.
"What age is this Birdi from?" he asked.
"He's after your time," I replied.
"Then he got the story from us." (131/144)

In this episode, pre-modern historiographers are both admired and ridiculed, since their official task of recording events is paralleled to a collective act of narration, which weaves together stories and even rumours. After the above-mentioned dialogue, a long passage continues the story of Qawṣūn parodying the style of chronicles. It consists of many pieces of information coming from several cities, introduced by the formula *qudima alaynā khabar min*. This historical reconstruction, based on *verbatim* quotations from the source, can be seen as a parenthesis in the fictional narrative.[336] It summarizes the events and leads to the following episode.

Intertextuality focuses on historical sources, but involves also the motifs and style of other sub-genres pertaining to middle-brow fiction and popular culture. Fantasy is exemplified by the Storehouse's guardians who are tattooed cannibals. Their appearance and brutality should be terrifying, but horror is so exaggerated that it elicits mirth. They break social norms and do not follow any moral principle. To use Bakhtin's concepts, they are comic scarecrows.

Furthermore, some dramatic scenes in *Riḥlāt* evoke the tradition of improvised comic sketches *(al-faṣl al-muḍḥik)*, including beating and slapstick. These sketches stage a topsy-turvy world, in which the riffraff temporarily win and subvert power relations. For instance, this type of comedy is found in the episode of the judge (a religious and political authority) assaulted by a group of cooks who want to take revenge. Their aggression is a farce, because their only weapons are their cooking tools and shoes:

> The moment he set foot outside the door of the mosque, the kitchen help and a crowd of chef's apprentices and general riffraff, armed with forks, spoons, knives, pot lids, ladles, and tureens, not to mention the sticks and clubs, set upon him. […] they did manage to pull his turban down around his neck and set it on fire and rid up his clothing. Then they began beating him with shoes, shouting, "You're with Qawsun, you infidel, you sinner!" (162/177)

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[336] This historical reconstruction is enclosed between two sentences describing Ibn Shalabī and Khazʿal drinking arrack while receiving the reports.

To sum up, these episodes subvert power relations with popular humour and the carnivalesque culture of laughter. The fictional world stages a rebellion that is only imagined in real life. At the same time, subversion implies mixing multiple literary models and playing with their conventions. The next section focuses on *Riḥlāt*'s main intertextual reference, *i.e.* pre-modern historiography.

# 4.5 Historiography

The main themes of *Riḥlāt* are the interplay of past and present and the depiction of social relations in Cairo, seen as a microcosm of Egypt. On a thematic level, pre-modern historical sources shape the novel's setting and draw attention to certain aspects of society. On a formal level, this intertextual game blurs the boundaries of fact and fiction and creates a humorous historical novel.

The first part of this section illustrates the historical sources found in *Riḥlāt*, their focus, and genre. Since this novel is set mainly in the Mamluk period, the main references are al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Taghrībirdī, two prominent historians of that time specialized in the court chronicle and topography.

The second part looks at the fictional devices used re-elaborate historiography, in particular the construction of characters based on historians. Finally, the last part examines the effect of this interplay of documents and fiction, as well as the implied author's considerations about historical novels.

## 4.5.1 Profiles of the historians

In *Riḥlāt*, we find the following historians: Ibn Khallikān, Ibn ʿAbd al-Ẓāhir, al-Maqrīzī, Ibn Taghrībirdī, Ibn al-Ṭuwayr, al-Jabartī, and Stanley Lane-Poole. We shall now outline their profiles, starting from Mamluk historians.

Irwin suggests that historical writing flourished under the Mamluks.[337] The main trend in early Mamluk historiography in Egypt (13th-early 14th century) was the court chronicle, while Syrian scholars favoured the obituary pattern and annals.

Ibn Khallikān (d. 1282) was an early Mamluk historian who developed the obituary pattern.[338] Born in Iraq, he studied theology in Aleppo, Damascus, and Cairo, and lived during the reigns of Sultan Baybars and Qalāwūn. His *Wafayāt al-aʿyān wa-anbāʾ abnāʾ al-zamān* is an alphabetically-arranged bibliographical dictionary of famous persons whose year of death could be ascertained.

Ibn ʿAbd al-Ẓāhir (d. 1292), instead, was a court historian. He was the head of the chancery *(kātib al-sirr)* and a diplomat under Sultan Baybars and Qalāwūn.[339] Besides official documents, he compiled the histories of Baybars, Qalāwūn, and Ashraf.[340] His *Kitāb al-Rawḍa al-bahiyya al-ẓāhira fī khiṭaṭ al-muʿizziyya al-Qāhira* was a topography, used as a reference by al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Taghrībirdī, especially for the time of the Fatimids.

Irwin notes that Egyptian historians of the 14th century relied on both the annalistic tradition and court chronicles. Among them, Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406) was born in Tunis, but migrated to Egypt in 1382, where he found patronage under Sultan Barqūq. Ibn Khaldūn exerted a great influence on his Egyptian disciples for his interest in socio-economic issues and his concept of cyclical rise and fall of dynasties.[341]

One of Ibn Khaldūn's disciples was al-Maqrīzī (d. 1442).[342] Born in a scholarly family in Cairo, he started his career in the state chancery and later occupied administrative and religious posts. As Irwin remarks, he "lost court patronage and became an enemy of the regime, though inevitably a cautious one. […] By contrast, [he] had a passionate and

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[337] Robert Irwin, 'Mamluk History and Historians', in *Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period.*, 159. For Mamluk historiography, see: *Mamluk Studies Resources* (website) http://mamluk.uchicago.edu/ and *Mamluk Bibliography Online* (website) http://mamluk.lib.uchicago.edu/index.html

[338] J.W. Fück, 'Ibn Khallikān', *EI2*, iii, 832–33.

[339] J. Pedersen, 'Ibn 'Abd Al-Ẓāhir', *EI2*, iii, 679–80.

[340] Irwin, 'Mamluk History', 162-63.

[341] Anne F. Broadbridge, 'Royal Authority, Justice, and Order in Society: The Influence of Ibn Khaldūn on the Writings of al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Taghrībirdī', *Mamluk Studies Review* 7, no. 2 (2003): 231–47.

[342] F. Rosenthal, 'al-Maḳrīzī', *EI2*, vi, 193–94; Frédéric Bauden, 'al-Maqrīzī', in *Encyclopedia of the Medieval Chronicle*, ed. Graeme Dunphy and Cristian Bratu, 2 vols, 2010, 1074–76; Bruce Craig, ed., *Mamluk Studies Review* 7, no. 2 'Al-Maqrizi' (2003). On al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Taghrībirdī, see: I. Perho, 'Al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Taghrī Birdī as Historians of Contemporary Events', in *The Historiography of Islamic Egypt (c. 950- 1800)*, ed. Hugh Kennedy (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 107–20.

somewhat antiquarian interest in the Fatimids."[343] His contemporaries, including Ibn Taghrībirdī, accused him of not stating clearly his sources, if not openly of plagiarism. Modern scholarship, instead, gives al-Maqrīzī the merit of saving from oblivion some of his contemporary sources.

His history of Egypt since the Muslim conquest included three works, the latter being *al-Sulūk li-maʿrifat duwal al-mulūk* (The Path to Knowledge of Dynasties and Kings), a history of the Ayyubids and Mamluks updated until 1441.[344] Besides *al-Sulūk*, al-Maqrīzī is renowned for his topography of Cairo, *al-Mawāʿiẓ wa-l-iʿtibār fī dhikr al-khiṭaṭ wa-l-āthār* (Admonitions and Reflections on the Quarters and Monuments).[345] As Bauden explains, "[t]hough mainly dealing with architectural history, the book proves also useful for the social and urban history of the capital and the dynasties that contributed to its expansion."[346]

The *khiṭaṭ* is a genre of Islamic historiography based on spatial organization. Etymologically this word refers to 'planning, laying out', as in a map. As Cahen remarks, it originally indicated "the various quarters of the newly-founded early Islamic towns which the Arab-Islamic chiefs laid out (root *kh,ṭ,ṭ*) for the population groups which they attracted thither or for their respective leaders."[347]

This historical genre developed out of administrative concerns, *i.e.* keeping records of newly established towns of the expanding empire. Therefore, it has always been linked to the authorities. In addition, it is a topographical genre focusing on a specific place and a type of urban sociology, recording traditions, customs, and transformations.

Due to its administrative constraints and its focus on urban change, the *khiṭaṭ* needed to be rewritten with new dynasties. It developed especially in Egypt, with the works of Ibn ʿAbd al-Ẓāhir and al-Maqrīzī. The latter did not arrange the contents according to quarters, rather according to categories of buildings. Furthermore, he focused on the lost

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[343] Irwin, 'Mamluk History', 167.
[344] Al-Maqrīzī, *al-Sulūk li-maʿrifat duwal al-mulūk*, ed. M. M. Ziyāda and S. ʿA. ʿĀshūr, 12 vols. (Cairo, 1934-73).
[345] Id., *al-Mawāʿiẓ wa-l-iʿtibār fī dhikr al-khiṭaṭ wa-l-āthār*, 2 vols (Būlāq, 1853).
[346] Bauden, 'al-Maqrīzī'.
[347] Claude Cahen, 'Khiṭaṭ', *EI2*, v, 22.

palaces of the Fatimids, hence "the topographical genre [...] was inevitably a literature of nostalgia".[348]

Some centuries later, ʿAlī Mubārak used this model to map the expansion of Cairo under khedive Tawfīq (1879-1892) in his *al-Khiṭaṭ al-tawfīqiyya al-jadīda* (1888). A contemporary re-elaboration of this genre is *Khiṭaṭ al-Ghīṭānī* (1980) by al-Ghīṭānī, which blurs historical documents and fiction. Cairo remains unidentified, but is recognizable though some symbolic sites.

Almost contemporary of al-Maqrīzī was Ibn Taghrībirdī (d. 1469/70), the son of a leading Mamluk emir.[349] He succeeded al-ʿAyni (d. 1451) as court historian. Many contemporaries accused him of partiality to the Mamluks, but he criticized the dynasty's corruption and factionalism. Irwin argues that, like other historians of the 15th century, he was critical of his own time and "looked back on the early decades of the Mamluk regime through a haze of nostalgia."[350]

Despite his criticism of al-Maqrīzī, Ibn Taghrībirdī is known for two chronicles which depend on, and are a continuation of, *al-Sulūk*: *al-Nujūm al-ẓāhira fī mulūk Miṣr wa-l-Qāhirah* (The Flowing Stars, on the Kings of Egypt and Cairo)[351] and *Ḥawādith al-duhūr fī maḍa al-ayyām wa-l-shuhūr*.

If we move back in time, Shalabī's main reference for the Fatimid period is Ibn al-Ṭuwayr (d. 1220). He was a high-ranking official of the later Fatimids, who compiled *Nuzhat al-muqlatayn fī akhbār al-dawlatayn* (History of the Two Dynasties) during the reign of Salāḥ al-Dīn. As Cahen remarks, this work went lost, but "the great compilers of the Mamluk period owe [to it] the most important part of their knowledge of the history of the later Fatimids."[352]

If we move forward, Shalabī mentions al-Jabartī (d. 1825/6),[353] the most prominent historian of the Ottoman period in Egypt (1512-1811). He came from a family of *ulamāʾ* and his approach to history was largely traditional, until he was influenced by the French

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[348] Irwin, 'Mamluk History', 167.
[349] William Popper, 'Abū 'l-Maḥāsin, Ibn Taghrībirdī', *EI2*, iii, 138.
[350] Irwin, 'Mamluk History', 168.
[351] Ibn Taghrībirdī, *al-Nujūm al-ẓāhira fī mulūk Miṣr wa-l-Qāhirah*, 16 vols. (Cairo: al-Muʾassasa al-miṣriyya al-ʿāmma li-l-taʾlīf wa-l-ṭibāʿa wa-l-nashr, 1929-72).
[352] Claude Cahen, 'Ibn al-Ṭuwayr', *EI2*, iii, 960.
[353] D. Ayalon, 'al-Djabartī', *EI2*, ii, 355–57.

expedition to Egypt in 1798. He wrote a detailed description of this event and the people's reaction to the French. His masterpiece is *ʿAjāʾib al-āthār fī l-tarājim wa-l-akhbār*, a chronicle of Egypt from 1688 to 1821. Winter explains that:

> it is a combination of narrative (*akhbār*), organized by the Hijra years and obituaries (*tarājim*) of the notable persons who died during each year. […] He presents the reader with a panoramic view of Egyptian, primarily Cairene, society, economy and culture, with several important glimpses of the beduin and fellahin as well.[354]

Due to the criticism of the *wālī* of Egypt Muḥammad ʿAlī (1805-1848), this work was banned in the country until the end of the 1870s.

Al-Jabartī experienced the encounter with the West, which marked modern Egyptian history and culture. Among the historical sources, Shalabī includes the British orientalist and archaeologist Stanley Lane-Poole (1854-1931). He was the nephew of E.W. Lane (1801-1876), whose *Arabic-English Lexicon* he completed. In addition, he wrote many books about the history of Egypt and two books about Salāḥ al-Dīn.[355]

To sum up, Shalabī chooses historians who have a specific interest in Egypt and whose works are considered among the most prominent and well-known of their period. Most of them are Mamluk historians who look back at Fatimid Cairo. Their chronicles (*al-Sulūk* and *al-Nujūm*, closely linked together) provide information about the political events, while topographies *(al-khiṭaṭ)* reconstruct the urban social history.

## 4.5.2 Historians as characters

This section examines some passages in which the narrator interacts with characters based on the historians presented above. Among them, al-Jabartī and Ibn Khallikān are mentioned only once. When Ibn Shalabī is jailed in the Storehouse, he sees al-Maqrīzī behind an invisible barrier of glass. This barrier means that the historian is in the future (in relation to the time of the story), in a house that will be built near the Storehouse. When al-Maqrīzī gives the exact location, Ibn Shalabī understands that this place will become al-Jabartī's house:

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[354] Michael Winter, 'Historiography in Arabic During the Ottoman Period', in *Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period*, 178.

[355] Stanley Lane-Poole, *A History of Egypt in the Middle Ages* (London: Methuen, 1901) and Id., *The Story of Cairo* (London: J. M. Dent & co., 1906).

"The house I'm sitting now," [Maqrizi] said, "is partly in the Saqifa quarter and partly in the Banner Storehouse quarter. As you can see, it's located between Salami Street, as you leave Festival Gate Square, and the Storehouse of Banners. […]"

"You must be sitting in Jabarti's house."

"Who's that?" he asked.

"An Egyptian historian from the reign of Muhammad Ali Pasha the Albanian and his viceregal family. His house was here, in Cratemakers' Alley." (64/75)

This dialogue is the pretext to identify al-Jabartī as the main Ottoman historian. However, the focus is not on his books or style, rather on urban space: we can suppose that al-Jabartī's house is preserved as a historical landmark.

Ibn Khallikān is mentioned in the first page of the novel, in which the narrator explains that he already knows the caliph al-Muʿizz because he had travelled to North Africa with this historian. *Wafayāt*, in fact, is one of the sources about the caliph's arrival in Cairo. What is relevant in this brief passage is that Ibn Shalabī defines Ibn Khallikān as one of his masters (*ustādh lī*, 1/7).

Another source on the same topic is Lane-Poole, who is introduced right after Ibn Khallikān: "A few centuries later, I happened to be in modern Cairo – the Cairo of the French and the British – and was introduced to a man named Stanley Lane-Poole, who loved the city and had written a history of the place." (1/7) The narrator considers colonial Cairo and the foreign communities as an integral part of the capital.[356] Furthermore, he expresses his admiration for a foreign intellectual who wrote about Cairo.

The British orientalist, who speaks "in Foreignish" (*bi-l-khawājātī*, 2/7), sits in a café with Ibn Shalabī, telling him about the Shi'i movement and the Fatimid caliphate. This scene has a comic ending, since the English gentleman leaves the café without paying and disappoints Ibn Shalabī by interrupting his historical account. Lane-Poole is used as a source about the Sunni *vs* Shia political opposition also in the episode reconstructing the history of al-Ḥakīm's (191/208).

When the narrator introduces the characters based on historians for the first time, he provides their full names and a feature characterizing them. He does not provide many details about the period in which they wrote or their style. Probably this technique makes

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[356] This positive opinion and the affinity between Egyptians and foreigners living in Egypt are exemplified by the following passage: "Stanley Lane-Poole – who, by the way, belongs to the Sons of Shalaby too, but on the foreign side." (161/176)

these historians recognizable for Egyptian readers, who may have heard of them in school programs. We can compare the following presentations:

1.a) I was rescued by Ibn Abdel Zahir, the friend of an important Western historian who will be introduced to you later. (16/25)

1.b) At the same moment there emerged a laughing head, one I recognized as belonging to my friend Ibn Abdel Zahir. "Hey there, big guy!" he said. "Think you can get away from me so easily?"
"Unbelievable!" I said. "Is that really you?"
"The judge, scholar, and secretary Muhyi al-Din Abd Allah ibn Abdel Zahir Rawhi *[al-kātib]* at your service."
[…] I pulled him back a little, but then, quickly as a *ghost*, he vanished. (22/31; emphasis added)

2) In the middle of all this I saw a tall, cruel-featured man who was doing his best to pretend he hadn't seen me.
[…] I asked, "You are Murtada Abu Muhammad Abdel Salam, right?"
"Yes," he said, as coldly as before.
"Son of Muhammad, son of Abdel Salam, son of Tuwayr?"
He nodded.
"Of Cairo and Caesarea, scribe *[al-kātib]* in Egypt?"[357]
"Yes," he said, exasperated.
"Do you remember the day you got me in trouble by sending me in to see the Ornament of the Treasurers?"
He smiled. "But you handled yourself, didn't you?"
How can you show up in my day and age and walk around the streets as if you were still *alive*?"
"The same way you show up in our times," he said. (47/58-59; emphasis added)

3) We passed an old man with a long beard. He was carrying a reed pen, a calamus, an inkpot, and a sheaf of papers. […] I recognized him: it was Maqrizi, the author of the still-famous Topography. (3/9)

In these examples, historians become familiar to the reader, because they travel in time and play tricks like the protagonist. We find two established images describing time-travels: the ghost (1.b) and the living creature travelling with his body and soul (2). Their displacement generates funny effects, due to anachronism, and the question-and-answer mechanism to contrast the two societies.

The Fatimid historian Ibn al-Ṭuwayr appears in the first part of the novel, set during the Fatimid reign. Using his position as *kātib*, he plays tricks on Ibn Shalabī: he embodies a playful idea of history, since he misleads the protagonist, instead of guiding him with his knowledge. Conversely, al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Taghrībirdī are the main sources to reconstruct the events of the Mamluk era. The reader should recognize the quotations

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[357] His full name is Abū Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Salām b. al-Ḥasan […] al-Qaysarānī al-Miṣrī b. al-Ṭuwayr.

from the sources due to their refined style, but some confusion may arise between the original authors and the novel's implied author. Therefore, the narrator occasionally reveals the intertextual game, by mentioning the title of the chronicles he refers to:

> - as I had confirmed for me by Maqrizi, who had written two books on the kings of Egypt. (220/238)[358]

> - Spotting Ibn Taghribirdi among them, I joined them in the hope of witnessing 'an admonition and a lesson to the wise. (114/125)[359]

The main technique for constructing these characters is presenting them as familiar and close to the contemporary reality.[360] For this reason, they are juxtaposed to some contemporary intellectuals who can also travel through time, as in the following example:

> Meanwhile, a crowd of distinguished-looking people were pouring into the forecourt and lining up to sign what must have been the guestbook. I recognized the historian Ibn Taghribirdi, the biographer Ibn Khallikan, the chronicler Ibn Abdel Hakam, Maqrizi, the historian Abdel Rahman Zaki, the Fatimid scholar Hasan Ibrahim Hasan, the architect Hassan Fathy, the novelist Naguib Mahfouz, the critic Husayn Fawzi, the architectural historian Souad Mahir, and many other friends and acquaintances […]. (7/15)[361]

The juxtaposition of incongruous elements is exploited in one list comprising the real names of historians and invented names, based on assonance and wordplay with the *shuhra* 'Ibn…': "There I spotted all my important friends: Ibn Abdel Hakam, Ibn Abdel Barr, Ibn Abdel Zahir, Ibn Taghribirdi, Ibn Iyas, Ibn So-and-So *[Ibn al-farṭūs]*, Ibn Whoever *[Ibn al-markūb]*, and Ibn What's-His-Face *[Ibn al-maḍrūb]*" (76/86).[362]

Historians belong to the vital urban world, like ordinary Egyptians, contemporary intellectuals, and popular figures of the 1970s that Ibn Shalabī meets or evokes in his journeys, such as singers (Umm Kulthūm, Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Wahāb, Muḥammad Qandīl), journalists (Ibrāhīm Manṣūr, Muḥammad Barakāt), TV icons and religious preachers (*al-shaykh* al-Shaʿrāwī), novelists and critics (Maḥfūẓ disguised as a tomato

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[358] The original Arabic refers to both al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Taghrībirdī: "wa-kamā akkada lī ṣāḥib *al-Sulūk* al- Maqrīzī ṣāḥib *al-Nujūm* al-Athābkī".

[359] The original Arabic reads: "Raʾaytᵘ Ibn Taghrī māshiyᵃⁿ maʿahum fa-mashaytᵘ maʿahu attaʿiẓᵘ aʿtabirᵘ". As Cooperson explains, the last two words refer to the title *al-Mawāʾiẓ wa-l-iʿtibār* by al-Maqrīzī, not by Ibn Taghrībirdī (Glossary 255).

[360] Ibn Shalabī calls Ibn Taghrībirdī by the nickname (Ibn Taghrī or Ibn Birdī), gets historical information in the form of dialogues, and is invited to cooperate to the compilation of historical books.

[361] The original Arabic gives only the historians' proper names, without their favoured style (biographer, chronicles, etc), while all contemporary intellectuals bear the title *al-duktūr*. In the English translation, Cooperson chooses to specify their fields of expertise.

[362] *Ibn al-markūb* means 'you son of an old boot'; *ibn al-maḍrūb* refers to a scoundrel; *ibn al-farṭūs* is an insult deriving from the word meaning 'sow'.

vendor (47/58), al-Sharqāwī, ʿAbd al-Fattāḥ al-Bārūdī). These encounters give pre-modern chroniclers a certain vitality, while the juxtaposition of high and popular culture brings them closer to the audience.

We shall now look at the effects of this interplay between historiography and fiction, and how history is discussed in metafictional commentaries in *Riḥlāt*.

### 4.5.3 Historical novel

Historiography is employed in two ways: the sources are quoted and the chroniclers are turned into characters. Inserted in dialogues and sequences summarizing the events, the sources are taken out of their context and may be interrupted. Another novelty is attributing their narration to fictional characters, who are fallible and amusing.

The protagonist experiences history from the inside. His familiarity with the characters based on historians and his wandering around the monuments suggest the importance of rediscovering the past to understand the present. He conceives history as cumulative (the image of many layers one on the top of the other) and repetitive (especially as regards power relations). The ironical approach to historical sources makes the social commentary more effective for the reader.

In addition, the main references are the chronicle and the *khiṭaṭ*, two genres linked to administrative constraints. By manipulating these sources, the implied author defies their writing conventions of official historiography. In fact, he re-reads history focusing not only on the rulers, but also on the lower strata of society and the impact of imbalanced power relations on social habits.

The *khiṭaṭ* is re-elaborated also in *Khiṭaṭ al-Ghīṭānī*, published in the same year of *Riḥlāt*. Mehrez notes that, like in the traditional *khiṭaṭ*, the city's architecture becomes the expression of its economic, political, and social relations. Unlike its antecedents, this novel is a fictional text writing an alternative history: it focuses on the city's collapse rather than its expansion, and criticizes the oppressive alliance between the police and the media.[363] As we have illustrated in ch. 2, al-Ghīṭānī uses the past as a mirror of the present

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[363] Mehrez, *Egyptian writers*. See, in particular, ch. 3 'Re-writing the City. The Case of *Khitat al-Ghitani*', 58-77. See also: Paul Starkey, 'Egyptian History in the Modern Egyptian Novel', in *The Historiography of Islamic Egypt*, 251–62.

also in other novels, to express criticism while avoiding censorship. Furthermore, the intertextuality with historical sources is very complex and experimental.

In *Riḥlāt*, instead, the fictional topography illustrates the continuity of the past in the present, both in architecture and social behaviour. It insists on the homology between space and residents. Like *Khiṭaṭ al-Ghīṭānī*, it portrays the city's decline, but expresses also some nostalgia for a glorious past. On a formal level, the *khiṭaṭ* provides the spatial organization connecting the multiple episodes of *Riḥlāt*, which displays little temporal progression.

The implied author sees Egyptian history as a very complex subject, posing a big challenge for authors of historical novels. In a metafictional commentary, the narrator first admits this difficulty, but then mocks previous attempts in this sub-genre:

> the history of Egypt poses a real challenge to the talents of her citizens. One of those citizens, admittedly, was the artist hardly bigger than his own chisel who carved out the statue of Ramses, not to mention tens of thousands of other colossal images. But would the country ever produce a novelist whose imagination could grapple with a history that overwhelmed all powers of perspective, creativity, and organization? It's a good thing that the novelists who've already made a name for themselves have never read any Egyptian history. If they did, they would be mortified by their amateurish attempts to depict it. (56-57/68)

This passage goes back till the Pharaohs and their monuments, an established trope in Egyptian fiction. The Pyramids are the antecedents of Medieval monuments and historiography, since they immortalize the achievements of the ruling elite.

On these premises, is it possible to tackle Egyptian history in a novel? And do the readers really need a history lesson? The implied author chooses two rulers, Khazʿal and Sultan Aḥmad respectively, to express their cynical considerations about history, power, and education. In the following passages, the Pyramids are employed as symbols:

> - "We don't need a history lesson," said Khazaal. […] Once, he explained, the Egyptians had been divided into pyramid builders on the one hand and serfs on the other. To hide the light of knowledge and civilization from the serfs, the builders preserved it in a language that only they knew […] When the builders died, they were buried in magnificent tombs. For their part, the serfs were buried under monumental ignorance; and from the caverns of ignorance their children have come marching in long lines, like rats, and spread throughout the Fertile Crescent. Civilization, he went on, has vanished, along with everything else except the genius of the land itself. Given the ignorance of the serfs, the genius of the land requires that someone come and rule it. (108/119)
>
> - Do you know why I agreed to take you on a Sultan's Mamluk? In a word, so I could watch you – to see for myself that there really are people out there so backward that they

still concern themselves with philosophies and values and glorious achievements and matters of historic importance and all kinds of meaningless delusions! Look behind you at the Pyramids. They're like corpses practically screaming at you to live your life as you want to live it, and with passion. (183-84/200)

The latter passage reminds us of the total disbelief in official history expressed with sarcasm in *An takūnᵃ ʿAbbās al-ʿAbd* by al-ʿĀydī:

> 'You want us to progress??
> So burn the history books and forget your precious civilization.
> Stop trying to squeeze the juice from the past.
> Destroy your pharaonic history. […]
> We will only succeed when we turn our museums into public lavatories.'[364]

# 4.6 Conclusion

As the subtitle *Riḥla fī l-zamakān* suggests, *Riḥlāt* combines time and space to depict contemporary Egyptian society. The alleys and palaces of Old Cairo embody a collective identity, crafted by ordinary people and rulers, and appreciated also by non-Egyptians. By remaining fixed in space, the protagonist captures the 'genius of the place', suggesting that the homology between Cairo and its residents is rooted in the past.

Mobility is a central element determining the progression of the plot: every time that the protagonist stands in front of a monument, an odd incident happens and he travels to the past. Like in the *maqāma* and modern travelogues, *Riḥlāt* exploits mobility to portray various aspects of urban life, describe many social types, and generate a comic effect. Humour is found both in displacement and in the subversion of established conventions.

Displacement is caused by time-travelling, a fictional device recurrent across Western and non-Western literary traditions. Ibn Shalabī's time travels give the novel its episodic structure, which increases the perception of humour thanks to brevity and repetition. While anachronism generates comic misunderstandings, expressed by eccentric behaviours and creative wordplay, these journeys activate also the satirical criticism of society and the stereotypical attitudes attributed to Egyptians.

The protagonist embodies this duplicity, since he is a participant observer. He may be seen as a picaresque character because of his ability to access different social strata, his

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[364] Ahmed Alaidy, *Being Abbas el Abd*, trans. Humphrey Davies (Cairo and New York: AUC Press, 2009), 34.

fluid identity, and his capacity to turn the situation to his own advantage. In this attitude, he seeks identification with Egyptians, who find creative solutions in everyday life. Thanks to displacement and identification, Ibn Shalabī becomes the representative of his people and playfully discusses their flaws and virtues from a liminal perspective.

To tackle socio-political issues, he uses stereotypes and revives stock characters, in particular the wise fool and the court jester. Both characters challenge power relations and social norms with their actions and speech. Furthermore, he insists on the clear-cut opposition of rulers and population, rich and poor. The antagonists are presented as a series of doubles and criticized for their inclination to make the same mistakes. Both categories are constructed with a mixture of clichés and references to popular culture.

The interaction of these two groups across past and present allows to tackle familiar socio-political issues, such as corruption, negligence, lack of morality, migration, poverty, and inadequate education. In this sense, humour has an overall comforting effect. Subversion is found, instead, in specific episodes of rebellion and in breaking linguistic norms. *Riḥlāt* makes an extensive use of ECA in wordplay, dialogues, and narrative sequences. ECA is employed for its expressive connotations and to interrupt some passages of refined prose.

This linguistic game involves the use of historical sources, taken mainly from Mamluk historians focusing on the *khiṭaṭ* (topography) and court chronicles. Both genres are intertwined with the main themes of this novel. Quotations from the sources are often interrupted to make some commentaries with an informal register. Another strategy to take them out of their context is transforming historical figures, such as rulers and chronicles, in fictional characters. These characters have a picaresque nature, since they play tricks and crack jokes.

*Riḥlāt* blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction to suggest the possibility of writing another type of history, which speaks to the common reader. The purpose of instructing while entertaining evokes *adab*-literature, but also the didactic intent of early modern satirical prose.

The author was fascinated by Mamluk historiography and architecture, which he tried to recover in this novel thanks to urban and popular culture. One of the social phenomena which, according to this fictional reconstruction, originated at the times of the Mamluks is smoking hashish: "It's the smoke from a period of time not too far off," he said, "a

place like a little town, where the Egyptian habit of smoking different herbs and spices first began." (22/31) The next chapter looks at the interplay of drugs and humour in *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa* also by Shalabī.

# Chapter 5

# HASHISH AND FOLK HUMOUR: *ṢĀLIḤ HĒṢA* BY KHAYRĪ SHALABĪ

> There is always a huge crowd on al-Tarikh Bridge every Wednesday. Young and old men and children in rags and bare feet start to arrive in the early morning and line up on the bridge with their faces toward the port, their gazes fixed on the empty space. The tram stops at its station behind them, and no one leaves his spot until evening.
>
> A long time after this started happening, the people realized that there was an incinerator at the port where the police burned drugs they had confiscated after stopping smuggling attempts or raiding dealers' storage places. Wednesday was the day on which the burning took place, and the sea breeze blowing at the bridge always passed the incinerator and, carrying the smoke of burning hashish, brought the people on the bridge pleasure and comfort free of charge. Now many vehicles besides the tram loiter on the bridge on Wednesdays.[365]

The main character of *Riḥlāt*, Ibn Shalabī, epitomizes the flaws and virtues of Egyptians in everyday life and in their relation with the authorities. He is a wise fool because he adopts this survival strategy and combines the double perspective of the ordinary man and the wise intellectual. Temporal distance is the lens through which to look at contemporary society, revealing its shortcomings.

This chapter completes the previous analysis of humour in Shalabī's writings by looking at *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa*, a novel published almost twenty years after *Riḥlāt*. Both novels develop the stock character of the wise fool: while the protagonist of *Riḥlāt* is presented as an eccentric individual, the main character in *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa* is immersed in a community of peers, who share the same type of entertainment. Together, they witness the socio-

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[365] Ibrahim Abdel Meguid, *The House of Jasmine*, trans. Noha Radwan (Northampton, MA: Interlink Books, Kindle Edition 2012), ch. 8. Original Arabic: Ibrāhīm ʿAbd al-Majīd, *Bayt al-yāsamīn* (Alexandria: Dār wa-maṭābiʿ al-mustaqbal bi-l-Iskandariyya, 1993 [1986]), 83.

political changes of the 1960s and 1970s and try to resist their disillusionment. In *Riḥlāt* the 1970s are the present from which Ibn Shalabī travels back to the past. On the contrary, *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa* re-reads this period as a golden age through the filter of nostalgia.

At the centre of *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa* is the representation of the sub-culture of hashish smokers, which is a vital component of Cairene popular culture and a semi-legal activity in the urban underworld. The protagonist and his friends increase their entertainment by means of intoxication, be it drinking or smoking hashish. Fun reaches its peak in a status of *hēṣa*, *i.e.* rowdiness.

*Hēṣa* is the protagonist's nickname and gives the title to the book. In Egyptian Colloquial Arabic, it means noise and cheerful uproar. In the story, it acquires two meanings: at the beginning, it indicates pure fun, laughter, a status of ecstasy, and escapism; later, it hints at political chaos and disrupting the order for one's own interests.

This novel has received some critical attention not only for its political content and style,[366] but also for its characters and space representation, which reflect Shalabī's attention to liminal characters and places.

Mara Naaman examines the setting of *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa* in her study of Downtown Cairo as a contested space in a selection of contemporary Egyptian novels.[367] Naaman explores the connections between space, characters, and language: these elements concur to portray an urban underclass which negotiates "an alternative form of modernity"; furthermore, they respond to the writer's political and aesthetic project of recovering the popular cultural heritage.[368]

Similar issues are discussed by Frédéric Lagrange, who is also the French translator of the novel. In his reading, the three interconnected elements (space, characters, and

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[366] Youssef Rakha, 'End of an Era', *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 14-20 September 2000; Marcia Lynx Qualey, '"The Hashish Waiter": Freedom and Escape in the Era of Camp David', *Egypt Independent*, 28 August 2011; and Susannah Tarbush, 'Book Reviews - The Hashish Waiter by Khairy Shalaby', *Banipal* 44 (2012).

[367] Mara Naaman, *Urban Space in Contemporary Egyptian Literature. Portraits of Cairo*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, Kindle Edition 2011).

[368] Ibid., 71.

language) blur the boundaries between the traditional notions of central and marginal.[369] He focuses on the use of the vernacular and the challenges for the translator.[370]

The first part of this chapter follows Naaman's and Langrange's approach: it explores the three above-mentioned elements to understand which type of humour is performed and how it portrays a specific segment of Egyptian society. In this context, we add some considerations about the wise fool and examine some amusing episodes. After exploring the cheerful side of *hēṣa*, this chapter follows the thematic development of the novel and looks at its gradual shift to dark humour and political satire.

Finally, the analysis moves from the level of the story to the level of the discourse by looking at the metaphors of hashish and theatre as mirrors of society. Humour is the subject of the novel and at the same time is the object of metafictional considerations:[371] how is folk humour kept alive? Who creates it? What are its social functions?

## 5.1 Ṣāliḥ *Hēṣa*

### 5.1.1 Plot

The novel follows a group of young intellectuals who regularly meet at Ḥakīm's hash den. There they smoke, talk about their lives, discuss serious political and cultural issues, and laugh.

The den is located in the Maʿrūf quarter, a run-down neighbourhood in Downtown Cairo. Its relaxed atmosphere is provided by the owner Ḥakīm, the hashish waiter Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa, and the den's boys, including the not-so-young Ṣābir. The protagonist, Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa, is the symbol of this place and life on the margins. His job consists in cleaning out thousands of bowls for the bong water pipes and refilling them with tobacco molasses.

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[369] Frédéric Lagrange, 'Le marginal comme modèle national. Fumeurs de haschich et gueux sublimes dans le *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa* de Ḫayrī Šalabī', in *Étrangeté de l'autre, singularité du moi. Les figures du marginal dans les littératures*, ed. Ève Feuillebois-Pierunek and Zaïneb Ben Lagha, (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2015), 567–88.

[370] The challenges of translating Shalabī's works are discussed in two interviews Talib and Cooperson: Marcia Lynx Qualey, 'Q&A with Adam Talib, Translator of Khairy Shalaby's "The Hashish Waiter"', *Arabic Literature (in English)*, 8 July 2011; and Id., 'Q&A with Michael Cooperson, Translator of Shalaby's "Time Travels"', *Arabic Literature (in English)*, 9 July 2011.

[371] We adapt Naaman's considerations about the language as both a subject and object in the novel. See: Naaman, *Urban Space*, 88.

When he finishes this repetitive task, he mixes denatured alcohol *(al-sbirtū)* and coke, and gets drunk and rowdy. He starts talking freely and becomes almost aggressive. After sleeping soundly, he forgets everything and is as polite as usual.

The clique gradually discovers his story in a flash back. Over the British occupation, Ṣāliḥ's father was a sergeant in the Camel Corps, the division entrusted with sedating the protests and maintaining the order. He follows the orders of the government and the occupants, but cannot provide for his many children. Therefore, his wife starts to work for a layer-politician attached to the *Wafd* party, who becomes a mentor for Ṣāliḥ. During a demonstration, the boy sees his father hitting the lawyer with the whip. This shocking episode turns him into an independent young man.

After his military service, the protagonist remains in the army as a volunteer, even though he does not like strict discipline. In Sudan, he takes up boxing and meets his wife Wahība. However, their marriage is cursed: they discover that Wahība is his aunt.

Ṣāliḥ leaves the army, returns to Cairo, and joins the Police. At the Police Club he continues his boxing training, becomes a champion, and takes part in the Olympics. When the Minister of Labour he works for tries to take advantage of him, the protagonist rebels, and gets rowdy for the first time.

All the stories of the young intellectuals gravitate around this main character. They are deeply influenced by Ṣāliḥ's philosophy and way of talking. Over the 1970s, the group gradually disperses and each member takes his own path.

The group reunites at Ḥakīm's den to watch the TV live coverage of President Sadat's visit to Jerusalem. Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa is the only one who takes to the streets and speaks out what he thinks, but he is beaten by the police and made disappear. Later, his dead body is found in his shack, the place where he used to get rowdy.

His death marks the end of an era, since the government cracks down on the hash dens, while local and international politics bring about a new vision of the world. One day, the narrator believes he sees Ṣāliḥ in flesh and bones, but it is Zakī, the actor of the clique, who turns the hashish waiter into a successful comedy character.

## 5.1.2 Narrator

The story is told by an anonymous first-person narrator. He is a member of the coterie, thus a homodiegetic narrator. At the beginning, he employs the first-person plural (we) and addresses the second-person singular (you). This strategy conveys his internal perspective coinciding with that of his group; furthermore, it guides the reader into the underworld of hashish smokers, which would otherwise be inaccessible.

The narrator gradually moves to the first-person singular (I), focusing on his opinions and displacements in the city. This change is clear in chapter 14, when he goes to the den to meet Ṣāliḥ without the rest of the crew and declares his intentions: so far he has observed the group's dynamics, but has now become a participant in the experiment (96/109). Having claimed his individuality, he makes the first interesting discovery, *i.e.* that Qamar, one of his friends, imitates the hashish waiter.

In the last chapter, he is again by himself. His gaze gradually restricts his gaze from the grand historical picture, to the affairs of the former members of the group, and eventually to his own status. His nostalgia isolate him from the rest of the throng.

This narrating voice leaves the floor to a third-person narrator in the flashbacks, which reconstruct Ṣāliḥ's childhood and youth, the biography of some members of the clique, and some key episode in their relationship. This may be seen an evolution of the first-person narrator: after collecting all the information, he assigns the account to an omniscient voice. Sometimes the sources of the accounts are some secondary characters, but the third-person narrator knows more than them.

For example, Ṣāliḥ grew up with the waiter Ṣābir and was the boxing trainer of Ibrāhīm al-Qammāḥ, the shop-window designer. Therefore, these two characters know Ṣāliḥ's past. Ibrāhīm promises his friends to tell the whole story when they have clear minds:

> Ibrahim said he was sorry, but the story was longer than the Epic of Ban[u] Hilal, and maybe even more important. It needed time and clear heads, not simply because so much happens in it, but also because the person telling it has to enjoy the telling, has to be able to hear himself telling it so he can learn the things he'd failed to learn from Rowdy Salih the first time around. [...]
> If we met back up again at night, he said, we could all watch the film of Rowdy Salih together without having to worry about any bastard censors cutting even a single scene. (68/77-78)

In this passage, Ibrāhīm compares Ṣāliḥ's life to the most popular Arabic epics and to a film. These comparisons root the main character in Egyptian culture; furthermore, cinema and theatre are recurrent images all over the novel.

Ṣāliḥ's life story is narrated two chapters later (chapters 13 and 15), but it is unlikely that it is Ibrāhīm's account. In a few passages, the omniscient narrator recalls that Ṣābir witnessed some of the events and his internal perspective has a slight influence on the zero perspective.

As anticipated by Ibrāhīm's declaration of intent, quoted above, this account is linear. It includes some established motifs of Egyptian realist fiction, such as the father-and-son conflict, education to liberal values, political engagement for the nationalistic cause, and a troubled romance. In addition, it portrays the hard life of the downtrodden in the poor urban districts. Ṣāliḥ's formative period ends with his rebellion, which leads him to the hash den. At this point, the flash back ends and the first-person narrator goes back to the den's routine.

Lagrange compares these two narrative styles. He suggests that the homodiegetic narration reproduces the hallucinatory effect of hashish through loosely-tied episodes and evocative descriptions:

> Le haschich [...] suscite la progression serpentine de la narration (les associations d'idées, les digressions de contour, les vignettes pittoresque), comme il inspire les métaphores filées dans les descriptions physiques des personnages, et enfin la virtuosité de l'auteur dans le jeu des registres et variétés de la langue, celle des fumeurs venant habiter celle des intellectuels.[372]

For the same reason, Lagrange adds, the opening descriptive chapters are told in an eternal present tense, as if time was arrested. Time starts to flow when the heterodiegetic narrator relates the previous events in the flash-back.

Finally, he notes that a key element of the narrating voice is linguistic variation, mixing refined literary Arabic, the jargon of hashish smokers, a local form of vernacular, idioms, proverbs, and storytelling techniques. To this, we can add that the narrator mediates other voices through reporting techniques other than dialogue: when introducing some characters, he reproduces the way they talk. For example, free indirect speech expresses the thoughts and sayings of a street boy peddling his service to the den's clients (13-

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[372] Lagrange, 'Le marginal', 573.

14/17), whereas two reported monologues voice Ḥakīm's and Ṣāliḥ's father's attitudes (27-28/30-31 and 79/91 respectively).

### 5.1.3 Autobiographical elements

While the narrator portrays of each member of the group in full details, information about him is scarce. He works as a journalist, writes radio dramas and short stories, and is an aspiring novelist. He lives in a rented room at the Hotel Imperiale, a pension on Ramses Street. At the end of the novel, he gets married, but does not change his lifestyle: his modest apartment and economy car illustrate that he refuses consumerism.

Several autobiographical elements are found in this character, to the point that Rakha defines him "a younger version of Shalabi himself".[373] When the narrator introduces himself to a fellow-smoker, his origins coincide with those of the author: "I told him about my family in the countryside around Fouadiya and about my political, poet father, who was burdened with his many children, old age, and poor eyesight." (103/116-17). Another parallelism is that they both start their career in journalism as apprentices at *al-Jumhūriyya* newspaper. They narrator recalls his early career with irony, thanks to the temporal distance with which he looks back at his past: "In return, [Qamar] learned that I'd recently been attached to the Court of her Majesty the Press but that I hadn't been hired anywhere yet" (102/112).

The narrator's deep knowledge of Cairo's intellectual community, the media, and entertainment establishments derives from the author's own experience, as it happens in *Riḥlāt*. He often mirrors Shalabī's literary taste and his opinions on other intellectuals. For instance, Ibrāhīm Manṣūr (see above, 2.2.3) is mentioned with admiration in the novel,[374] whereas modernist writing is not appreciated, as it can be inferred from the following description: "Wala al-Din the short-story writer – a marginal member of the group, rather like his starkly emotionless modernist stories [...]" (74/85). In another passage, the narrator discusses al-Kharrāṭ's translation of *War and Peace* with a friend (102/115), reflecting Shalabī's distance from modernism.

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[373] Rakha, 'End of an Era'.

[374] In the novel, Manṣūr is one of the intellectuals arrested for their reaction to the news of President Sadat's visit to Jerusalem (221/246).

Other masters of Egyptian literature, who travelled to Europe for their studies and got married to foreign women, are recalled. This creates a parallelism with some members of the coterie: "and he found in her the foreign white woman that would make him proud when he returned to Cairo with her on his arms, like Taha Hussein, Hussein Fawzi, Yahya Haqqi, Futuh Nishati, Abd al-Qadir al Qitt, and others before him." (44/48)[375]

However, the status of students sent abroad has radically changed. Egypt sent missions of intellectuals to Europe since the times of Muḥammad ʿAlī to encourage the modernization of the educational, cultural, and technological systems. Over the first decades of the 20th century, the sons of the elites completed their education abroad. After the 1952 Revolution, the Soviet Union and Western-European countries were added to the traditional destinations. Nevertheless, the intellectuals of the clique portrayed in *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa* cannot rely on the national education system, so they travel abroad at their own expenses. Aḥmad travels to Italy and is supported by the international network of the Communist Party, whereas Muṣṭafā travels to Czechoslovakia, a socialist country where one is safe as long as he stays away from politics (170/190).

Foreign countries and bourgeois Cairene neighbourhoods, like Zamālik and Muhandisīn, are mentioned in the novel, but the action takes place at the hash den. The next section examines its literary representation.


## 5.2 Space

The narrator has a key role in guiding the reader into the setting of the novel: he is an insider and simultaneously an observer. A similar strategy is adopted in Abū Julayyil's *al-Fāʿil* to depict the underworld of construction labourers. Furthermore, both novelists have a deep knowledge of the environment they portray.

As discussed in ch. 2, Shalabī privileges marginal rural or urban spaces with a local flavour, inhabited by non-canonical characters of the lower class, such as rogues, swindlers, and vagrants. In *Riḥlāt*, he revives the heritage of Old Cairo, whereas in *Ṣāliḥ*

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[375] See another passage about this topic: "He hadn't gone to Italy just so he could come back with a white woman for a wife like all other Egyptian students who'd been sent abroad to study did and had done ever since the beginning of the modern era." (41/44)

*Hēṣa* he portrays a central but run-down quarter, with its hash dens and neighbouring coffeehouses.

Shalabī is familiar with the Cairene café culture, which plays a central role in the formation of intellectual circles, since it offers support and a space for discussion.[376] Some famous cafés (Groppi, Café Riche, and Grillon) are located in Downtown Cairo, the area renovated according to Khedive Ismāʿīl's modernizing urban project in the mid-19th century. The famous cafés of this area hosted local intellectuals, foreign residents, and tourists, especially prior to the 1952 Revolution. However, *Riḥlāt* portrays an alternative site of socialization.

Like in many contemporary Egyptian novels, the events gravitate around one single place:[377] Ḥakīm's hash den *(al-ghurza)* in the Maʿrūf quarter. To illustrate the literary representation of this neighbourhood, we follow Naaman's study.[378] The Maʿrūf quarter was initially included in the urban renovation of Downtown, but the project was not implemented there, so its villas and apartment buildings started to coexist with informal housing. After World War II, it received a wave of rural migrants mainly from Upper Egypt and Nubia, who joined their relatives and fellow-villagers. The neighbourhood was appropriated by lower-class migrants and local residents to respond to their housing needs.

While the Maʿrūf quarter is considered a traditional popular neighbourhood, it is located behind Talʿat Ḥarb Street, the core of the modernization project. Naaman argues that Shalabī's literary representation complicates the polarization between a modern and a premodern Cairo: this neighbourhood is an in-between zone, whose community seeks an alternative way of dwelling in modernity.

This appears in the first five chapters, which describe the neighbourhood and four different ways to access it. Here the Maʿrūf quarter seems an enclosed world, hidden from the view of the outsiders; nevertheless, it is accessible and interacts with its main external

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[376] Shalabī, *Uns al-ḥabāyb* (see above, 2.2.2) and Jacquemond, *Conscience*, 174-78.

[377] In her study of the representation of urban space, Mehrez identifies the alley as the main spatial metaphor in modern Egyptian fiction. The best example of this form of space representation are Maḥfūz's realist novels. Later, the urban and social changes find a literary representation in the metaphor of the apartment building. This location is exemplified also in Shalabī's *Wikālat ʿAṭiya* and Abū Julayyil's *Luṣūṣ*. See below, 6.3.2.

[378] Naaman, *Urban Space*, 73-80.

reference, the neighbouring modern space of Downtown. The two districts are compared for their commercial activities, cafés, and cultural institutions (such as the Library and the Museum of Modern Art). The little physical distance separating the two areas means a great temporal distance as far as social interactions and lifestyle are concerned. While Downtown is famous for its commercial establishments and official cultural institutions, the Maʿrūf quarter has a vital market and night life. A list of human types, wares, colours, and sounds shape a "great big carnival" or festival (*mahrajān*, 3/8), an image found also in *Riḥlāt*. In this description, the separation between human, animal, and inanimate worlds is blurred.

Each chapter illustrates a different path to reach the district, till the correct access is found. This common post-modern technique multiplies the narrative possibilities and expresses the narrator's attempts to approach his subject. At the same time, this detour allows to describe the hidden side-alleys populated by poor children, drug dealers, and local thugs. The vivid description of the location corresponds to the picturesque portrait of the residents.

In this respect, we can add that the picturesque details are combined with a mocking attitude. Irony targets the description of place and residents as authentically Egyptian,[379] as in the following passages:

> - And yet, because Egyptians are so generous – and because of that alone – everything had to be allowed to reach its destination. Cars passed through the eye of a needle [...] (2/9)

> - Another man who'd made his bed in the street, slept deeply, looking to all the world like a mummy escaped from the Egyptian Museum just a few steps away. (11/15)

As Naaman notes, this urban underworld faces poverty, overpopulation, and government negligence. The residents live in dilapidated houses and buildings at risk of collapse, which the authorities have ordered to evacuate. Therefore, the buildings and the population become invisible and their activities are semi-legal.

This foreshadows the sprout of shantytowns in the urban fringes, where new waves of migrants arrived since the 1980s. These recent urban changes are a central theme in Abū Julayyil's *Luṣūṣ* and *al-Fāʿil*. Ḥakīm, who worked as a construction labourer before buying the hash den (24/27), anticipates Abū Julayyil's characters.

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[379] Self-mockery based on stereotypes and Egyptian symbols is one of the main stylistic features of *Riḥlāt*.

Besides the run-down houses, the Maʿrūf quarter includes other places that escape the authorities' control: the hash dens. The circle of friends gathers at "Hakeem's cherished, magical, sleepless hash den." (18/21)

It is an Upper Egyptian-style country house built over the rubble of a demolished urban building. This duplicity reconciles the literary trope of the rural-urban opposition. The young intellectuals hailing from the countryside find in the den a rural community in the heart of the city, where the Upper Egyptian owner keeps alive the southern traditions by encouraging friendship and solidarity. The above-mentioned homology between space and characters applies also to the den. The life of *al-ghurzajī* Ṣāliḥ coincides with that of the den: he was born, lived, worked, and died there. Soon after his death, the police shut down several dens in the city centre.

As Naaman remarks, the den is a site of entertainment, discussion, and self-promotion. Ṣāliḥ and his friends partially isolate themselves from the surrounding urban reality, but they aspire to participate in the cultural scene and discuss socio-political issues. They represent a playful alternative to the official intellectual circles meeting in the neighbouring cafés; furthermore, they mock other symbols of modernity, like the commodification of goods and the prestige attributed to some professions.[380]

We shall now look at how space representation evolves over the novel. In the opening chapters, the den's magical and idyllic depiction conveys a feeling of nostalgia for a lost (under)world: "Wicker chairs were set up on the hill at twilight as the sky was dyed blood-red and the blushing sun began covering its face with the corners of its veil and withdrawing quietly into the chamber of the moon." (21/24)

Namaan argues that this nostalgic depiction merges with a deeply critical one, since the narrator exposes also the neighbourhood's unresolved problems.[381] To this, we can add that this critical attitude is heightened in the last three chapters, where the change in space representation corresponds to the novel's tragic denouement.

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[380] Naaman, *Urban Space*, 90-93.
[381] Ibid., 78.

Chapter 21 describes the neighbourhood from the top floor of the Hilton Hotel, where the tourists stay and the crew is invited to a wedding party. The view from above merges with the clique's view from below, as they walk to the hotel: "From their rooms on the top floors, tourists could see all the Marouf Quarter laid out like a large *wound* in the belly of the indigestion-plagued city as it constantly vomited up residents [...] We left these shacks like worms exuding from pus-filled *sores*" (212/236-37, emphasis added).

This description employs the metaphor of disease. The same passage continues with the cheerful mob becoming a suffocating throng and the original vitality turning into death: "whether in the cemeteries packed full of the living or in the streets teeming with the walking dead, that tumultuous stifling mass" (Ibid.) This imagery of death is repeated in the descriptions at the end of chapters 22 and 23:

> - Even when we left the hash den, we could only wave to each other as we parted, each of us heading down his own distant alleyway leading tot wo different paths beneath the same screeching, cloudy sky of the same city that was so crowded it was beginning to feel like a *graveyard*. (234/261, emphasis added)

> - Suddenly all the lights went out and the city was plunged into *a pitch-black darkness*. Slowly we began bumping into one another like bodies turning in a *grave* even narrower than al-Hagg Gamal Farhan's bathroom. (243/271, emphasis added)

The novel ends with the image of darkness, which covers the world that the narrative was able to illuminate: the Maʿrūf quarter is again a hidden world, in contrast to the gleaming Downtown, the protagonist dies, and Zakī's performance ends.

# 5.3 Laughing together: the social dimension of humour

After looking at the plot, narrator, and setting, this section examines the production of humour within the community of friends. The starting assumption is that joking and self-mockery reinforce the group's identity (affiliative function), while contrasting it to the external world. Laughter is induced by hashish and alcohol, which are not deemed as deviant forms of addiction isolating the coterie from the rest of the society. On the contrary, they heighten their understanding and have a relief, if not resisting function.

This section looks at the clique's shared attitudes, interests, and symbols. Then, it focuses on their leader, who exemplifies the wise fool. Finally, it examines some humorous scenes and the role of language in eliciting humour and shaping identity.

## 5.3.1 The clique

In his sociological study of hashish sub-culture in Egypt in the late 1980s, Hussein finds that this drug is usually consumed in collective sessions *(il-'a'dat)* in hash dens or private houses. These sessions are enjoyable because they are "filled with jokes and humorous conversations" and because a certain degree of egalitarianism allows to overcome differences in age, class, and religion.[382] What counts is the relaxed atmosphere, the fellow-smokers' generosity, and their experience in the consumption of hashish. These ideas are found also in Shalabī's literary representation: "in that strange, stoned world where one bong is shared between a philosopher and a man in the street, an intellectual and a thug, a ministry official and an office boy, a bey and a shoeshiner" (24/27)

The novel portrays a circle of emerging intellectuals in their late twenties who regularly meet at Ḥakīm's den. The group, with its core members and affiliates, is described as follows:

> The group [Hekeem] considered his best friends – our group – was made up of around thirty people with similar dispositions and the same taste in hash and drinks. We had a professor, writer, poet, artist, actor, journalist, antique-shop owner, composer, street magician, singer, songwriter, theatre director, manager of a firm that sold Egyptian products, accountant at the National Bank, novice lawyer, clerk in the public prosecutor's office, secretary at the government grocery co-op, and a chronic university student who was addicted to student union elections. We'd all gone to Hakeem's den solo at first, (25-26/28-29)

Within the bigger crew, there is a core group of friends *(al-shilla, al-jamāʿa)*, almost a family. They are put together by Ḥakīm's ability to turn customers into friends, as well as his Upper Egyptian capacity to create a network of support. Their conversation ranges from serious topics – such as philosophy, literary criticism, art, and politics – to pop culture, music, cinema, and football.

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[382] Nashaat Hassan Hussein, *The Sub-Culture of Hashish Users in Egypt: A Descriptive Analytic Study*, Cairo Papers in Social Science 13 (Cairo: The American University in Cairo, 1990), 35.

For a historical perspective on this phenomenon, see: Franz Rosenthal, *The herb: Hashish Versus Medieval Muslim Society* (Leiden: Brill, 1971).

They hail from low or middle-class families, mainly from the provinces. As mentioned above, they are an alternative community to urban modernity and official intellectual circles. For instance, they joined the Marxist cause at university, but are now less involved and more critical.

As regards their professions, they embody innovative intellectual and artistic trends: the narrator writes radio and TV dramas; Ṭalʿat al-Imbābī is a lecturer of history at Cairo University, interested in political and social psychology; Muṣṭafā Lamʿī is a sculptor and illustrator of children's books; al-ʿUqla is a caricaturist; Fārūq al-Jamal is a vernacular poet who gets his verse published in the magazine *Sabah al-khayr*; Ibrāhīm al-Qammāḥ is a shop-window designer; Qamar al-Maḥrūqī is a graduate of College of Applied Arts.

Qamar introduces himself as an engineer, but works in a ceramic workshop.[383] Later, he becomes a research assistant for the Egyptian Arabic-English dictionary project, conducted by the American University. As Lagrange notes, his name is a play on ʿUmar al-Fārūqī, who actually collaborated with el-Said Badawi (al-Sayyd Badawī) for the realization of *A Dictionary of Egyptian Arabic*.[384]

Among the crew's common interests is reading, writing, and cinema. Two members work in cinema: Aḥmad ʿĀṣim is a director and Zakī Ḥāmid is an aspiring actor, whose name evokes the Egyptian star Aḥmad Zakī (1949-2005).[385]

The group interacts with some characters who embody the socio-political changes of the 1970s. Qamar invites to the den three well-off friends (Mursī Khallāf, Walīd Rashīd, and Wajdī al-Wakīl), who have gained their fortune with the economic liberalization, the so-called *infitāḥ* promoted by Sadat. Another enigmatic character is Wajīh Farḥān, an aspiring poet and journalist, and a sponger. When he reappears many years later as a member of the Israeli delegation, the clique condemns him as a traitor. His story that of the Egyptian journalist Nabīh Sarḥān, who fled to Israel became an Israeli citizen in the late 1960s.[386]

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[383] Naaman argues that Qamar mocks the cult for engineers in the Nasserist era, whereas the shop window designer Ibrāhīm and the salesman Wajdī mock consumerism. See above, 5.2, note 380.

[384] Lagrange, 'Le marginal', 574. In the novel, the project's supervisor is called, with a clear homology, al-duktūr al-Nabawī Sharīf al-Nabawī.

[385] Lagrange, 'Le marginal', 575 and Naaman, *Urban Space*, 82.

[386] Hind Bashandī, 'Nabīh Sarḥān… Min «jundī miṣrī» ilā «mudhīʿ isrāʾīlī»', *al-Ghad TV*, 11 July 2016.

The members of the coterie are tied by special bonds. For instance, Aḥmad ʿĀṣim is married to the Italian leftist activist Matilde; when they divorce, she marries Aḥmad's friend Ṭalʿat, without harming their friendship. Aḥmad's sister, Maḥāsin, is married to Qamar. Ṭalʿat and Qamar are almost as doubles in their appearance, way of talking, and laughter:

> Qamar al-Mahruqi let out a throaty laugh; as did Talat al-Imbabi, with the same sounds and rhythms – they were a lot alike. Most of the time we couldn't figure out who'd influenced whom. They both had the same skinny body-type, too, although Qamar was slightly taller and slimmer. (50/54-55)

Their resemblance is reflected in the narrative structure, since they are the protagonists of two long episodes featuring Ḥayāt as the linking female character. They are similar also in their special bond with Ṣāliḥ:

> - "[Qamar] was the only one who had a special bond with Rowdy Salih that allowed him to talk to him however he pleased" (51/56)

> - "[Talat] was always the most devoted, most affected, the closest of us all to Rowdy Salih, so it never occurred to me that he could ever turn his back on Salih until…" (148/165)

Each member of the crew has a special relation with Ṣāliḥ, ranging from enthusiasm to devotion. The next section examines why they choose the hashish waiter as the leader and representative of their collective identity.

## 5.3.2 Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa, the wise fool

### 5.3.2.1 Description

Ṣāliḥ is about forty-five years old. His family has Nubian origins and comes from Upper Egypt, but he was born in the Maʿrūf quarter. Both locations are linked to Egyptian indigenousness, a traditional lifestyle, and folk culture. Furthermore, he does not have an identity card, so he does not exist for the authorities except for the diploma he got from the local Elementary School.

Despite his marginality in society, he is recognized as the leader by the counter-community of hashish smokers.[387] This status is conferred to him by the whole group, rather than by single individuals. In this sense, Ṣāliḥ is the product of a collective narrative

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[387] Chapter 8 is entitled *al-Zaʿīm.*

and becomes a cult figure, like popular heroes or film stars. They choose him they can identify with him and because he stimulates their amusement:

> But then after we'd become a friendly group who got together every night to get high, after everyone's passions, jobs, and traits mingled, our viewpoints converged, our eyes learned to communicate with mere looks, after we got to be like that, that was when Rowdy Salih really came on to the scene. It wasn't simply because we'd started fixating on him, because he'd become our amusement, our topic of conversation, the star of our jokes and stories; rather it was because – in addition to being all that – he also possessed something of each us, more than just one thing. [...] Everything he did and said made us laugh because we thought it was a slice of utter insanity *[al-junūn]*, but we soon realized that it invigorated us; it was everything we wished we could do or say. (30-31/33-34)

As it emerges in this passage, the hashish waiter is both the subject and the object of humour: his lunacy makes them laugh and, at the same time, he is the topic of their conversation, jokes, and amusing stories. Imitation anticipates a central humour-generating technique in this novel:

> We obsessively repeated the things he said no matter what they were and claimed them as treasures of a living heritage. We started citing things he'd say in conversation about every aspect of life; we even used them as authentic examples of the vernacular language to which we could apply our artistic and literary theories and we discovered a depth of eloquence and innate wisdom in them. We occasionally got the feeling that Rowdy Salih had actually studied art and literature, had, in fact, actively participated in every single movement, but that history had passed silently over his involvement just as it passes silently over so many things. (Ibid.)

Ṣāliḥ's vernacular language expresses his ancestral wisdom and coexists with the Arabic of the literati. The last sentence of this passage describes him as one of those ordinary men and legendary characters forgotten by official history, to whom the narrator and implied author want to give voice.


This presentation suggests that the protagonist is a sage in fool's clothing. This duplicity emerges from his physical description: behind his dirty clothes and *shaʿbī* appearance,[388] the group sees his dignity and noble soul. Their impression is conveyed by similes and metaphors: he is compared to a disgraced nobleman (32/35 and 34/37), a heavenly creature (31/34), a giant (32/35), and an elegant swan (Ibid.). He is nicknamed *al-gentleman* (39/42) for his aristocratic but humble attitude, and compared to Tiresias, the blind prophet of Greek mythology, for his insight (147/164). As regards his attitude, he is polite and shy (36/39), but can speak daring words and insults, especially when he

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[388] *Shaʿbī* means popular, of the streets.

is drunk. The protagonist seems illiterate, but possesses an ancestral wisdom expressed by his very local vernacular.

The duplicity is maintained until the end of the novel. At Ṣāliḥ's funeral, the neighbourhood pays tribute to his perfect balance of dignity and comedy *(al-waqār wa-l-hazl)*, two attitudes separated by a thin line:[389] "The neighbourhood was shrouded in a dignified silence; it was so dignified it seemed slightly comic, just like Rowdy Salih himself, who combined a special balance in dignity and comedy that rarely succeeded in others." (238/266)

Ṣāliḥ's double nature is highlighted by setting his personality against that of his friend Ṣābir on the one hand, and the writer Oscar Wilde on the other.

Ṣābir was born and raised in the same environment and works as a den's boy, the one who sits in front of the customers holding the bong for them and changing the bowls. Even though Ṣāliḥ and Ṣābir belong to the same underworld, the former has a certain gravity, whereas the latter epitomizes the street rascal:

> The difference between them was in the person itself. Rowdy Salih – despite his ratty clothes and generally repugnant appearance – had this inborn gravitas that compelled your respect, maybe because, to you, he was the living embodiment of the phrase, 'fallen on hard times', whereas Sabir was the consummate sarcastic smart ass always sneakily laying malicious traps to catch out any silly idiot dumb enough to fall into one. (71/81)

The parallelism with Oscar Wilde is found in the two quotations at the beginning of the novel:

> Humanity takes itself too seriously. It is the world's original sin. If the caveman had known how to laugh, History would have been different. Seriousness is the only refuge of the shallow. (Oscar Wilde)

> God made the world a rowdy place and then filled it with rowdy people. Everybody here's rowdy. They're all rowdy 'cause all they want to do is get rowdy and they either get to or they don't. and everybody here's run-down. But they're all run-down in their own way. And me, I'm the king of the run-down 'cause I'm run-down in every which way. (Rowdy Salih)

Wilde is a famous novelist, writer of comedies, dandy, and wit. The reader, who does not know Ṣāliḥ yet, is induced to compare the two maxims: refined wit and popular

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[389] In *al-Fāʿil*, there is a humorous episode in which dignity turns into comedy because of a sudden fall into the ordinary. That episode uses the same word, *al-waqār*, to explain the mechanisms of humour. See below, 6.4.2.

wisdom, a master of comedy and an unknown character. As Lagrange notes, the hashish waiter is the marginal counterpart of Oscar Wilde.[390]

Ṣāliḥ's motto, repeated three times in the book (37/40, 98/111-12, 243/271), is the starting point to examine his philosophy as a wise fool.

### 5.3.2.2 Philosophy

Besides the duplicity of his appearance, the main reason to classify Ṣāliḥ as a wise fool is the content of his utterances. These are often unintelligible and playful, yet they reveal a deep truth to a careful listener. The first part of the novel exemplifies his playful attitude, whereas the second part portrays him speaking the truth.

His philosophy is summarized by the concept of rowdiness, *i.e.* a temporary subversion of power relations. In this parallel world, the hashish waiter becomes the leader and "the king of the run-down", as he defines himself in his motto. On the contrary, respectable men are turned into the butt of his sarcasm.

Since rowdiness is caused by alcohol abuse, one might think that Ṣāliḥ speaks freely because of this drug. Still, intoxication only amplifies his philosophy based on freedom and dignity. He follows these principles over the course of his life and rebels in many occasions, including the final contrast with the police.

Besides enhancing subversion and freedom, his words contain a deep knowledge. Even though he speaks like a lunatic or a madman, the coterie acknowledges that he is more balanced than the rest of society:

> In point of fact, Rowdy Salih had a completely balanced personality: he did everything he wanted to – whether he was drunk or sober – and with absolute freedom. [...] Talat al-Imbabi, perceiving the crux of the puzzle like a scientist, went on to explain that Rowdy Salih was actually more balanced than any of us, that he was different because he didn't suffer from any of the psychological complexes the rest of us did because he always did what he wanted to do without any hesitation. He'd chosen to live this way: Rowdy Salih wasn't obliged to do anything, he wasn't coerced, he wasn't faced with exigent circumstances. (40-41/43-44)

The process of getting rowdy, described in chapter 7, combines the relief and the critical functions of humour. Ṣāliḥ is very methodical: after long hours of work, he goes

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[390] Lagrange, 'Le marginal', 577.

to his shack, made of the remains of a demolished house next to the den. He mixes half-litre of denatured alcohol with a bottle of Pepsi, drinks, and eats. In the first phase of the rowdiness, he conveys his rage into insults:

> When he erupted and began shouting insults and curses, his booming voice brought people from nearby streets, people who came to double their pleasure by watching as well as listening to an interlude of creative, clever insults, which painted a surreal portrait that won bursts of frantic laughter. The first reason they were so funny was that they could only be partially understood because of all the foreign phrases in English, Italian, Turkish, and Nubian they included, and which were shouted at the tops of his lungs, his voice adding an air of gravity and dignity. It carried the seal and sign of greatness and the rhythms of gentlemen who, when they spoke, found people listened. He had that gentlemanly ability to mock with pitch and reproach with tone so he didn't even have to use words with clear social referents to get his point across. (36/38-39)

Ṣāliḥ's speech is humorous because of the incongruity *(al-mufāraqa)* between its obscurity and its gravity, as well as its indirect, yet effective, social criticism. The neighbours enjoy this show and laugh in hushed voices for fear of upsetting him. His coarse words subvert the rules of linguistic courtesy, while his attacks subvert social hierarchies between the lower and higher strata of society. Ṣāliḥ is disrespectful, but wants to be respected by those who are considered better than him in society.

Nevertheless, getting rowdy is not totally liberating, because the protagonist is afraid of being mocked. Therefore, in the second phase, he responds in a playful tone to those who might have ridiculed him:

> We all went off to see our affairs, promising to meet up again at night when Rowdy Salih would have entered phase two of his mirthful hellfire, when all that remained was his hilarious and constant laughter of the highest degree of purity, vigor, and brilliance. [...] It was true that – just like any drunk – he liked to tell himself he wasn't drunk even when he was totally smashed, but this was the only time he liked to make it obvious that he was drunk so he could take advantage of the fact that drunks have no shame. As soon as he heard the voice of someone he'd had stored in his mind, he'd fire back a flaming, spot-on retort, and he'd be the first to bust up with a carnivalesque laugh *[ḍaḥkat mahrajān]*, filled with unbridled, gleeful, maniacal sounds, so that nobody could tell whether they were laughing at the brilliant snap or laughing at him for being so completely absorbed by his own laughter, at that horrible racket. (38/41)

This phase is more enjoyable, since humour is a form of oblique aggression. The protagonist targets consumerism and social inequality, embodied by some well-off customers. Humour serves to level off social differences and restore humanity as a common value.

Like the wise fools and court jesters, Ṣāliḥ takes advantage of his status to speak the truth with no fear of being punished, since he speaks in jest. Moreover, his carnivalesque

laughter smoothens the ridiculing effect and includes him in the collective funny game: as it happens with self-mockery, laughing together is reinforces the sense of belonging to a group.

Later in the novel, Ṣāliḥ enumerates the benefits of playing the fool: "You should know, by the way, that playing the fool *[istilwāḥ]*– no offense – is an art." (120/134) Playing the fool is a defensive strategy from evil in society: the fool gains the confidence of other people and discovers their secrets; once discovered their hidden nature, he can judge them, but not openly. 'A clever fool' (*al-lōḥ al-dhakī*, 120/135) uses this weapon to protect himself in hard times; it is effective if one decides either to rebel or be submissive as the stereotypical Egyptian.

### 5.3.3 Entertainment at the hash den

After looking the coterie and its leader, we shall now examine how they perform their collective sense of humour. The smoking sessions include many witty repartees and playful dialogues about the group's dynamics and its self-representation. These dialogues happen when a character is introduced or when Ṣāliḥ interacts with the rest of the crew. This section examines four episodes.

The first episode revolves around Aḥmad ʿĀṣim, the film director. The group knows him from before, but he is a new guest at the den. Both Ḥakīm and Ṣāliḥ have the feeling that they have seen him before, but do not know his identity. The coterie's deeper knowledge on this subject serves to play a verbal trick at Ṣāliḥ's expenses. Their wordplay about the new guest's identity confounds the waiter, who looks like a fool.

When Aḥmad is introduced, Ḥakīm thinks that he is a tour guide *(murshid siyyāḥī)*. Ṭalʿat corrects him by saying that he is a cinema guide *(murshid sīnamāʾī)*. Ṣāliḥ picks only the last part of the sentence and, ignoring the full picture, understands the word *murshid* for its literal meaning: in Downtown cinemas, it indicates the usher. The hashish waiter addresses Aḥmad as a cinema usher, while the rest of the crew enjoys the scene and bursts out laughing.

Finally, Qamar tells him the truth. He contrasts the literal and metaphorical meaning of the word *murshid*: the cinema guide is not simply the usher, but the one who releases the movie and drives the audience to the cinema. The proper word for film director,

*mukhrij*, reveals that the wordplay is based also on the assonance between the two terms. The confusion of sound and meaning justifies Ṣāliḥ's unintentional misunderstanding:

"Hey, buddy, get it through your head: Mr. Asim's a film director *[mukhrij sīnamāʾī]*. He's the one who makes the films, he doesn't show people to their seats!"
Rowdy Salih's face flushed; bronze turning to the color of a child's face when he's made a terrible mistake. He pointed toward Tala al-Imbabi and stuttered, "No offense, sir. It's just he said you were a cinema guy. *[murshid salmāʾī]*"
"I meant he guides the ideas, like an artist. *[Murshid bi-l-fikr, yaʿnī! Bi-l-fann!]* Now do you get it?" (51/56)

Muṣṭafā rephrases Qamar's words in a final remark, dispelling any possible tension. The young intellectuals do not take themselves too seriously:

"Between me and you, there isn't a big difference. The guy who makes the film is the one who puts people in the seats, not anybody else," Mustafa Lami said under his breath.
"You've got it right, Moos," said Ahmad Asim. (Ibid.)


The second episode is found in the same chapter. Ṭalʿat invites Ṣāliḥ to spend some days at his place, where he will be his guest and will not work. Before accepting, the waiter reverses the common ideas of work and laziness, since being an honoured guest would require him more efforts than doing his tough job. The humorous effect is conveyed by his convoluted arguments, focusing on three aspects (54-55/60-62):

[I] what it means to be a guest:

"No, but I'm going to be a guest. My whole job will just be to eat, drink, get high, get drunk, go to sleep, wake up, eat, drink, get high, get rowdy, go to bed. Honestly, now, what job could be harder than that? I'm not even sure I could last a whole day."
The waves of a sea of laughter swirled and eddied. [...]

[II] the practice required to play this role:

"Well, if I want to do a good job of it, I'll be exhausted. For starters, I don't even know how to act. And secondly, a role like that needs practice. Practice I should've started on thirty or forty years ago so that when I get myself into a jam like this it'll be obvious that I really am the kind of respectable guest who deserves an invitation like this." [...]

[III] the coterie misrepresenting him a respectable man:

"[...] Rowdy Salih from the hash den who's never been respectable his entire life – to people like you that is. You know respectable people."
"But we do think you're respectable [...]"

Like in the first example, there is a reference to acting. Ṣāliḥ claims his right to be himself, without being forced to play a social role. A simple request, Ṭalʿat's invitation, turns into a complex meditation about freedom and social conventions. However, his

philosophical aphorisms remain obscure to the rest of the coterie, who cannot discern if he is speaking seriously or in jest.

Finally, Qamar puts an end to the nonsensical discussion, defined as a headache and rowdiness (55/62). Ṣāliḥ adds some unintelligible words, but admits he is unable to convey his thoughts.

The third episode revolves around the relationship between Ḥakīm and his employees Ṣāliḥ and Ṣābir. They all come from Upper Egypt, but their trajectories are totally different. After migrating to Cairo, the den's owner took advantage of the urban decay and the residents' poverty to make a fortune, reinvested in his village of origins. Ṣāliḥ's and Ṣābir's families, instead, migrated to the Maʿrūf quarter, where they lived in houses on the verge of collapse. Due to their life of excesses, the two sons lost their inheritance by selling their house to Ḥakīm for little money.

In this humorous repartee, the three characters negotiate their self-representation and their opponent's image. They discuss the limits between being gullible or the victim of misfortune, being smart or a ruthless opportunist. Their mutual invectives are smoothened by their sense of humour.

The episode opens with Ḥakīm suggesting that the affection between Ṣāliḥ and Ṣābir derives from their sexual intimacy when they were young: "Lord knows what they used to do to each other when they were little. God protects and forgives!" (72/82) Ṣāliḥ replies by giving the sexual reference a metaphorical meaning. He accuses the den's owner of profiting of his young age to deprive him of his house: "I swear to God the only person who ever did anything to me was you. You're the one who took my virginity, dammit. You tricked me and then you raped me." (Ibid.)

This story confirms Ḥakīm's fame as a cunning man. The group sarcastically depicts him as a devil and he accepts this comparison with a certain degree of self-mockery. In this episode, the coterie discovers that Ḥakīm accumulated his fortune at the expenses of Ṣāliḥ and the previous landlord. When they ask him what would happen if the previous landlord claimed his own rights, they are ridiculing his ruthlessness by means of exaggeration and dark humour:

> "But how'd you know the landlord's dead? Couldn't he just turn up here some day?" asked Qamar al-Mahruqi. [...]

"[...] If he's a real man, he can climb out of his grave and come find me!"

"Surely, he can't though," said Mustafa Lami. "He's scared of you."

"Wait, you used to be young, Hakeem? You know, like, you were a baby once?" Faruq al-Gamal asked.

"Hakeem's always been a devil just like he is now," Talat al-Imbabi interjected. (73-74/84-85)

Similarly, Ṣāliḥ's image is rooted in his past: he initially portrays himself as a victim, then as an inexperienced youth who is fooled, and finally as a baby who has been rowdy since he was born. All over this long dialogue, humour is reinforced by the description of Ḥakīm's smile, which is antrophomized and compared to a prisoner who tries to escape.

The previous scene illustrates that all the members of the crew contribute to crafting jokes. This mechanism is found also in the fourth example, where the vernacular poet al-Jamāl composes a poem for Ṣāliḥ. The final version of the poem is the product of the group's collective creation (177/198-99):

| | |
|---|---|
| *Rowdy Salih went charging into history* | صالح هيصة دخل التاريخ يجري! |
| *On a horse without reins or saddle* | راكب حصان من غير لجان ولا سرج! |
| *He prods the joyful people in the castle* | بيمد إيده يزغد المبسوطين في البرج... |
| *And their cash drawers he swindles, / And their saddlebag he swindles,* | ويخطف منهم الدرج / ويخطف منهم الخرج! |
| *handing out what's in them to the disabled.* | ويوزع اللى فيه ع العرج![391] |

Al-Jamāl improvises the first three lines, then Ibrāhīm adds the fourth one. They suggest a variation for this line, but prefer the first version and add the last line.

The poem praises Ṣāliḥ for his determination at fighting injustice by comparing him to a folk hero or knight who steals from the rich and gives the poor. The legendary or historical setting serves to denounce the abuse of the contemporary ruling class. Arabic poetry has a long tradition of invective against the excesses of the rulers. This poem reminds of the epigrams for its short length, assonance, and fast rhythm.

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[391] The original Arabic is not found in the English translation. It is added here instead of the transliteration (see above, ch.3, fn. 252).

It is composed in Egyptian Colloquial Arabic: this poetic trend, revived in the late 1950s, recovered the folk heritage and expressed social criticism. The author appreciated colloquial poetry and other passages of the novel refer to it.

The first three episodes stage the group's internal dynamics through lively and humorous dialogues. The fourth example, instead, inserts a satirical poem into prose to portray the protagonist's attitude towards society. Finally, humour is found in the descriptive and biographical sequences in which the narration is more linear. This type of humour is generated by the attention to picturesque details in the realistic descriptions. The features of some characters are distorted to elicit the reader's sympathy for their poor conditions, rather than to ridicule them. Their grotesque appearance does not intend to mock their behaviour, but at most to express social criticism.

The best example in this sense is the description of Ṣāliḥ's sisters, who are as ugly as monkeys:

> Aunt Montaha was dark-skinned, you know, that dark Aswan complexion, but she had pretty features and a feminine body like that of the queens of Old Nubia, like Anas al-Wujud herself whom Uncle Abd al-Birr used to love to tell stories about. But her daughters – goodness gracious! – were the spitting image of Uncle Abd al-Birr, real apes. All they'd got from their mother was a supple softness, her slender neck, her round, proud breasts, her slim waist, and her slender hips on remarkably long, thin legs so that even the youngest one, who wasn't quite nine years old yet, looked like a camel and its teetering load when she walked down the street. (81/93)

Their physical appearance limits their marriage possibilities. Still, this serious issue is tackled with a playful tone. The narrator describes the unpleasant surprise of the young men who discover that the ladies' beautiful body is matched with an ugly monkey-esque face. Some serious considerations follow: their mother gives them a good upbringing and preserves their reputation; when the family income increases, the girls become prettier.

Other images are both picturesque and humorous. For instance, when Ṣāliḥ threatens his father, his sisters run after their mother "like frightened ducks" (90/103). The chaos disrupting the family order is rendered by an unusual accumulation of terms: "he led the whole circus *[mahrajān]* of runners, switchblades, and shouts to the Qasr al-Nil police station" (Ibid.).

The central comic image of this episode, being as ugly as monkeys, goes beyond the limits of the descriptive sequence and becomes the topic of a skirmish at the hashish den.

In the subsequent chapter, the first-person narrator describes Ḥakīm's monkey-esque mouth (107/121). Following the loose connections of idle talk, the conversation moves from ceramics, to the first man – Adam – made out of clay, to the evolutionary theory. This scientific theory is interpreted in simplistic way for the purpose of mockery:

> Out of the blue, Salih said that the scientists these days who claim that man originated as a primate were one hundred percent correct and if you wanted prof, you just had to look at Hakeem's face. Hakeem just looked at him and gave him a shit-eating wink, then he pointed backward and said, "God have mercy!" We all understood he was making a joke at the expense of Salih's fathers and sisters, who all looked like gorillas with the gift of speech. (108/121-22)

Ḥakīm's joke is extremely condensed, but the members of the clique understand it and laugh at it thanks to their shared knowledge. The reader, who has learned about Ṣāliḥ's sisters in the previous chapter, is involved in this game. In the novel, descriptions include similes and metaphors with animals, as it happened in *Riḥlāt*. These are often based on idioms and convey the narrator's attitude towards the characters in a direct or ironic way.

## 5.3.4 Language

Ṣāliḥ's personality, humour, and language are a vessel of Egyptian folk culture. In Shalabī's formative years, nationalistic policies promoted folk culture in order to claim cultural authenticity and speak to the masses. The author was probably influenced by this trend, but goes beyond it and proposes an alternative form of heritage recovery. The anti-heroic characters, marginal settings, vernacular, and storytelling techniques of his writings "serve as means of critiquing the state and reclaiming agency for the subaltern classes."[392]

This section explores how the use of language in *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa* generates a type of humour reflecting the group's identity. The interconnection of language and identity is explored through meta-linguistic considerations and mirrored in the linguistic hybridity of the narrating voice.

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[392] Naaman, *Urban Space*, 86.

## 5.3.4.1 Language and humour

As illustrated above, entertainment at the hash den relays on witty conversation, anecdotes, and jokes based on language manipulation. Ṣāliḥ often crafts new expressions that enter the vocabulary of the clique. The following passage illustrates his ability to play with words even unintentionally, for example when he is rowdy:

> If, at a moment like that, he happened to call to a friend to ask for a friendly favour, and even though he sincerely wanted to put as much good feeling into his voice as he could when calling to his buddy so-and-so, when he shouted "How's it going, Ace, *[yā fulān]*" he couldn't help but making it sound like, "Hey, fuckface! *[yā ḥayawān]*" (36/39)

In the English translation, Talib reproduces the assonance between the two vocative forms in the original Arabic. This wordplay, which is not very sophisticated, results in a mild insult.

In another case, the protagonist employs wordplay intentionally to make his message even more expressive. He recalls that his brothers were killed by cholera, whereas Ḥakīm was tougher than the disease:

> ʿ[...] They waited right up until I went to do my military service and then chol'ra wiped them all out. Well how come that son-of-a-whore chol'ra *[il-kōrīrā bint l-ʾaḥba dī]* didn't take Hakeem out? I'll tell you why: because he's just like chol'ra himself, only he's more choleric!' *[ʿashān howa nafsoh kōrīrā akrar minhā!]* (75/86)

The MSA word for this disease is *al-kūlīrā*, but Ṣāliḥ resorts to the ECA pronunciation *il-kōrīrā*. Therefore, the translator drops a vowel in the corresponding English word. Furthermore, the elative does not follow the grammar rules: it juxtaposes the noun *kōrīrā* and the supposed elative created on the same root, *akrar minha*. The wordplay results from the alliteration of the sound 'r' and the manipulation of the grammar rule.

As regards the meaning, *akrar* does not refer to the root 'k-r-r', meaning 'repetition', rather it reinforces the previous noun. In English, the wordplay is extended to the semantic level, since choleric means hot-tempered and irritable. Finally, a coarse word, feminine in Arabic and masculine in English, conveys the speaker's emotions.

The elative in the previous example may be classified as a neologism. Most of the neologisms in the novel are related to the sphere of rowdiness, which is defined as a status (*fī l-hēṣa*) or a basic action (*biyeʿmil hēṣa* = 'to do'). Ṣāliḥ crafts a new idiomatic expression to indicate the process of getting rowdy: *yelḥaʾ l-hēṣa*. The original meaning of the verb, 'to reach, to catch up with, to hurry', is modified to fit into the new context. Yet, its precise meaning remains obscure to the clique. In the following passage, the

narrator describes Qamar imitating the hashish waiter's laughter, followed by this neologism in the imperative form:

> [...] Qamar al-Mahruqi standing before me, laughing that clarion laugh almost exactly like Rowdy Salih, with its succession of interrupted *ahs* and ending with a drawn-out, blissful cry, which rested on individual letters to sound them out and give a joyful melody: *G...e...t I....n! [Il..ḥā..ā..']* Nobody actually knew what 'Get In!' meant. Rowdy Salih was the one who'd come up with it. Did it mean 'Get in on the rowdiness?' Or was it just a stand-in for 'Heads Up!'? (98-99/112)

Another neologism, *al-ṣāliḥiyya al-hēṣiyya*, describes the customers' devotion to the hashish waiter and their ability to imitate him. This abstract words are the *nisba* of the protagonist's name and nickname.

The circle of friends employs the jargon of hashish smokers. Badawi's *A Dictionary of Egyptian Arabic* includes a plate illustrating the various parts of the waterpipe (*al-narjīla* or, more common in Egypt, *al-shīsha*) and the bong *(il-gōza)* used to smoke tobacco *(al-muʿassal)* on which hashish can be added.[393] At the end of his sociological study, Hussain provides a glossary of technical terms referring to the ritual of smoking, the quality of the drug, and its effects.[394] Many of them are appear frequently in this novel: for instance, *il-mazāg* or *il-taḥshīsh* meaning 'getting high', *mazāgī* or *maṣtūl* meaning 'stoned', *il-taʿmīra* meaning 'hashish',[395] *il-nār* meaning 'coal', *il-ḥagar* meaning 'clay head, pottery bowl'.

As regards the specificity of this argot, Hussain argues that there is no "special language or dialect" used by the larger community of hashish smokers, rather "certain words, expressions and symbols which are specific to a number of users in relation to their profession, ages, status, etc."[396] Slightly modifying his argument, the jargon of hashish smokers includes some common expressions to indicate the rituals and symbols. These develop as a result of the illegality of the activity and may change over time. Smaller groups with a high level of interaction tend to craft their peculiar slang, which is almost unintelligible to the outsiders and reinforces their belonging to the group.

This slang, which reflects their view of society, may include expressions that are not strictly related to drugs, but to the group's interactions. In the novel, the clique adopts

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[393] El-Said Badawi and Martin Hinds, *A Dictionary of Egyptian Arabic*, Librairie (Beirut, 1986), 980.
[394] Hussein, *Sub-Culture*, 66-70.
[395] *A Dictionary of Egyptian Arabic* gives the following definition of this term (p. 600): "1. a fill, sufficient fuel to fill a stove or the like once. 2. sufficient tobacco or hashish for one smoke."
[396] Hussein, *Sub-Culture,* 39.

Ṣāliḥ's recurrent expressions: 'no offence' (*la-muʾākhdha* or *min ghēr muʾākhdha*); 'twenty-four carat' *(arbaʿat w-ʿashrīn qīrāṭ)*, meaning 'the best, full'; 'get out' *(inzil)*. Specific words identify the people they deal with, such as drug dealers, intellectuals or businessman who feel superior to them, and foreign hippies.

The interplay of language and humour is expressed also by the narrator's precision at describing the way people talk and laugh. In this way, laughter becomes a language of its own, sometimes more meaningful than words. Each character has his own peculiar sense of humour: for example, al-Jamal laughs "with that Alexandrian lunacy of his" (59/66); Muṣṭafā clenches his molars and, when the laughter is particularly hearty, shakes his head in the same rhythm (50/54-55); Zakī rarely smiles; Ṭalʿat is sarcastic; Ibrāhīm is witty and has a playful, sardonic spirit (62/70). In the following examples, the parallelism between the two languages is explicit:

> - "[...] ha ha ha! Get out!"
> We all shared in his raucous laughter, adding the words 'get out!' at the end, which was how he liked to cap things off; *like a full stop at the end of a sentence*. (144/161, emphasis added)

> - Quick to smile, quick to grimace, as if with those two signals alone he could join in any conversation going on around him; *he only used words* when either smile or grimace required clarification. (50/54, emphasis added)

As Lagrange notes, the narrator's meta-linguistic considerations capture the rich linguistic landscape of the hash den.[397] Ṣāliḥ has a good command of English, because he received his education during the British mandate. However, he does not reveal his ability to the new generation of students, less fluent in English, or to the pseudo-intellectual who consider him illiterate (119/134). The Italian Matilde is fluent in English, French, and Russian, and translates from these languages; whereas, her Egyptian friend Ḥayāt translates essays and plays from English. The foreigners living in Cairo, like Matilde, speak Egyptian Arabic "with an attractive accent" (43/46) and resort to English when they cannot find the exact word.

Lagrange illustrates another interesting case, that of the shop window designer Ibrāhīm. He cannot read and write, but adopts the language of fellow-intellectual only in its spoken version, mixing Egyptian Arabic and eloquence. He is praised for "his

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[397] Lagrange, 'Le marginal', 578 and 582-83.

eloquence, his carefully worded, brilliant diction, his grace, his intense economy with all but the most necessary words: there was no small talk, no solecisms, no pretension, no hyperbole." (58/65). Ibrāhīm's eloquence is reflected in his good taste, his love for poetry and cinema, as well as his creativity in his job.

### 5.3.4.2 Language and identity

The attention to linguistic diversity suggests the centrality of the language in defining the identity of a subject or a group. The coterie, their foreign friends, the fellow-intellectuals, and the residents of the poor neighbourhood are identified by the way they speak. In particular, Ṣāliḥ is considered the living repository of Egyptian diction and wisdom. By preserving the linguistic heritage of the Egyptian streets, he is the genuine representative of his people *(al-maṣrī al-aṣlī)*.

The interplay of language and identity in the novel can be examined at two levels: on the thematic level, Qamar takes part in the dictionary project; on the stylistic level, the linguistic choices reinforce the clique's identity, while involving the reader. On this aspect, we shall follow Lagrange's essay.

Qamar al-Maḥrūqī works as an assistant researcher for the dictionary project at the American University: he collects and explains old expressions still in circulation in the popular neighbourhoods, markets, coffeehouses, and hash dens (39/42 and 187/209). Ṣāliḥ is one of his sources, informally at the hash den and formally in his office. One day, the hashish waiter cannot enter the AUC building, because he does not have an identity card. His juridical status makes him invisible in the eyes of the authorities and, in this case, the cultural institutions. A fight follows and Qamar leaves the project.

When Qamar is first introduced, the narrator blames this project for foregrounding American neo-colonialism in Egypt. Later in the novel, in the episode of the fight, Qamar expresses the same accusation:

> This whole dictionary's a conspiracy! The rowdy Americans are the ones behind all this rowdiness 'cause they're planning to invade and occupy Egypt! They want to know the meaning of every single word Egyptians say on the streets so they can know how to control us! I refuse to continue helping you all with this crime! I'd rather [do] with ten pounds from an honest job than all your rowdiness! (188/210)

This story is based on a real project undertaken in the 1970s, which resulted in the publication of Badawi's dictionary. In those years, the influence of English in Egypt

became more visible due to mass communication and international relations. This episode reflects Shalabī's concerns about language. As Lagrange notes, he praised the vernacular as a rich language for everyday use and literary expression, able to convey the ordinary people's needs and cultural indigenousness. However, linguistic policies and literary conventions silence it, as it happens to Ṣāliḥ. In his novel, an external linguistic project is blamed as a form of appropriation and social control.

Lagrange sees two contradictions: firstly, the narrator's and Qamar's claim to preserve the language of the street contrasts with exposing this language in the novel's linguistic amalgam; secondly, Shalabī sought recognition in translation, while translation is facilitated by the above-mentioned dictionary. Lagrange remarks that *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa* does not have a xenophobic attitude. As far as we can understand, the hostility towards the United States is partially derived from the author's ideological background, but serves for broader criticism. It criticizes all forms of control and appropriation brought about by post-revolutionary cultural policies in Egypt.

On the stylistic level, the complex linguistic texture identifies the coterie as an enclosed group in constant dialogue with the larger Egyptian society. In order to reconstruct the language and humour of this sub-culture, *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa* recreates orality with a clear awareness of the linguistic registers.

Lagrange notes that the dialogues are in ECA, whereas the narrative parts in MSA accommodate lexical, idiomatic, stylistic, and less frequently syntactic elements of a very local vernacular.[398] He explains the formal mechanisms which produce this code-switching or hybridization in the literary language according to Somekh's theory.

Then, he examines the reasons for this hybridization. Firstly, the narrator integrates the vernacular to cover some gaps in the standard language or for its richer connotations. ECA carries an extra-semantic meaning which expresses the [implied] author's intentions or the narrator's attitude towards a character/event. On a larger level, the hybridity of multiple registers and the appreciation for the language of the margins is a linguistic transgression which parallels the semi-legal transgression of hashish smoking. Both activities attain to the sphere of playfulness and humour.

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[398] Lagrange, 'Le marginal', 583-85.

The coterie laughs at the jokes thanks to a shared language and encyclopaedic knowledge. The dialogues and narrative sequences make this jargon accessible to the readers, increasing their empathy with the circle of friends. Lagrange argues that: "le narrateur concoctant son savant dosage de lexique du kif, de prise à partie dialectalisante du lecteur-type installant confiance et connivance, et de vocabulaire précieux don't le voisinage avec le haschich provoque le sourire".[399] In other words, the readers smile in recognition and complicity, since they appreciate unusual images, code language, and the juxtaposition of high and low registers.

# 5.4 Political satire

In *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa*, the den is a vital element of Egyptian society, since it hosts humour-fertile social gatherings. These interactions are depicted with nostalgia, because they are affected by the socio-political changes in the Sadat era.

This evolution corresponds to the narrative development. The playful episodes, what could be defined pure fun or *hēṣa*, are concentrated in the first part. The characters are still young and try to find their place in society. In the second part of the novel, on the contrary, they experience increasing social constraints and political disillusionment. Their collective humour becomes dark comedy and farcical imitation. Their disillusionment is expressed by political satire, revolving around the second meaning of the word *hēṣa*, *i.e.* political chaos and disrupting the order for one's own interests.

This section examines three main targets of political satire: Egyptian politics after President Nasser, international politics, and the Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement, which leads to the novel's denouement.

*Egyptian national politics*

The aspiring intellectuals, grown up under the ideologies of Marxism and Arab socialism, witness the first effects of Sadat's policies. Ṣāliḥ compares the two post-revolutionary presidents: he jokes about Nasser, whereas he is sarcastic about Sadat.

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[399] Ibid., 572.

Nasser is remembered for the Egyptians' great affection toward him. This affection was expressed, for instance, in the massive participation to his funerals. To explain this iconic moment, Ṣāliḥ resorts, half-seriously and half-ironically, to the stereotype of Egyptian grandeur and devotion to the leaders:

> Salih smiled: "This last friend of ours, here, asked me, 'Why were Egyptians so sad when Nasser died?'" [...]
> Salih laughed. "I told him that Egyptians are a great people. 'Great at what?' he says to me. So I tell him, 'At everything.' Great in age, great in rank, in intellect, understanding. 'What does that have to do with being sad about Nasser's death?' he asked. So I said to him, 'Think about it, Whitey! If we're great at everything, we're going to be great at grief as well! The thing is, we loved Nasser because Nasser, my western friend, was as great as the Egyptian people. He was on our scale. He was great in every way just like us. Egypt, we put our trust in him so he became Egypt and Egypt became him. The foreigner didn't know what to say to that… ha ha ha! Get out!" (144/160-61)

In this passage, politics is not a serious topic of conversation. The political scenario is simplified to adjust to the stereotype attached to Egyptians. Ṣāliḥ discusses this stereotype with a foreign customer in a very relaxed atmosphere, interrupted by smiles and laughs. It is a way to understand Egyptian society from the perspective of ordinary people.

*Rihlāt* often uses this technique to mock Egyptian society and power relations. A humorous passage analysed above (see 4.4.2) resembles the episode mentioned here: Ibn Shalabī explains why Egyptians cry a river when their leaders die, with an implicit reference to Nasser himself. This technique is less frequent in *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa*, yet some passages kindly ridicule Egyptian grandeur and heritage by means of self-mockery.[400]

Before and after this picture of Nasser, Ṣāliḥ openly criticizes Sadat for two reasons. On the national level, he betrays the 1952 July Revolution with socio-economic liberalizations harming the public sector (146-47/163). On the international level, the war of attrition with Israel *(ḥarb al-istinzāf)* causes several losses and harms the whole population (143-44/159). Even the military success of the 1973 October War is ephemeral.

In their political tirades, the hashish waiter and his friends attack those who profit from the deregulated economic situation, such as corrupted government employees, black

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[400] See, e.g., the following passage about Egyptian grandeur, pan-arabism, and pharaonic heritage: [Ibrahim speaking] "[…] I mean, come on, guys, we're Egyptians. Sons of the pharaohs. If the leader of the Arab nation isn't Egyptian, it isn't just going to work. Trust me. Do they think being a leader is a game? It takes a man whose grandfather was Ramses the Second, and whose uncle was Khufu, for example, and whose mother was Hatshepsut, and whose cousin was Ahmose. You can call Ahmose Ahmad for all I care so long as it helps the Arabs." We enjoyed many pleasant evenings just like that one. (177-8/199)

market dealers, currency traders, and the so-called fat cats. These illegal activities are tolerated by the authorities, while the rest of the population suffers from the price increase, including the cost of hashish. Economic changes are linked to authoritarianism, repression, consumerism, and international influence. Nasser's policies, instead, are not discussed thoroughly. In the first part of the novel, there are only a couple of jabs at the debt owed to the World Bank.

*International politics*

Over the years of Sadat's presidency, Egypt loses its leading role among the Arab countries. The fight for hegemony is the second target of political satire. The coterie summarizes the international relations by enumerating many leaders tied together by invisible connections (148/165). Then, they focus on the rise to power of Saddam Hussein (Ṣaddām Ḥussayn) in Iraq and Gaddafi (al-Qudhāfī) in Libya. Both leaders hire intellectuals from the Arab countries, including Egypt, for their propaganda.

The coterie laughs bitterly of the interconnection of power and culture, a topic that involves them personally. This theme is found also in the first part of the novel, in which the Egyptian cultural scene is described as a nest of spies. Qamar and Ḥayāt pay the consequence for openly confront the socialist students' movements. In the second part of the novel, criticism is directed against those intellectuals who sell themselves to the new regimes.

This is the case of their friend Ṭalʿat who gets a job in Iraq. Sarcasm is achieved thanks to two mechanisms: Ṭalʿat's ambition is a light topic of conversation at the den, until it suddenly reveals its serious side; and he is the grotesque version of emerging political leaders. In the following passage, we can find the playful tone and political vocabulary, anticipate Ṭalʿat's trajectory. The narrator and Ibrāhīm try to understand why Ṭalʿat and Ṣāliḥ's had a fight:

> "Maybe… But I know Talat. He's got big ambitions, and people who've got big ambitions are fast talkers. I bet you he's planning to become *a minister* some day."
> "No, no, Talat al-Imbabi would never settle for anything less than *the presidency* of a large country like the Soviet Union or something."
> We giggled hysterically. Ibrahim said that perhaps that was the source of the disagreement: Talat was worried that Rowdy Salih would try to take *the presidency* away from him." (149/166, emphasis added)

Later, the hashish waiter reveals the reason of their quarrel and compares Ṭalʿat with Saddam Hussein. Their ambitions, professional and political respectively, are debased to the level of rowdiness, meaning chaos and intoxication. Ṣāliḥ's explanation is direct and, at the same time, allusive:

> Salih said, "All it is and all it was is that Mr. Talat got rowdy. You know, he was getting rowdy."
> "What do you mean 'he was getting rowdy?'" Qamar protested. "Why would he get rowdy?"
> "Because he wanted to get Rowdy. You know – no offense – to get his hands on some good dough, to get himself an important job."
> Qamar's expression changed and he began to listen intently and askance, "Get dough and a position from where?"
> "From Iraq. In Iraq."
> "I don't know what the hell you're talking about."
> "Man, you got to know Saddam Hussein's getting rowdy in Iraq. He wants to get in on the rowdiness like everyone else. [...]"
> "What are you one about? What does any of this have to do with Talat al-Imbabi? You think we're stoned or something?"
> "I'm getting there. Talat's finished getting rowdy here about now and he wants to get in on the rowdiness in Iraq. Wasn't Mr. Talat – no offense – a member of that group called the 'Vanguard'? Saddam's guys picked some of those guys to go work for Saddam. Journalists, broadcasters, professors, and people no one cares what it is they do so long as they sing the praises of Saddam and get down with his rowdiness. (166-67/187-88)

Another member of the crew, Muṣṭafā, takes the opposite path. He refuses to work for a Libyan newspaper called the *Revolution*. This name is chosen ironically because there is a *Revolution* newspaper in every country, but the word itself has lost its meaning (174/195 and 176/197). Muṣṭafā eventually joins an independent project in Abu Dhabi.[401]

*Peace treaty*

The international and national political scenarios reconnect with Sadat's visit to Jerusalem in 1977. The narrator remembers witnessing this historic event with his friends, while temporal distance makes him aware of the visit's political consequences.

After being scattered, the friends meet again at the den to watch the live broadcast, because only company and hashish can make the news bearable. At the beginning, they cannot believe what they see and explain the tragic situation with the stereotypical

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[401] Shalabī probably saw Abu Dhabi as a peripheral country in the Arab region, when he wrote the novel. In the past fifteen years, the UAE have acquired a more central role and investments in state-funded cultural projects have considerably increased. The novel includes another reference to the Gulf region: a picturesque Saudi man represents Saudi investments in Egypt.

Egyptian love for jokes and farce: "We were lulled into a sedate calm, convinced that President Sadat was merely trying to pull off the ultimate Egyptian joke" (215/240).

When they realize the seriousness of the issue, Ṣāliḥ emerges as their leader and proves his qualities both as a satirist and wise fool. He is a satirist because he targets his opponents with a moralistic intent. His cheerful laughter turns into bitter laughs and words against Sadat and the journalists of his delegation:

> Rowdy Salih [...] shouted, laughing, but nothing like his usual happy, unadulterated, unbridled laughter; this laughter seemed more like the rhythms of a volcanic, violent anxiety: "Ha ha ha! Look! He took all the rowdies with him! Every last one of them's rowdy. Getting rowdy. 'Cause what they want is to get in on the rowdiness and they're going to pay the price of admission with our children's blood. Come on, you bums, you sons of bitches! You've been screwing us for twenty-five years talking about the Revolution, liberating our land, the Crisis in Palestine. Ha ha ha! Get in! They think we're going to buy it. Get in! How are we supposed to believe all that war that just happened? Get in! People's kid died for what? For nothing! Just so a few chair-crazies get to play musical chairs? Ha ha ha! Get in!" (216/240)

As a wise fool, he defies the authorities by speaking the truth. He shouts against the television and the policemen (219/245). While the wise fool is usually tolerated because he speaks in jest, Ṣāliḥ is harshly beaten and made disappear. Even though he is considered a lunatic, he is silenced. Dissent is not tolerated, especially if it comes from the lower strata of society.

The hashish waiter's defiant attitude is contrasted with the population's passivity through the image of the volcano. The Egyptians feel the volcano of rage and discontent burning inside of them, but do not take to the streets. The clique is metaphorically paralyzed by the calming effects of hashish (217/241), whereas Ṣāliḥ is among the few who protest.

At the end of the novel, the narrator summarizes the events following Sadat's journey: the Camp David agreement (1978), the peace treaty (1979), Sadat's assassination (1981), the break-up of the Soviet Union, and the Gulf War (1990-1991). His disillusionment and nostalgia are expressed by the novel's key concept attaining to the comic sphere: "Rowdiness reached the peak of absurdity."[402]

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[402] In the original Arabic: "*Waṣalati l-hēṣa ilā aqṣā dhurāhā al-hazliyya*". *'Al-hazliyya'* means both the abstract concept of absurdity and the genre of farce, especially in theatre and performance.

## 5.5 The functions of humour

As has been seen, humour in *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa* evolves over the course of the narrative: what begins as pure entertainment turns eventually into socio-political criticism. In both, comedy has an affiliative function and is staged mainly in the dialogues.

In addition, humour provides relief and a mirror of society. These functions are expressed by two recurrent images in the narrative, *i.e.* smoking hashish and theatre. The former reflects the need for evasion in everyday life, while the latter reflects on how are appropriates folk humour.

## 5.5.1 Relief

Both laughter and hashish offer a form of relief from everyday life. This parallelism informs the whole novel and is made explicit in some passages. For example, Qamar finds consolation in them after his bad experience with the students' union: "He'd been driven to the brink of madness, but he fought against it with sarcasm and hashish, even though his wounds never healed over." (105/118)

This calming effect is felt by single individuals, like Qamar, and by society at large. The novel plays with two stereotypes: Egyptians have an innate sense of humour and hashish is (or was) widespread and largely tolerated. The narrator gives a rough estimate: "all the hashish smokers of Cairo, which equalled about eighty percent of the male population." (118/133)

As a consequence, humour and hashish become metaphors for private and social life: when Ṣāliḥ and his friends are happy, they smoke and laugh; on the contrary, when they face difficulties and political disillusionment, entertainment and hashish disappear. For instance, when they discover that Ṭalʿat will go to Iraq, their sadness vanishes the effect of hashish:

> We shared a deep silence and something like sadness enveloped us; it was [as] if we'd just heard news of a friend's death. I guess we were all sobered up by it, too, because the whole party began smoking again in unison frantically and intensely as if we were coming rapidly to the end of our stash. (168/188)

Similarly, when the political situation changes, hashish becomes more expensive and eventually disappears. This change is exemplified by the title of chapter 21, 'Impermanent Cheer' *('Farḥa mā tammat')*. Two happy events, a wedding and the October War victory,

are followed by sad days. The group dissolves and the price of hashish increases, reducing the opportunities for social gatherings. The narrator comments that, until then, hashish had been the fuel of society:

> Hashish was the most purely democratic high in the country. It was how people buried their anxieties so they could put up with life's bitter moments and earn their daily bread, minding their own business. The price of hash suddenly went up along with the price of gasoline as if it were a sort of fuel that society needed in order to run. It was brought about by the rise of the U.S. dollar and the steady decline of the Egyptian pound, which soon became the laughing stock of world currencies, because people said the drug dealers needed huge sums of dollars to import hash and opium. Yet, the people continued to smoke hash all day and night; they just cut back on the costs of fire: that is the den-costs. The flow of customers became a trickle and it didn't help things that the dens themselves raised the price of a bowl of molasses-tobacco from half a piaster to five piasters so what used to buy you ten bowls now only got you one. (205/229)

At the end of the novel, intoxication and laughter are employed in metaphors with a bitterly ironic meaning:

> - Ibrahim al Qammah threw his hands up exasperatedly and said that the whole thing – from the beginning of the revolution to right now – was all just one big smoke-up on a still evening that had lasted a quarter of a century. (217/241-42)

> - Looking for Ṣāliḥ after his arrest is as painful as "some awful joke" *[al-nukta al-samja]* (222/247).

All the hash dens are shut down and new drugs enter the market. This is the end of an era, also in terms of social life and evasion.


## 5.5.2 Theatre as a mirror

In addition to relief, humour is a mirror of society which offers an alternative way for self-representation. The narrator explores the mechanisms of imitation and performance. He creates several doubles and focuses on those elements of folk culture enter comedy (theatre, cinema, improvisation, and indirectly fiction).

Firstly, theatre and cinema are among the clique's interests. This element of the story is transferred to the level of the narrative: the language of theatre serves to describe their interactions at the den. Some of the guests sit on the ground level, while others sit on the top of a hill made of rubble. The two groups interact like the audience and the actors on the stage (21/24). They exchange insults, jabs, and banters in loud voices and a cheerful atmosphere. When he gets rowdy, Ṣāliḥ takes parts in this game, usually subverting the roles of actors and audience (38/41).

The second type of performance consists in the members of the circle who imitate Ṣāliḥ, reproducing his longing for freedom and his Egyptian authenticity. Initially, their imitation is liberating. For instance, the narrator realizes that Qamar is an educated version of Ṣāliḥ, who frees himself from social constraints when he joins the culture of the urban underworld (101/114-15).

Later, Ṣāliḥ's doubles multiply and acquire an artificial nature. Even Ḥayāt, the only female regular, imitates him:

> At first, we teased one another when somebody did something that we realized – whether right then or only later – was a distorted imitation of Rowdy Salih. It got us laughing no matter how distorted an imitation it was. Than we began cheering on the people who were the most proficiently Rowdy Salih-ish like Qamar al-Mahruqi and Talat al-Imbabi, who were the real pioneers. Even Hayat al-Barri had become one of the strongest devotees in the cult of Rowdy Salih with a passion equal to that of her naïve youthful exuberance for Marxist thought. [...]
> She, too, had become Rowdy Salih-ish, inside and out, repeating his phrases passionately and affectionately, she copied his free-flying, stuttering laughter and she called him by his name without any formality at all. (202/226)

In this passage, imitation becomes a grotesque distortion *(ṣūra mamsūkha)*; the hashish waiter's spontaneous humour is appropriated, yet the effect is still enjoyable. The narrator is ironical towards the mechanical reproduction at the basis of comedy: he crafts the neologism *'al-ṣāliḥiyya al-ḥēṣiyya'*; employs some rhetorical figures of sound;[403] compares the enthusiasm for Ṣāliḥ with the passion for Marxism, which is criticized all over the book. His irony tackles the confusion between reality and reproduction, since Zakī the actor is so talented that the copy is more amusing than the original. Ḥayāt, who was attracted by Ṣāliḥ and married Zakī, "had actually gone and married Rowdy Salih!" (214/238-39)

Zakī connects this spontaneous performance with the professional one made by comedy actors. When he is still an extra, he laughs about the possibility of imitating life thanks to masks. The following witty repartee is rich in language manipulation and the playful spirit of the crew:

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[403] The rhetorical figures of sound in this passage are: *"qalbᵃⁿ wa-qālabᵃⁿ"*, an idiom meaning 'inside and out, with heart and soul'; *"taḍḥakᵘ ḍaḥkatahu al-munqaṭiʿa al-munṭaliqat l-nabra"*, with the alliteration of 'q' and 'ṭ'.

From that day on, Qamar al-Mahruqi explained, Talat al-Imbabi hadn't stopped scowling at Rowdy Salih, or as Salih himself said, "He's giving me the cold shoulder."

"Couldn't it be that he's lost face, Salih? You know there are a lot more thieves about these days and they can steal the eye shadow right off your eyes. You ought to be patient with him until he finds it, not get mad at him," added Mustafa Lami guilefully.

Zaki Hamid the actor said, "Oh, but I'm dying to steal Rowdy Salih's face to act in a few parts. If masks were any good, I'd have brought someone here to make a cast."

Salih laughed and said, "You want me to wrap it up so you can take it to go?"

We all giggled. (165/185)

Besides Zakī, the new stars of Egyptian comedy draw inspiration from folk humour. One night, Ḥayāt goes to the theatre with Qamar's wife and daughter to distract them from their family problems. They watch *Madrasat al-mushāghibīn (The School for Troublemakers)*,[404] a successful play which launched the career of many Egyptian comedy stars. Ḥayāt notices their appropriation of popular humour, especially the stock character of the simple-minded:

They strolled around backstage, saying hello to Adel Imam, Saeed Sal[i]h, Younis Shalaby, Ahmad Zaki, Suhair al-Babili, Hassan Mustafa, and Hadi al-Gayyar. [...] she discovered something very peculiar, something she'd never noticed before: Saeed Salih and Adel Imam – in particular – had a certain air about them, which, granted, was only fleeting, but was clearly modelled on Rowdy Salih, whom she was pleased to have got to know very well. So it wasn't only Qamar al-Mahruqi who'd been influenced by Rowdy Salih's personality. As a matter of fact, she simply couldn't tell whether it was Rowdy Salih himself who was this new, widespread, highly influential trend that had an entire generation in its throes or whether it was the people he'd influenced who'd gone out and created this trend, especially as every single comedian in the country played the part of the idiot, or the fool, or the guy who acts an idiotic fool *[shakhṣiyyat al-ʿabīṭ aw al-mustaʿbiṭ aw alladhī biysūʾ ʿalā al-habāla]* so that he can get out of following any rules. They talked like Rowdy Salih, repeated some of his funny expressions, they thought like him when they were up on stage. There was no doubting that they'd all gone and smoked hash at Rowdy Salih's, but all they'd taken from him was an attitude and some cutting remarks, which they dropped into serious contexts to cause hilarious dissonances, but to Hayat, Rowdy Salih the man was himself a great deal more valuable than that when looked from a certain angle. (186/207-8)

Ḥayāt's opinion, and indirectly that of the implied author, is not totally negative: comedy absorbs popular culture to encourage the audience's identification; moreover, it voices what cannot be said in real life. Only later, comedy becomes a farce, since its equivalent in real life and source of inspiration is silenced. When Zakī becomes a star, he turns the hashish waiter into the character of a film:

Rowdy Salih was standing right there in the flesh. [...]

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[404] *Madrasat al-mushāghibīn* (1973) was written by ʿAlī Sālim, produced by Samīr Khafājī (in this novel, Khafāja, b. 1930), and performed by the Troupe Artists United (*firqat al-fannānīn al-muttaḥidīn*). It starred ʿĀdil Imām, Saʿīd Ṣāliḥ (1938-2014), and Aḥmad Zakī.

> I pushed through the crowd; I wanted to throw myself in Rowdy Salih's arms. But then I was stopped by huge hands right at the moment when the truth hit me. Now that I was closer, I could see that the Rowdy Salih standing before me was actually Zaki Hamid the actor filming a scene for a movie. [...]
>
> His voice – the same cherished, familiar voice – began to unfurl with threats of looming disaster like Tiresias in a Greek tragedy: "God made the world a rowdy place and then filled it with rowdy people. Everybody here's rowdy. They're all rowdy 'cause all they want to do is get rowdy and they either get to or they don't. And everybody here's run-down. But they're all run-down in their own way. And me, I'm the king of the run-down 'cause I'm run-down in every which way." (242-43/260-61)

At the beginning, the narrator is misled by Zakī's perfect imitation, but when he realizes that it is only a mediated performance, he understands the gravity of the situation. The mechanical nature of the double invites to reflect on one's own condition: in this case, the evolution of the comic character embodies the loss of freedom. As Lynx Qualey notes in her review, "Salih becomes just an echo of himself, a part played by an actor representing Salih on TV. There is no more freedom, or even proper escape - just the televised illusion of freedom."[405]

# 5.6 Conclusion

*Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa* is entirely constructed on the parallelism between humour and hashish. Firstly, they are constitutive elements of the Egyptian way of life, circulate in the same places and among the same groups. In the modern city, they are accessible to several types of people, but Shalabī focuses on a specific neighbourhood and a coterie of aspiring intellectuals. The analysis of space and characters reveals their liminal nature: they are marginal, but participate in all the major national events; they have very local features, yet they are the quintessence of the nation.

Secondly, humour and hashish enjoy a similar status: they are alternative forms of sociability and semi-legal activities. Humour can be considered semi-legal because it is controlled by the authorities through censorship.

Thirdly, they have similar effects. They work as a social glue within the community, provide some relief from everyday life and social constraints, and sometimes represent a

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[405] Lynx Qualey, "'The Hashish Waiter'".

form of resistance. Being outside officialdom and part of folk culture, they allow a temporary subversion in which producers/consumers can speak freely.

Their liberating effect stimulates the creativity and cultural production. The narrator, both an insider and outsider, is an aspiring novelist. He initially adopts the perspective of the group and his style reproduces the blurred vision of hash smokers. He gradually achieves a clear perception, elaborates a linear narrative, but maintains the group's peculiarities in his hybrid language. The coterie exemplifies the mechanisms of collective cultural production. Their common background and slang generate their spontaneous way of joking that, in turn, reinforces their sense of belonging. Their leader, Ṣāliḥ, is the Egyptian version of the wise fool, a traditional type in cross-cultural humour.

Humour is performed by these characters. At the beginning of the novel, the group exchanges witty repartees which turn into dark ironies and satirical attacks because of the evolution of the events. In both cases, the hashish waiter has a leading role and adopts a resisting attitude with his rowdiness.

At the same time, the evolution of the plot illustrates multiple functions of humour and generating mechanisms, exemplified by some recurrent images. For example, the carnival indicates the vitality of the underworld, while stereotypes mock the notion of authentic Egyptian-ness. The central image is that of the double. There are multiple doubles among the members of the clique: Ṭalʿat-Qamar, Ṭalʿat-Muṣṭafā, and Qamar-Ḥayāt. Furthermore, they all imitate Ṣāliḥ. Imitation is amusing because it gives a distorted image of the original. However, it can reach the limit of a sterile caricature.

The stock character of the simple-minded circulates in folk culture and in comedy theatre. The novel is rich in images related to theatre, cinema, and performance. These artistic forms interact with reality, offering an opportunity for identification and criticism. Shalabī writes a humorous novel about what humour means, how it circulates, and is crafted in an artistic way.

In order to shape to this type of comedy in the novel, the main humour generating techniques are wordplay, similes, picturesque details, the description of the characters' way of laughing, and a rich linguistic amalgam mixing the high register, the vernacular, and the jargon of hash smokers.

# Chapter 6

# HUMOUR IN A MIGRATION TALE: *AL-FĀʿIL* BY ḤAMDĪ ABŪ JULAYYIL

> When asked about it, he would laugh and say: "Wells are like udders. They fill up and they dry up, each at its own time." Their mouths gaped in astonishment. Had he really explored the whole desert and knew which wells were full and which were empty? Had he lived long enough to learn all this?
>
> When Musallam went off this time, he didn't come back. The sandstorm was a swirl of dust. He disappeared from in front of his tent. They searched everywhere and asked every traveler they saw. Accounts of his disappearance varied, as did accounts of his life.[406]

*Al-Fāʿil* by Abū Julayyil is a migration tale which portrays two distant worlds coexisting within the same country, as well as the communities that inhabit them and those who are 'in-between'. Humour plays a central role both in rendering the lively underworld of recent urban migrants and as a commentary on issues such as identity, belonging, and survival strategies.

Humour is found in some anecdotes and ironic asides which are intertwined with the novel's central themes: rural-urban migration and space representation. Both themes are related to self-discovery, identity construction, and writing possibilities. As Lindsey points out in her review, *al-Fāʿil* is "a clever and complex meditation on the shaky edifice that is identity and the 'construction work' that is writing".[407]

In the last pages of the novel, the narrator tells an anecdote about his grandfather Awla and then comments: "But I've stumbled. Enthusiasm drives me on, and I stumble. I can't

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[406] Miral al-Tahawy, *The Tent*, trans. Anthony Calderbank (Cairo and New York: AUC Press, 1998), 87. Original Arabic: Mīrāl al-Taḥāwī, *al-Khibāʾ*, (Cairo: Dār sharqiyyāt, 1997).

[407] Ursula Lindsey, 'Abu Golayyel: Wrestling with Identity', *Egypt Independent*, 23 February 2010.

find the words, and when I do they seem heavy, awkward, and somber. I like to write with humor. I like to joke, but I always find I've been too serious." (149/158)[408]

This metanarrative commentary summarizes the overall narrative tone, which combines seriousness and jest, and reveals the incongruous even in serious accounts. Bearing in mind the interplay of writing and identity in *al-Fāʿil*, this passage also depicts the narrator's attitude towards reality: it is an invitation to take life not too seriously.

Placed in a key position, this commentary invites to explore the humour strategies employed in this novel. In particular, we shall examine how humor interacts with the story's main narrative threads and how it is generated by the textual structure, the characters, and the use of language.

Furthermore, humour contributes to placing the individual experience within a collective dimension. In this sense, the narrator's migration tale is one ring in the chain of his family history of migrations, told through amusing anecdotes. We shall examine how humour and irony allow a re-reading of the past on individual and collective levels.

Abū Julayyil's first novel, *Luṣūṣ mutaqāʿidūn*, is taken as a term of comparison for its representation of space and style.

## 6.1 *al-Fāʿil*

### 6.1.1 Plot

The novel tells the story of a young Bedouin, Ḥamdī, who migrates from his village in the Fayyūm countryside to Cairo, where he joins the crews of construction workers who come from the same region. The first-person narrator and main character remembers various episodes of his migration tale, while reconstructing the story of his family, which had abandoned nomadic life and settled down. He also leafs through memories of his childhood and college years, tells his co-workers' adventures, and confesses his lack of success with women.

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[408] In the original Arabic: *"Hā anā taʿaththartu, andafiʿu bi-ḥamās thumma ataʿaththaru, lā ajidu kalāmᵃⁿ, wa-in wajadtu ashʿuru annahu thaqīl wa-mutaʿaththir wa-jādd, anā uḥibbu al-kitābat bi-maraḥ, uḥibbu al-tahrīj, wa-kull marra aktashifu annī kuntu jāddᵃⁿ akthar min al-lāzim."* In this passage, there is an opposition between *jādd* (translated as 'somber' and 'serious') and *maraḥ* (translated as 'humour'). The term *tahrīj* (translated as 'to joke') may refer both to speech or actions.

In his Cairene exile, the narrator dreams of becoming a successful writer. He publishes some short stories on newspapers and magazines, and attempts to write a novel.

Construction work (*al-fāʿil* or *al-miʿmār*) is the main narrative thread and gives the title to the novel. The title of the English translation,[409] instead, refers to an episode in which the narrator and a female student exchange insults in Bedouin dialect. He harasses the girl and intends his insult as a compliment: "You look like a duck coming back from market." (103/112) She picks up his accent and responds in the same vein: "And you're a dog with no tail." (Ibid.) Both titles evoke central aspects of the main character's identity, respectively his job and his Bedouin origins.

The protagonist's personal memories are intertwined with some big events in Egyptian national history. For example, during Cairo's 1992 earthquake, Ḥamdī is digging the foundations of a building. From inside the pitch, he does not feel the earth shacking and does not realize what is going on around him. His work protects him from danger, but at the same time isolates him from other people, providing him with a different perspective on this event.

Another episode renders the political climate of the 1980s-1990s, when the Muslim Brotherhood represented a leading current in university student activism. The protagonist is involved in one of these demonstrations: even though he does not have an active role in the protests, he is arrested by State Security with other students and spends one year in general prison.

These references mark the time of the story, which spans from the mid-1990s in Cairo to the narrator's childhood in the 1970s, his father's migration to Fayyūm City in the 1950s, and his tribe's settlement at the time of Muḥammad ʿAlī. The story, however, does not progress chronologically and narrative time is fragmented.

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[409] In her review of the novel, Lynx-Qualey reports that the English title was chosen by the author. Marcia Lynx Qualey, 'One-Minute Review: A Dog with No Tail', *Arabic Literature (in English)*, 7 March 2010.

## 6.1.2 Structure

The novel consists of 32 short chapters.[410] It does not follow a linear plot, but juxtaposes various anecdotes kept together by the same narrating voice and by reappearing characters.

In the opening chapter, the narrator anticipates the fragmented nature of his account by saying that he sees his life as files stored in his head *(dafātir marṣūṣa fī raʾsī)*: sometimes they unfold one by one; sometimes multiple files open at the same time and memories of distant experiences overlap (2/8). The narrative consists in telling or writing about these files, from the narrator's internal perspective, following the connections established by his memory.

The novel has a circular structure, as it opens and closes with the narrator in his room thinking about his writing projects. In the opening scene, he is working on a novel, one of his unfinished writing attempts. In the last chapter, he moves into an apartment where he gets a room of his own, with a desk to write comfortably and a bed to ponder his ideas. He also finds a storage box full of books, including the biography of an unnamed foreign author who did manual jobs before becoming a writer and winning the Nobel Prize. The biography is a source of inspiration to reconcile his double identity of labourer and writer, while the room seems to provide the stability he has been looking for over all his time in Cairo. This situation might be a new beginning for his writing projects, with the possibility of finishing the novel(s) he has been working on.

These and other episodes portray the narrator in the act of writing, making *al-Fāʿil* a novel about writing a novel. The reader is not sure if the text that he is reading is actually the novel that the protagonist is writing in the fictional dimension.

The narrator, Ḥamdī, tells the story of his life focusing on his family and his migratory experience. This fictional biography does not portray the subject's evolution, but follows the association of ideas and memories. As suggested in chapter 2, the presence of several autobiographical elements does not erase the awareness of fictional conventions. In this respect, Abū Julayyil writes about the social realities that he knows well, but breaks the

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[410] The English translation consists of 31 chapters. In the present study, we shall refer to the chapter numbers in the consulted Arabic edition.

illusion of reality by employing experimental writing techniques, such as metafiction, intertextuality, multiple narrations, and repetitions (see above. 2.4.2). These writing techniques based on ambiguity and the marginal perspective on reality co-operate to expose the contradictions of society and life.

A similar approach is found also in Abū Julayyil's first novel, which is presented in the following section. It is taken as a term of comparison with *al-Fāʿil* in terms of themes, space representation, and humorous style.

# 6.2 A comparison: *Luṣūṣ mutaqāʿidūn*

## 6.2.1 Plot

*Luṣūṣ mutaqāʿidūn* tells the stories of the residents of an apartment building in the informal urban settlement of Manshiyyat Naṣr. The building's owner, Abū Jamāl, lives there with his wife, his four children and their wives, and some tenants. The landlord chooses only tenants who, like him, come from Upper Egypt. Thus, all the residents are migrants.

Abū Jamāl's life is intertwined with that of his neighbourhood. When he was young, he migrated to the city to work in Ḥelwan Silk Factory. When president Nasser paid a visit to the workers, he discovered from Abū Jamāl that they used to sleep inside the factory, as they did not have a place to stay. In the spirit of the revolution, the leader pointed his finger towards an empty plot of land and established the neighbourhood of Manshiyyat Naṣr to host them. Abū Jamāl embodied the revolutionary project as a worker in the state-led industry who benefited from the government urban planning. Nevertheless, he was among the first factory workers forced to retire early because of privatization, which came with liberal economic policies.

Besides the fictional reconstruction of the recent economic, social, and urban changes, the novel depicts power struggles within the family. Abū Jamāl's patriarchal authority is questioned by his bully eldest son, Jamāl. In particular, they fight over how to deal with the queer behaviour of the youngest son, Sayf.

This marginalized community is not based on rules of peaceful social coexistence, but on struggles over authority, petty crimes, and a sort of internal justice: the father

blackmails the tenants and deals a prostitution network with Jamāl; the latter is a drug dealer; his brother ʿĀmir is a *futuwwa* and the leader of a group of marijuana-smokers,[411] an addiction that he funds by stealing from his father and the fourth brother Ṣalāḥ. Bullying and revenge target the female characters, as well as ʿĀdil the Copt and Shaykh Ḥassan.

In the building, there are also some aspiring writers: Jamāl is a mediocre writer, whereas Ustādh Ramaḍān is a teacher who clings to the clichés of classical poetry without great success.

These stories are told by an anonymous first-person narrator, a Bedouin immigrant to Cairo who sometimes works in construction and rents a flat in Abū Jamāl's building. He is both an insider and an outsider in the neighbourhood, who keeps a close eye on his neighbours because he fears they might unite against him.

This novel has received critical attention for the following aspects: the representation of marginal urban space and Bedouin identity, which are at the core of *al-Fāʿil*, too; the construction of complex gendered identities, which is less central in the second novel, despite an interest for masculinity and gender relations; linguistic variation and dark ironies as stylistic features.

## 6.2.2 Style

*Luṣūṣ* is a satirical or sarcastic portrait of a marginal community in a liminal space in the outskirts of Cairo. A set of satirical weapons target the individuals and communities represented in the novel; social coexistence and power relations are unmasked by "teasing out the incongruities, the affectations, and the ridiculous in various situations."[412] Nevertheless, the author refuses the role of *iṣlāḥī lādhiʿ* (sharp-tongued reformist), as he does not seek a social reform, but to understand and expose social relations in all their objectivity, adopting a detached perspective.[413]

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[411] *Al-futuwwa* is the neighbourhood's strongman. A traditional figure, it has persisted into the 20th century, gradually making his own interests prevail over neighbourhood's protection. For the meaning of this term in classical Arabic culture, see: Claude Cahen and Taeschner, 'Futuwwa', *EI2*, ii, 961–69. For this figure in Maḥfūẓ's novels, see: Cobham, 'Enchanted to a Stone'.

[412] El Sadda, *Gender, Nation, and the Arabic Novel: Egypt, 1892-2008* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2012), 196.

[413] Ibid.

The narrator's ironic detachment also serves to satirize the conventions of realist fiction, as Booth suggest. This is combined with the novel's language, which plays with the juxtaposition of registers, apparent naïveté, double meanings, puns, and echoes of the language of Nasserism. In this way, language is a tool of resistance against official discourse about marginalized groups.

As regards linguistic variation, *Luṣūṣ* is written in a linguistic amalgam of Modern Standard Arabic, Egyptian Colloquial Arabic, and Bedouin dialect. It contains proverbs and idioms, and uses extensively coarse words and insults to give voice to the characters' harsh diatribes.[414] The colloquial register alternates with the refined language of Ustādh Ramaḍān's writings and the official revolutionary discourse, contributing to the novel's satirical style. Booth concludes that "There is much humour in this novel, but much darkness as well".[415]

In his comparison of the two novels, Badawī insists on the aggressive dimension of the ludicrous in *Luṣūṣ*. In the first novel, satire *(sukhriyya)* means discovering the gaps or paradoxes *(mufāraqāt)* and rendering them through the main character's rage, fear, and resentment; in *al-Fāʿil*, instead, gaps respond to a playful and light logic. Both novels expose the lack of logic in reality, but in the first case satire conveys resentment, whereas in the second case it expresses a playful coexistence with reality.[416]

These considerations about humour-related phenomena (satire, dark humour, and sarcasm) and humour-generating techniques in *Luṣūṣ* are useful for our analysis of humour in *al-Fāʿil*. Before focusing on humour, the next section illustrates the main themes of this novel.

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[414] The translation strategies of the Spanish version, in particular how to render Egyptian Colloquial Arabic, idioms, slang and coarse words, are analyzed in Hayam Abdou Mohamed, 'Leer a Hamdi Abu Golayyel en español. El papel del traductor', in *Actas del III Congreso Ibero-Africano de Hispanistas,* eds. Noureddine Achiri, Álvaro Baraibar, and Felix K. E. Schmelzer (Pamplona: Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Navarra, 2015), 53–65.

[415] Booth, 'Introduction', xvi.

[416] Badawī, 'Riwāyat "al-Fāʿil"'.

## 6.3 Themes

### 6.3.1 Migration and self-discovery

*Al-Fāʿil* gives new form to a traditional topic in Egyptian literature, *i.e.* rural-urban migration. Ḥamdī migrates for work reasons from the Bedouin settlement to Cairo, when both places are undergoing relevant changes. As in other contemporary migration novels, the protagonist's displacement activates a process of self-discovery. This section looks at the representation of Ḥamdī's migratory trajectory and provides a double reading of episodes related to construction work.

The main reason for the narrator's migration is working in construction with other fellow-villagers who are already in Cairo. His first journey to the city is framed within a collective dimension, as he travels with a group of village boys for whom migration is a rite of passage: "More than mere job hunting, it's something like a local tradition, a first step that every man must take at the start of his life: independence, self-reliance, and returning to the village with a few hard-earned pennies." (10-11/17) Over the following years, Ḥamdī is a commuting worker (*ʿāmil tarāḥīl*, 12/18), and he also works in Libya for a short period (*riḥlat ʿamal*, 2/8).

Since his first journey, the protagonist discovers what labour work means and gives a definition of the job:

> But the word labourer fascinated me. Why labourer? 'Working as a labourer.' Why did it refer to the toughest and most exhausting work? But when I made the journey myself and started work I saw that it was entirely appropriate, scrupulously exact. It is the primal act, immutable and timeless: lifting something from one place to another. (65/70)

In the novel, many episodes depict the routine of construction work, which consists in tearing down tottering buildings, renovating or expanding them, digging the foundations, preparing the material for craftsmen, lugging sacks of cement, and removing the rubble. This job requires physical strength and endurance, but it does not get any social recognition. Thus, it shapes a self-contained marginal urban underworld.

On a first level, these episodes portray urban migrants' precarious living and working conditions. Ḥamdī and his colleagues are hired on a daily basis usually by contractors and sometimes by apartment's owners for private jobs. They are *anfār*, a term originally used

in the military context, and later used to refer to daily labourers in agriculture and construction.

Construction workers wake up early to walk to the places where they are hired. Sometimes they sleep in the buildings they are repairing or in the contractor's pickup. While families of residents benefit from their work, they do not have a stable dwelling and their family is restricted to co-workers.

On another level, these episodes work as a metaphor for the protagonist's quest of identity in the city. In this respect, the following passage is significant:

> I was working for a demolition contractor. No, not demolition: demolition and construction.
>
> He only worked with houses on the verge of collapse. The places sealed up with red wax, directives issued to tear them down: these were his bread and butter. Peeling back the wax with a delicacy befitting its official status he would slip into the house with his men: one team to dig out the foundations and another to smash the walls. A few days later and the miracle is complete: the decaying pile has become a lofty, freshly painted tower. Most of the houses in Shubra and the surrounding neighborhoods owed their continued existence to him. […]
>
> In 1992, as the earthquake struck Cairo, I was digging at the bottom of a foundation trench beneath a three-story house, but everyone, even the closest to me, were left in no doubt that I was first and foremost a journalist. The stories I'd had published were enlisted to support my claims that I was, in fact, an editor for the *al-Ahrar* newspaper, which, I reckoned, was just about credible for someone in my position.
>
> Sometimes I'd say I was continuing my studies. If anyone asked what I was studying I'd panic. Then I learned of something called The Institute of Literary Criticism, and struck by the grandeur of the name I started claiming that I studied there. All the while I was hunting for a job, any job: reputable employment, starting at eight in the morning and finishing at two in the afternoon. (2-3/8-9)

In this excerpt, construction work acquires a symbolic meaning, as it is associated to life-related images (for example, miracle and existence). In a city with no clear official urban planning, buildings on the verge of collapse are demolished and rebuilt, hence brought back to life. Construction workers redesign Cairo's geography, but do their job informally, almost beyond any official control.[417]

Like the buildings, the protagonist undergoes a process of demolition and construction: he is a Bedouin, whose ancestors were accustomed to nomadic life, who tries to settle down in the city; he is a labourer who does not want to be identified as such, but as a

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[417] Some sentences from the excerpt quoted above are echoed in chapter 30, where the narrator describes how construction crews work. In particular, the phrase "Peeling back the wax with a delicacy befitting its official status" is repeated on p. 131/138. It refers to the semi-legal renovation jobs.

writer. Therefore, he shows off his publications on newspapers and magazines when he is on construction sites.

To sum up, Ḥamdī's identity is constructed through negation. In the above-mentioned passage, he says that he is looking for another reputable job; in other passages, he and his co-workers clean their clothes from any trace of construction material (129/137); in particular, they hide their true profession when they go back to the village (11/17).

## 6.3.2 Double alienation

In *al-Fāʿil*, space plays as important a role as in *Luṣūṣ*. The migrating subject moves between two distant worlds coexisting within the same country: the mega-city of Cairo and the Bedouin village in Fayyūm. In both places, he negotiates his identity and experiences a double alienation. In her review, Lindsey defines *al-Fāʿil* as "another chronicle of the author's double alienation – as a member of a community still at odds with the state, and as a new urban migrant."[418]

We shall now examine the representation of the urban and rural space in the novel, and the link between space and writing possibilities.

### 6.3.2.1 The city: working sites

In *al-Fāʿil*, Cairo's map is restricted within the boundaries of working sites and accommodations. The narrator admits: "We knew nothing of Cairo beyond Ahmed Helmi Square, Salim's café, and the buildings where Mi'allim Matar's crew worked." (12/18)[419]

Aḥmad Ḥilmī Square exemplifies the sites where labourers are usually hired, such as bridges or the corners of public squares (81/86), which are basically transit areas. The narrator and his co-workers usually meet the contractors in Salīm's café in Shubrā. The contractor *miʿallim* Maṭar works in Shubrā, which is described as a good working place (in comparison to the narrator's experience in Fayṣal), because the labourers meet local residents who offer them food and tea: "Shubra is better by far; Shubra is life. There we

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[418] Lindsey, 'Book review'.
[419] The English translator Robin Moger renders the title and form of address *al-muʿallim* with the word 'Mi'allim'. This choice reproduces the pronunciation in Egyptian Colloquial Arabic, attested for example in Hinds-Badawi's *A Dictionary of Egyptian Arabic*. However, the word's graphic may cause some perplexity. In the quotations, we accept the translator's choice, whereas in the rest of the text we conform to the general rules of transliteration applied in this thesis.

work with people, in the midst of stable, happy families. Shubra is work and play." (119/127)

A nearby district hosts a community of transnational migrants: Jazīrat Badrān is inhabited by Syrians, therefore its main street is labelled Palaces of the Syrians (*quṣūr al-shawām*, 18/24).

The buildings where they work in Shubrā represent an enclosed world, opposed to an apartment building in Heliopolis *(Miṣr al-jadīda)* where a fellow-villager and friend nicknamed the Doctor *(al-duktūr)* works as doorkeeper's assistant. In the chapter entitled 'A Visit' *(Ziyāra)*, the narrator describes the building's well-off residents, reveals how they have achieved their social standing, and exposes their defects and hidden habits. They cohabit with an underworld of prostitution managed by drivers and doorkeepers, which they are physically and morally close to.

This chapter reminds of *Luṣūṣ*, where Abū Jamāl's building encloses the characters' lives, fights, and petty crimes. Both the first novel and this chapter rely on the "house narrative", a space representation technique in which characters and actions revolve around a single building.

According to Mehrez, the apartment building *(ʿimāra)* has substituted the alley *(ḥāra)* as a literary metaphor for the whole city of Cairo and its social fabric.[420] This metaphor renders recent urban changes, spatial fragmentation, and the rupture of social relations. Booth adds that the proximity of characters of different origins and tempers in an enclosed place questions the naturalness of social communities (starting from the family) and the possibility of communication. Moreover, these living conditions generate a feeling of "crowded alienation": the self is surrounded by several people but lack a sense of belonging.[421] We shall refer to this concept when talking about accommodation in the next section.

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[420] Mehrez, *Culture Wars*, 146.
[421] Booth, 'Introduction', xii-xiv.

## 6.3.2.2 The city: accommodation

The narrator devotes one chapter to each of the two places where he lives. At the beginning, he and some co-workers share a room in ʿAyn Shams, in a building owned by Abū ʿAntar. The small rented room is furnished only with some basic equipment, as they consider it as a temporary accommodation: "it wasn't a permanent home. It was a limbo, a station platform that would either take us on to the life we dreamed of in the capital or return to the village." (129/137). The room is so crowded that it does not provide a suitable environment for Ḥamdī to write, but just some space to display his books.

These precarious living conditions resemble those of crowded marginal *ʿashwāʾiyyāt*, *i.e.* informal settlements or shantytowns that have sprouted in Cairo since the late 1970s and early 1980s to house new waves of rural migrants and the urban poor.

In our analysis, we adopt El Sadda's definition of *ʿashwāʾiyyāt* as "liminal space[s], on the outskirts of the city but still part of it, in fact encroaching on its center."[422] Elements of originally-separated spaces, such as the countryside and the city, merge in a continuum in these liminal spaces. They are inhabited by marginalized communities emerging from the fragmentation of the national state into non-national spaces. Their haphazard nature of *ʿashwāʾiyyāt* finds a literary representation in the characters' complex identity (including gender identity) and experimental narrative techniques.

In an interview, Abū Julayyil does not restrict marginality to a physical location, but links it to a set of power relations:

> "It's impossible to distinguish between what's ashwa'i and what's not, in Cairo," says Hamdi Abu Golayyel. […] "I don't understand what critics mean by the word 'marginalised,'" says Abu Golayyel, as we leave Manshiyat Nasr. He gestures around him: "This neighbourhood isn't any more marginalised than the rest of the city. People in Midan Tahrir," he says, mentioning Cairo's central square, "have no more power to make political decisions than people here. Mubarak is the core, and the rest of us are all marginalised.[423]

*Luṣūṣ mutaqāʿidūn* is set in one of these informal neighbourhoods, Manshiyyat Nāṣir, "a mongrel place, part village and part unplanned city fringe" (*Luṣūṣ* 78/81). In her reading of the novel, Heshmat defines this setting as a ghettoized space that is almost isolated from the rest of the city and functions according to a counter value system. Abū

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[422] El Sadda, *Gender*, 200.
[423] Ursula Lindsey, 'And Then Cairo Turned Itself inside out', *The National*, 4 March 2010.

Julayyil describes this world through satire, but does not judge it on moral grounds.[424] Mehrez, instead, insists on the homology between the space, its inhabitants, and non-regulated policies. The novel is a "bitterly humorous testimony" from the underworld of the urban poor, which counters the official discourse about this space and its community.[425]

While the apartment building of *Luṣūṣ* is in the city's outskirts, the shared room in *al-Fāʿil* is located in an almost central area. This is not an open contradiction, since informal housing and living conditions are found also in Cairo's central or semi-central neighbourhoods. A good example is the representation of the Maʿrūf quarter in Shalabī's *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa* (see above, 5.2). In her historical reconstruction, Naaman mentions Abu-Lughod's sociological study about rural-urban migration in the 1940s and 1950s: migration "was most intense in the belt surrounding the central business district (from Wust al-Balad to ʿAbdin) and in certain, what Abu-Lughod terms, 'urban fringe areas' (i.e., Shubra al-Khayma, ʿAguza, Imbaba, and the northern cemeteries)."[426]

Despite its location, the room in Shubrā is an informal accommodation and conveys the feeling of "crowded alienation" mentioned by Booth. This haphazard accommodation affects the narrator's writing possibilities: his fragmented writing attempts and his complex meditations on identity are rendered with experimental narrative techniques.

The link between space and writing is made explicit in the description of Ḥamdī's second accommodation. At the end of the novel, he moves with some co-workers in a full apartment, in a dilapidated house in Shubrā that they are rebuilding. Once again, it is pure coincidence that determines where they live, and it is not clear how long they will stay there. The protagonist gets a room of his own that might provide space and stability needed to write:

> This room was mine. When they saw the desk they acknowledged there could be no debate. I was on the lookout for an appropriate setting in which to write a novel. I wrote in the room, the one in Ain Shams, squatting on a box of books and scribbling anything that came to mind, but it seemed to me that a novel needed something else: a desk; wood and

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[424] Heshmat, 'L'évolution', in particular: 'Chapitre 4. *Lusûs Mutâkâʿidûn* de Hamdî Abû Gulayl: le ghetto des immigrés ruraux', 137-75.

[425] Mehrez, *Culture Wars*, 152-160.

[426] Naaman, *Urban Space*, 74. See: Janet Abu-Lughod, 'Migrant Adjustment to City Life: The Egyptian Case', *American Journal of Sociology* 67, no. 1 (July 1961): 22–32.

iron. A desk, at any rate, and a bed nearby. The desk for writing and the bed for pondering the results. The room promised a resounding beginning. (147/155)

The novel's ending leaves many possibilities open: this might be the right opportunity for the protagonist to become a writer; otherwise, it might be just one of the many beginnings of his story. As has been seen, the book has a circular structure, since it opens and closes with the narrator in his room thinking about his writing projects, that is what he wants to accomplish with his migration trajectory.

### 6.3.2.3 The village: a historical reconstruction

In *al-Fāʿil*, the city is the place to improve one's economic condition and fulfil one's aspirations, but it is perceived as an alien place, where the only community is the small group of fellow-villagers and co-workers: "We would walk the streets of Cairo but as sons of another, distant country, to which we awaited the chance to return. And now, when I make the journey to the village, I say, 'I'm going home': returning to my homeland." (114/121-22)

The narrator's homeland is a tiny settlement of agricultural land on the edge of the desert, called Abū Ṭāḥūn, officially named Dānyāl after prophet Daniel's tomb. It is located in Iṭsā municipality, about forty kilometres south of Fayyūm City. In the novel, it is called *najʿ* (hamlet, small village), *ʿizba* (country estate, farm; rural settlement) or simply *balad* (a place that can range from a rural village to a town or a city, according to what the local reality is).

Chapter 26 opens with a nostalgic description of this place that combines homesickness *(al-ḥanīn ilā l-awṭān)* with a vocabulary traditionally associated to nationhood. Abū Ṭāḥūn is homeland *(waṭan al-umm)*, or better said a homeland wounded by poverty *(waṭan jarīḥ)*, where one feels like a citizen with rights and obligations *(bi-iʿtibārī muwāṭinan lī ḥuqūq wa-ʿalaī wājibāt)* who lives in exile *(ghurba)* when he is far from it:

> Our village is always on my mind. From my very first day in Shubra I thought of it as my true home, the only place where I move free from fear, a citizen with rights and obligations. I place it before me and leaf through its memories, those histories of a wounded homeland. Why I always associate homelands with injury I could not say. They seem somehow more impressive, more authentic when debilitated by wounds. And our village is

wounded: poor and tiny, set far from the highway and the market and fresh water, and surrounded on every side by the desert. (111/118)[427]

Nevertheless, cracks in the nostalgic narrative appear on various levels: the definition of wounded land is chosen because it sounds "somehow more impressive, more authentic" (Ibid.); the village's official one is questioned because the tomb might belong either to a Muslim or a Christian prophet (113/120); finally, the narrator tries to explain to his relatives that his "Cairene exile has not been time wasted" (114/121).

This second disenchanted narrative implies a re-reading of the past on an individual level, as the narrator revisits his own migration tale. He reveals that he goes back to the village as a different character, as an urban immigrant and writer, who struggles to transfer intellectual prestige into traditional social prestige.

In the same chapter, the re-reading of the past is conducted on a collective level, as the village had become a homeland as a consequence of forced migration and settlement. Ḥamdī's family, which had lived alongside other Bedouin tribes in Libya, in the Maṭrūḫ Desert, and in the Nile Delta, was displaced to southern Fayyūm at the beginning of the 19ᵗʰ century by Muḥammad ʿAlī. This was part of the project of building a modern nation state, from which Bedouin peregrinations (*tanaqqulāt, ḥayāt tarḥāl*) and raids (*ghazw, hujūm, nahb*) had to be excluded.

> Its inhabitants are Bedouin tribesmen and peasants, its produce the crops and animals we tend. It has scant agricultural land: strips of green stretching serpent-like into the wastes. It was granted to our grandparents by Mohamed Ali Pasha *in the days of forced settlement [ayyāmᵃ al-tawṭīn].* Early on, the Pasha realized that there was no chance of founding a modern state with the Mamluks and Bedouin around. The Mamluks he slaughtered. The Bedouin *he settled...and slaughtered [wa-l-badw waṭṭanahum… wa-dhabbaḥahum ayḍᵃⁿ].* Let's just say he settled the Bedouin who were willing to be settled and slaughtered those willing to be slaughtered. (112/118-19, emphasis added)

Homeland was basically imposed, as the causative form of the verb *waṭṭana* suggests. In another passage, the narrator refers to this historical process as "a displacement policy designed to settle the Bedouin" (*tahjīr maʿrūf hadafuhu tawṭīn al-badw*, 27/32).

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[427] This passage is partly repeated after two pages: "It seems that I have lost my way again [in my village]. I should be talking about my homeland. Now Abu Tahoun is small, and perhaps insignificant compared to a proper homeland, but it's the only place where I move free from fear, a citizen with rights and obligations." (113/121) This repetition highlights that the narrative is based on memory associations, as well as fragmentation and reassembly. It also creates a parallelism in the chapter: when the phrase first occurs, it is followed by a description of what homeland means for the Bedouin community; in its second occurrence, it is followed by what homeland means for the narrator as an individual.

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The Bedouin hardly adjusted to the new circumstances: the poor natural resources and their inability to exploit them transformed their nomadic peregrinations into work migrations to the neighbouring cities and later to Cairo. The narrator includes these multiple migrations into his family history. Family memories allow him to craft an alternative history of the Bedouin community, far from the straightforward official narrative and from any attempt to cling to a glorious past.

# 6.4 Humour and migration

## 6.4.1 Characters from the urban underworld

As seen above, one of the main narrative threads is life and work in the urban underworld of construction workers. The narrator portrays some odd characters, almost outcasts, who gravitate around this world. As Temlali puts it in his review, "[l]e roman de Hamdi Abou Golayel est une description décapante de l'univers sous-terrain du «faîl». Il tire des portraits touchants de ces paysans ou bédouins déracinés, pour qui la survie parmi les citadins, est une question de débrouille et, surtout, de capacité d'ironie."[428]

This section examines three characters who function as doubles of the narrator, focusing on the narrative and linguistic strategies that make them humorous.

### 6.4.1.1 Three Ḥamdīs

In chapter 4, the narrator describes a craftsman he usually works with, who is lazy and messy at doing his job. His defects make it a fun to work with him: "It was a pleasure to work with him, something between a holiday and a comedy." (21/27)

What draws the narrator's attention towards the craftsman is his name, Ḥamdī, which reminds him of two funny characters from his village: Ḥamdī *muṭarraf* (Hung Hamdi) and Ḥamdī *al-ʿabīṭ* (Hamdi the Fool). In this short chapter (only two and a half pages long), the narrator sketches out their odd behaviour to make Ḥamdī the craftsman even funnier.

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[428] Yassin Temlali, '«Al Faîl» de Hamdi Abou Golayyel, ou le Caire souterrain des déracinés', *BabelMed*, 20 December 2008.

These funny anecdotes connected to the name Ḥamdī are also a self-mocking strategy: the author puts an ironic distance between himself and the text, while playing with the reader, who knows that Ḥamdī is his name; the narrator, on the other hand, has been anonymous so far and will reveal that his name is Ḥamdī in the next chapter.

The three Ḥamdīs are described in the following paragraph:

> The first thing that drew me to him was his name. A strange name; obscure and unintelligible. I once expressed how I felt about it in a short story. It wasn't Hamad or Haamed or Hamid, but Hamdi. You didn't know whether it referred to you or the person you were talking to. Most of the Hamdis I've known have either been crackpots or idiots of some kind. Hamdi our neighbor in the village was a freak. He had a huge penis. They said he could rest its tip on the ground when he pissed. Now, it's a matter of common knowledge that the well-endowed are prone to mental instability. It's not so clear, however, if this claim is motivated by spite or revenge or possibly a desire to affirm that a shortness of appendage (a problem that has haunted men down the ages) is in fact a natural state, or whether the long-dongs really are insane or at least soft in the head. The other Hamdi I knew from primary and secondary school was definitely crazy. He was called Hamdi the Fool and used to admit it of himself. This one time he stopped me on the street, put his hand on my shoulder and, with spittle flecking my face, declared, "Hamdi the Fool says to you, 'Your mother's cunt.'"
>
> He terrified me. This was in the fifties. He would dribble in his beard and ride around on a stalk of wheat or a sunflower like it was a car, honking his horn, swerving, and hitting the brakes to save people and passing sheep.
>
> At first, when I'd see Hamdi Shadid at the café I'd think of Hung Hamdi and Hamdi the Fool and make a quick comparison. He was closer to Hamdi the Fool in shape: his bulk, his stammer, and his unkempt beard. It wasn't long or short, just the beard of someone who wasn't doing so well. But his reserve and contentment with his lot reminded me of Hung Hamdi. (22-23/28-29)

In order to reinforce the comic potential of the urban character, the narrator creates a parallelism with figures that are part of countryside's folklore and storytelling. They are outcasts because of their crazy *(majnūn)* and idiotic *(maʿtūh)* behavior: Hung Hamdi is indirectly associated with madness through gossip; whereas Hamdi the Fool is officially labelled as the village fool, a status that he seems to internalize when he adopts this nickname to talk about himself.

In their portrait, the narrator reproduces the discourse of village's gossip in the following phrases: "Hamdi our neighbor in the village was [known to be] a freak." *(yashtahiru bi-annahu)*; "They said" *(qīla innahu)*; and "Now, it's a matter of common knowledge that" *(wa-maʿrūf ṭabʿan anna)*. At the same time, he mocks the gossip and popular storytelling about outcasts in the aside that ridicules the villagers' masculinity thanks to a higher linguistic level: "It's not so clear, however, if this claim is motivated

by spite or revenge or possibly a desire to affirm that a shortness of appendage (a problem that has haunted men down the ages) is in fact a natural state" (Ibid.)

Their weird behavior goes hand in hand with their odd physical appearance: the huge penis, which is a grotesque element, and the unkempt beard. Their physical and behavioural traits merge into Ḥamdī the craftsman's final description. Furthermore, the light tone of the anecdotes is strengthened by sexual references to Hung Hamdi's body and in Hamdi the Fool's vulgar language.

### 6.4.1.2 The Doctor

The chapter examined above a self-enclosed narrative about an urban character that reminds of folkloric figures. Another narrative about urban life consists in a series of adventures starring the Doctor, almost the narrator's alter-ego. His real name is Shinhābī and his nickname comes from his neat appearance, as summarized in this brief description: "He'd always had that strong body, the pale skin, and the green eyes, and when he took the time and cleaned himself up, you'd think him quite the gentleman." (9/15)

After leaving the village, he establishes a network of contacts with construction contractors in Shubrā. Afterwards, he tries various job in order to improve his condition, but every time he gets bored and quits. Indeed, his adventures revolve around his work experiences: he is not a dedicated worker and always pursues his own interests; sometimes he fools his employers, but most of the time he fails.

The Doctor recalls the figure of the trickster, who lives in the urban underworld, dodging and hustling. The focus on simple jobs and gullible employers reminds of picaresque characters in classic Spanish literature, even though the Doctor is a man, whereas *picaros* are usually young boys.

In the first of these adventures, the Doctor gets a job as night guard for trucks in a garage. In order to sleep during his working hours, he devises a clever plan: every time he hears a noise, he shakes a bunch of chicken's legs to wake up some wild dogs that start barking (13/20). This anecdote is told in a light tone and anticipates future troubles, since the narrator comments that the Doctors exploits his ruse in the worst possible way.

The Doctor can be seen as a double of the protagonist, but he is more experienced and does not take the identity issue too seriously. When he accompanies Ḥamdī in his first trip to Cairo, the experienced Doctor wears casual clothes, while the young boy wears the traditional Bedouin garb as a sign of belonging. At the end of the novel, the Doctor is fired from his post as doorkeeper for threatening the prostitution business run in the building. Because of this, he leaves Cairo and goes back to the village, where he quickly adapts to the new lifestyle, as suggested by the description of his clothes:

> He had eventually settled in the village and quickly acclimatized, transforming into a bona fide peasant: a Bedouin gallabiyah with braiding on the neck and sleeves, a cashmere shawl, a white woolen headscarf, broad shoulders, and great rough hands from scything grass and dragging animals around by their halters. (136/143)

The Doctor can adjust to every situation thanks to his fluid identity and his carelessness.

### 6.4.1.3 Abū ʿAntar, the landlord

The Doctor and the narrator share the same feelings towards Abū ʿAntar, the owner of the building in ʿAyn Shams where they rent a room. Their relationship is illustrated in a funny anecdote, which contains the setting, the backstory, and the key episode in only three pages. A number of awkward details prepare the ground for the epilogue, in which the landlord is ridiculed.

The story opens with a descriptive sequence. As already noted, the narrator usually inserts a brief description before or after telling the characters' stories, giving them a certain fixity and pointing out the ridiculous. In this case, the narrator exaggerates Abū ʿAntar's physical appearance, since he is extremely tall, and insists on a physical detail, his Adam's apple. Because of a speech impediment, Abū ʿAntar communicates with agitated gestures and animal-like sounds: "experience taught us to rely on his language. We growled, he growled, and each went his separate way" (108/116). This language, echoed by the tenants, dehumanizes the landlord and anticipates the communication difficulties that will cause the incidents.

The first sequence also describes the landlord's odd habits: he wears a *gallabiya* on bare skin, but the dress is too long and sweeps the stairs; he walks up and down the stairs, carrying heavy things, in a repetitive mechanic way.

The second sequence tells the antecedents, focusing on the hostile relationship between landlord and tenants. Besides other reasons, their incessant laughter (*wa-ḍaḥkunā ʿalā al-fāḍiyya wa-l-malyāna*, 107/115) makes Abū ʿAntar angry. In order to control his tenants, the landlord eavesdrops at their doors: "He merely had an excessively broad interpretation of a landlord's proper rights and powers." (108/116) This sentence confirms Booth's reading of some 'house novels' in contemporary Egyptian literature, including *Luṣūṣ*. These crowded dwellings do not provide any intimacy to the young tenants, who are subject to the neighbours' constant observation and the landlords' attempts to exert an autocratic yet precarious rule.[429]

Abū ʿAntar's behavior is ridiculous for a number of reasons: eavesdropping compensates his lack of speech; he is hunched over the keyholes, in an unnatural position; when the tenants open the door and catch him red-handed, he falls into their room.

The hostile relationship is the background for the key incident, which is caused by the tenants' will "to make a peace offering" (108/116). In the third sequence, the Doctor and the narrator see Abū ʿAntar carrying a heavy sack upstairs and help him, but something unexpected happens:

> Suddenly, his trousers fell down. They were white and baggy and from Saudi Arabia where he'd bought them back in the days of scrimp and save. One of us must have trodden on them, or maybe the elastic gave away. One moment they were round his buttocks and the next they were trailing between his feet. His bottom, perhaps from shame, was tightly clenched and looked like a mouth that had lost its teeth. I would never have guessed he had such a delightful bottom. Not skin on bone, but skin stretched across two hard muscles.
> The Doctor tried to cover him up. He growled a warning to the old man and tried repeatedly to lift the trousers, but Abu Antar climbed grimly until we reached the roof. […] [we] waited for him to go off and cover himself up, but he just stood there naked, his penis a monkey crouched in a jungle. Before we could put the sack down he growled and muttered to himself.
> "We're filthy," said his wife. (109/117)

This scene is made ludicrous by the insistence on physical details, in particular lower parts of the body, which are usually linked to sexuality and humour. The focus on the body is accentuated by two similes (a mouth, a monkey).

Another humour enhancer is repetition. For example, the verb 'to growl' *(zāma, yazūmu)*, repeated six times in the whole chapter, dehumanizes the protagonist and conveys the absurdity due to lack of communication. The phrase "in the days of scrimp

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[429] Booth, 'House as Novel', 380-83.

and save" *(ayyām al-rabṭ ʿalā al-baṭn)* is found in the above-mentioned passage as well as at the beginning of the chapter to describe Abū ʿAntar's migration to Saudi Arabia. This migration provided him the money to build the house, but did not change his status or improve his behavior.

This episode is funny because it narrates an embarrassing situation, combined with a disparaging attitude towards a patriarchal figure who embodies social authority.

## 6.4.2 Self-mockery of the aspiring writer

In the episodes examined above, humour is a surviving tool to endure the hardship of life and work; it renders both the vitality and the contradictions of the characters who inhabit the urban underworld. This segment of society is depicted from the perspective of the narrator, who is an aspiring writer. For him, construction work is a source of inspiration and a site where he can promote himself as an intellectual, by showing his published stories to his co-workers and to local families.

Nevertheless, the narrator insists on his failures as a writer and adopts a detached attitude towards his literary endeavours. The ironic distance with which he sees himself as a character results in a self-disparaging tone: when the narrator does not take himself too seriously, he can better express his 'in-between' condition.

As Temlaly puts it in his review, "L'autodérision est le défouloir qui lui permet de supporter cette entreprise de dédoublement permanent. Et le lieu de cette autodérision est un roman qu'il écrit à ses heures perdues".[430] Similarly, Lindsey notes that the narrator mentions his literary aspirations "sometimes as a form of redemption […] but mostly as an occasion for self-deprecation."[431]

We shall now examine three episodes in which self-mockery shapes this aspect of the protagonist's identity.

The first episode revolves around one of Ḥamdī's first writing attempts. He writes a short story about the plasterer Khalaf, who suffers from a pain in his back. However, the story is misunderstood on many levels (116/124).

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[430] Temlali, '«Al Faîl»'.

[431] Ursula Lindsey, 'Book review: 'Why did you leave the village?'', *The National*, 7 January 2010.

On one level, the original title *Qīthārat*<sup>u</sup> *Khalaf*<sup>i</sup> *l-bannā*<sup>ʾi</sup> ('The Guitar of Khalaf the Builder') is misspelled and published as *Qīthārat*<sup>un</sup> *khalfa l-binā*<sup>ʾi</sup> ('A Guitar Behind the Building'). Irony targets the young writer, who has great aspirations but stumbles on the complexities of the literary language; indirectly, it mocks the literary establishment that tends to romanticize the mundane content of stories.

On another level, Khalaf intends the literary piece as a formal complaint for his medical treatment. Thus, the young writer does not obtain recognition in the audience that he wants to impress, an audience that is probably not familiar with reading literature.

In another episode, the narrator goes to a group job interview for a position as cultural attaché. The awe-inspiring but unenthusiastic examiner takes Ḥamdī by surprise with his first question: he quotes a popular song and asks who the composer is. The protagonist reaction is inadequate to the situation, as he bursts out laughing:

> Before this could sink in, he snapped,
> "Whose words are those?"
> I burst out laughing. I had heard this song a number of times – I even hummed it to myself on occasion – but I never expected to hear it from the mouth of so exalted a personage. The way he drew out the song in a brutal warble then suddenly whirled around to surprise, or rather assault, me with his question was something I was unable to let pass in silence. I tried to apologize. I almost kissed his hands. I told him I was from the countryside, that I had just remembered something funny, but he insisted on canceling the meeting. My interview, and with it those of my friend and the other applicants, was at an end.
> But for that fatuous cackle I would've become a distinguished cultural official. I was the best candidate: I had brought a file of my published work. Let's have no regrets. It had nothing to [do] with laughter. (4/10-11)

This passage is interesting for three aspects. First of all, the narrator explains the mechanism of humour: laughter is caused by surprise, perceived as an assault *(bāghatanī aw fa-li-naqul taʿananī)*, and by the incongruity between the popular song and the examiner's high status *(rajul bi-hadhā al-waqār)*.

Secondly, Ḥamdī justifies himself by resorting to the image of the peasant, who is likely to act like a yokel or a fool. Thirdly, the final commentary exemplifies the narrator's detached attitude towards his own attempts to be considered an intellectual.

As he cannot fulfil his intellectual endeavours in the city, the protagonist plays the role of the intellectual when he goes back to the village:

Every now and then, every fortnight or so, I'd take a nice little sum back to the village. I'd rub oil and white spirit into my neck and hands to wipe away the last traces of plaster and cement, put on a clean, pressed gallabiyah, and spend the holiday at home posing as a man of importance, playing the village intellectual *[muthaqqaf al-qariyya]* to a tee. Rising late, towel slung over my shoulder I would make my way down the canal bank, toothbrush and toothpaste held aloft, then sit all day on the bench leafing through books and reading not a word. (117-18/126)[432]

In the village, Ḥamdī hides his true profession, which might debase the family's prestige, and assumes the role of the respected intellectual who has improved his condition in the city. Nevertheless, the narrator's self-mocking attitude reveals how feeble this constructed identity is. For example, Ḥamdī's pensive attitude is just an excuse to be lazy, and the symbols of urban civilization are ironically the toothbrush and the toothpaste, more than the books he pretends to read. He is convincing only because of the physical and cultural distance that separates the city and the village.

These episodes rely on self-mockery to question self-acceptance and social acceptance, while exposing the trickiness of the literary language and of the cultural establishment.


## 6.4.3 Negotiating Bedouin identity

### 6.4.3.1 Bedouin migration tales

As mentioned the section about the Bedouin village, the protagonist's displacement is preceded by his ancestors' migrations. Family history is told through short amusing anecdotes that reveal the contradictions of the Bedouin adapting to a new lifestyle. The previous generations hardly abandoned Bedouin customs and values in the new contexts, determining an incongruity between the expectations and their actual behaviour. The funny anecdotes examined here play on this incongruity and on the traditional opposition between villagers and citizens.


The first generation of Ḥamdī's ancestors includes the Bedouin who undergo the forced displacement to Abū Ṭāḥūn. The narrator imagines their reaction upon their arrival:

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[432] This excerpt repeats a passage found at p. 11/17.

Having thought about it, I figure it's a place you flee from, or at best a stopover, a staging post for passing travelers. I'm pretty sure that when my forebears dismounted here they were intending to stretch their legs, not to stay forever. (113/120)

This witty remark plays with the opposition between settling down *(al-istiqrār, al-iqāma al-dāʾima)* and fleeing *(al-firār)*. It reveals that Abū Ṭāḥūn is not an attracting settlement, thus it counter-balances the previous nostalgic image of the village.

The second generation is that of the narrator's grandfather, Awla, who lives until the 1950s and is among the Bedouin who gradually settle down. Nevertheless, he cannot completely abandon "his life of prowling and plundering" (5/11) and tries to convert his abilities into a modern business. He builds a room on the edge of the desert, almost an office, where he works as an agent: stolen livestock is hidden there; then the livestock owners come, pay a commission to Awla, and get their property back. This clever ruse allows him to take advantage of a non-regulated situation.

His antagonist is one of his relatives, depicted as the stereotypical modern cultivated citizen:

One night, thieves made off with sheep belonging to Abdullah Abu Mansour, my grandfather's cousin, one of the first people from the area to have attended a government school, and a lawyer. He was renowned for his sharp tongue and bizarre appearance, entering the village wearing a suit and riding a bicycle. He spoke with a city accent and treated his relatives and neighbors like wild animals. (5-6/12)

The cousin resorts to legal measures to frame Awla, but the latter sorts out the situation thanks to his informal local network. In their quarrel, the citizen is ridiculed by the sly Bedouin.

The following generation is that of the narrator's father. In his times, some Bedouin emigrate to Fayyūm City to work as doorkeepers, guards, and labourers:[433]

Impoverished Bedouin had been descending on Fayoum since the early forties in search of employment, the work the town's cultured denizens declined, such as manual labor, laying sewage pipes and electricity cables, and guarding agencies and institutions both public and private.
My father worked as a security guard at a private school in the center of town. (125/132-33)

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[433] The narrator describes urban changes in Fayyūm City. He mentions personal memories about public places (the cinema, restaurants, the train station), as well as a construction project which covered some archaeological ruins.

When the father moves to the city, he misunderstands many circumstances due to his ignorance of city customs and tries to solve contradictions by applying his Bedouin logic. In these episodes, he is the butt of humour: he is portrayed as the ignorant villager at loss in urban reality.

For example, when he and his wife see electricity for the first time in a city hospital, they misunderstand the electric cable for a snake and the socket for a rock. The father beats the cable with his stick, as he would do in the countryside or the desert. He understands the situation only when a passer-by, probably a citizen, explains it to him.[434] The juxtaposition of language registers renders the gap between what the parents know and what citizens, the narrator, and the reader know: the father and the mother speak with a Bedouin accent, which make this scene vivid; the action is followed by a commentary in Standard Arabic that reports with ironic distance how the mother tells her experience to the other villagers:

> She screamed at the top of her voice, "Abu Hamid! A snake!"
> "Where? Where is it?" gasped my father, and she pointed toward the socket. "In that rock," she said and gave the violent shudder of the authentic snakebite victim. Abu Hamid vengefully raised his staff and would have set about pulverizing the snake's lair had not a passing citizen explained to him that it was in fact electricity and not a snake. My mother saw her first television on the same trip and conveyed news of these two miracles back to the village. She told our goggled-eyed neighbors about the electric demon that stings like a snake and the black box full of tiny people who accost you and speak to you. (123-24/131)

Compared to the times of grandfather Awla, the confrontation between villagers and citizens is inverted. This suggests that Bedouin identity is weakening in the city or is confined only to external traits, as in the following episode. Once, the popular singer Ṣabāḥ (1927-2014) goes to Fayyūm City, where she sees the narrator's father and is attracted by his unusual appearance. His identity is reduced to external features, such as his traditional clothes and his dialect. He is playfully compared to a specimen of an extinct species:

> Sabah was clearly taken with his appearance, awestruck by this living dinosaur with his shanna and Bedouin dialect. […] When he remained motionless she offered to let him ride with her to the Auberge and take whatever he wanted in return. She would put a word in with the mayor to transfer him to a better job. He declined with maximal disdain and from that day forward was celebrated in Abu Tahoun and the surrounding villages as the man who turned down Sabah when she offered herself to him. (125-26/133-34)

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[434] In the original Arabic, the person giving the explanation is *aḥad al-mārra*, which means 'a passer-by'; the English translator renders it with "a passing citizen".

This anecdote mocks traditional Bedouin masculinity based on disdain *(ibāʾ)* and praise *(fakhr)*. The Bedouin disdainfully refuses Ṣabāḥ's friendly offers. When this accident turns into gossip, the sexual allusion is exaggerated and the father's refusal becomes a reason to brag in the male Bedouin community. The narrator unmasks that the group's narrative is the result of an exaggeration, thus questioning the veracity of the story itself.

### 6.4.3.2 Bedouin heritage

As illustrated in the narrator's family history, the Bedouin community undergoes economic difficulties and gradually loses its social prestige. As a consequence, it clings to supposedly famous figures in politics or literature, incidentally mentioned by the narrator: a member of parliament, a police officer, a martyr in the Palestinian uprising, and the translator of Chekhov and Dostoyevsky into Arabic.

Another reference to the Bedouin heritage is *al-sīra al-hilāliyya*, the lengthy prosimetric folk epic that tells the deeds of the Banū Hilāl tribe, from its migration from the Arabian Peninsula, to the conquest of North Africa, and its eventual annihilation.[435] Journeys, battles, and romances celebrate the qualities of bravery and prowess, even if the heroes are not devoid of weaknesses. Like other Arabic folk epics, *al-sīra al-hilāliyya* has developed interrelated oral and written traditions in the post-classical period. It is still popular, for example in Egypt where professional poets sing it in verse accompanied by music. The appearance of new forms of entertainment has reduced the number of master poets, but the epic tradition is kept alive in social gatherings and through cassette recordings. It remains a key element of Arabic and Egyptian popular culture.

In *al-Fāʿil*, *al-sīra al-hilāliyya* is used as an intertextual reference in two occurrences. In chapter 5, the narrator reports that his family claims to descend from the Hilāl tribe, in order to link themselves to the positive image of the brave and generous Bedouin. However, the narrator insists only on the negative sides of this reference that, according to him and his mother's wisdom, better suit his family's real attitude:

> The Abu Golayyel family are al-Rimah Bedouin, and it's claimed that they are descended from al-Fawayid Bedouin such as Judge Badir of the Sira Hilaliya, the epic saga of the Hilal tribe. Interestingly, some of them resemble old Badir, especially when it comes

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[435] Dwight F. Reynolds, 'Sīrat Banī Hilāl', in *Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period*, 307–18.

to meanness, cowardice, and shiftiness. My mother describes one of my uncles as a catfish. "He's slippery," she says. "You can't get a hold on him." (26/31)

In chapter 27, instead, *al-sīra al-hilāliyya* is a form of entertainment for the group of construction workers, who spend their working hours and spare time together in the same building:

> If we were working two week-long shifts in a row he'd buy a kilo of meat from a famous butcher in Doqqi, I'd cook it with rice or pasta, and we'd spend our Thursday and Friday listening to the Sira Hilaliya, the epic of the Hilal tribe. He lived for the Sira, and through the long night he would vie with the tape recorder for the honor of narrating it to me. (116/124)

The nocturnal gatherings of these urbanized Bedouin and peasants are a modern version of the reciting sessions that have given form to the epic: the tape recorder competes with the storyteller, and contemporary urban migrants enjoy listening to the deeds of nomadic wanderers and warriors.

This incidental reference brings together Egyptian folk heritage, nomadic existential condition, and storytelling as a narrative technique. The narrator, who praises *miʿallim* Bakr for his ability to narrate the *sīra*, indirectly refers to his own narrative technique: he weaves together anecdotes of his life story *(al-sīra al-dhātiyya)* and enriches the history of the Bedouin community with a plurality of voices, that speak through legends and sayings.

## 6.4.4 Laughing together: the social dimension of humour

The playful tone of the anecdotes about the grandfather and father connects their past experience with the protagonist's present condition, whose migration and identity negotiation are described with irony.

Far away from the community of origins, Ḥamdī reconstructs a small community of friends who share the same origins, accent, and sense of humour. Their social interactions display the collective dimension of humour that functions as social glue or psychological relief. Humour is more effective when wordplay and puns rely on a shared dialect or jargon; it also creates a sense of group affiliation, since it activates a common cultural and comic background.

We have already mentioned the community of flat-mates whose incessant laughter irritates the landlord. Similarly, a clique of friends *(shilla)* accompanies the protagonist in his college years. He studies in the not well reputed Umm Ḥassan College in Banī Suwayf, where students from provincial cities, the countryside, and Bedouin villages meet. Ḥamdī befriends two Bedouin from the Fayyūm and two Bedouin from al-Minyā (Upper Egypt). This group of friends makes the protagonist more confident about his Bedouin identity, that he had previously tried to hide. In their company, he wears traditional clothes and is proud of his accent. Their dialect is almost a code language, unintelligible to those outside their Bedouin clique. It is used to make fun of other male students and to harass female students.

The Bedouin invective tradition is transferred into a contemporary context, with a shift from poetic flyting *(naqāʾid)* to direct insults *(shatāʾim*, 103/112). The young protagonist relies on this language use to assert his masculinity, but the narrator points out how this strategy fails, for example in the episode of the Bedouin girl who answers to his insult in kind.


At college, Ḥamdī takes part into in a students' demonstration. University protests have had a key role in Egyptian modern history and have been portrayed in some contemporary novels as a formative moment in the life of young characters.

Ḥamdī has a marginal non-active role that leads him to focus on marginal details and portray the demonstration from an unusual perspective. He ends up being arrested simply because he does not take the change to flee.

Arrested students, close to the Muslim Brotherhood or not, are transferred from the college to the Directorate of State Security on a Central Security truck. During the journey they start laughing to express solidarity and to erase the fear of being tortured. This is the chapter's opening scene:

> The central security truck was as packed as a public bus. Fifty students hale and hearty, a disabled student, and a student who turned out to be the son of a police officer and got out before we started to move. As I got in I saw a student I recognized. We'd never had much to do with each other but the moment we saw each other we shrieked and embraced in an ecstasy of relief. Staggering about, we both spoke simultaneously, "Did you see? Did you see what happened?" then burst into an uncontrollable torrent of giggles. I tried to pull myself together, reminding myself of the slaps and kicks to come, but it was no good. We were past caring, every one of us, and then it was all playful punches and slaps on shoulders, buttocks, and the backs of our necks. Even the soldiers were laughing. They took us from

the college to the Beni Suef Directorate of State Security, and the entire journey was spent doubled up with laughter. Had you seen us in our security truck you would've thought we were on a school trip or off to a wedding. (77/82)

Laughter is contagious, as it flows among the students as "an uncontrollable torrent" and involves the soldiers. It is a physical reaction, a release of physical and psychological energy between the two tense moments of arrest and torture. In this carnivalesque scene, rules and hierarchies between the protesters and the authority are temporarily suspended. The students' odd behavior is emphasized by two similes (the public bus, the trip or wedding party) that hint at ordinary situations that have nothing to do with political arrest.

Later students are transferred to the military prison and eventually to the general prison, where they are jailed with common criminals who, according to the prison's director, might violate them. Therefore, Ḥamdī avoids any social relation, until a lifer starts taking care of him because they come from the same region. The protagonist becomes part of a community of fellow-villagers, whose gatherings reproduce social habits from the countryside and whose humour makes prison life lighter.

One of them is particularly known for his sense of humour. When Ḥamdī first meets this man, he misunderstands him for a dangerous criminal who might rape him. When they meet again, in company of their mutual friends, humour reveals the misunderstanding and dispels the negative image:

> The man with the oranges came in and said to me, "Scared of me, you idiot? Believe me, I'd fuck the blanket I sleep on it if started twitching, but you? Never." We all laughed and made up. He was a born comedian; he could get a laugh from a lump of stone. He worked as a burglar and spent his life either sitting in jail or breaking in to apartments.
> We would perform a little pantomime together that for some reason used to make me howl with laughter. Each time I met him I would say hello, and just as he was about to walk on I'd say, "Wait a moment, Amm Shehata," and carefully count my fingers, checking over and over again that they were all there. "Go ahead, Amm Shehata," I'd say, and we'd roar.
> So: I never left his side – meaning, of course, my upstanding fellow countryman and his band of killers and pickpockets. (87/92-93)

In this passage, a person with great sense of humour is defined *"shakhṣ ẓarīf maraḥ qādir ʿalā iḍḥāk ṭūb al-arḍ"* (a witty hilarious person who can make everybody laugh).[436]

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[436] The idiomatic expression *yuḍḥiku ṭūb al-arḍ* appears in the Egyptian press to describe renowned humorists, including writers, journalists, cartoonists, and actors. For example, that journalist Sāmī Kamāl al-Dīn (b. 1978) chooses this expression for the title of his collection of anecdotes about famous Egyptian humorists: Sāmī Kamāl al-Dīn, *Alladhīna aḍḥakū ṭūb al-arḍ* (Those who made everybody laugh, Cairo: Dār al-kitāb al-ʿarabī li-l-nashr wa-l-tawzīʿ, 2008).

In the first episode of this excerpt, the man makes fun of his own sexual desire that the newcomer had initially perceived as a threaten. This banter eases tension. The sexual reference is paired with a colloquial register: *"yā ʿabīṭ"* ("you idiot") and *"anām maʿahā"* ("I'd fuck", literally 'I'd sleep with it').

The second episode is a gag (*masraḥiyya*) performed by the main character and the convict. It jokes about robbery, that is the reason why the man is convicted. In prison, his criminal potential as a robber is debased and turned into a comic potential.

This playful atmosphere is interrupted when the narrator's mother's visits him, which makes him cry out of shame (89-90/94-95).

The centrality of laughter and humor in these episodes provides an original account of prison life that reinterprets the tradition of prison writing. As regards the social functions of humour, it strengthens the sense of community and is a resistance tool to authoritarian constraints.

## 6.4.5 Humour and religion

Religion, in its social dimension, is a secondary narrative trend in *al-Fāʿil* and *Luṣūṣ*. We can compare how both novels tackle this topic in respect to humour-related phenomena (irony, sarcasm, and comic anecdotes).

In *Luṣūṣ* religion is one of the social dimensions in which corruption and false morality manifest themselves. Religion-related episodes thus share the overall sarcastic tone of the novel: social relations in the marginal neighbourhood are portrayed with objectivity in order to reveal their contradictions, highlighted by the narrator's sarcastic commentary.

Two characters embody this narrative. The first one is Shaykh Ḥassan (chapter 5), who leaves his hometown in Upper Egypt, Sūhāj, because he has slept with his mother-in-law. He meets Abū Jamāl when they are both waiting for their respective *fatwā* from *al-Azhar*. Ḥassan becomes a tenant in Abū Jamāl's building and tries to erase his sin by increasing his religious devotion. After some time, his economic success and his self-confidence lead to a power struggle with the building's owner.

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To give another example, a newspaper article commemorating the actor Saʿīd Ṣāliḥ (1938-2014) quotes the satirical writer Maḥmūd al-Saʿdanī (1928-2010), who used this idiomatic expression to describe Ṣāliḥ in his book *al-Muḍḥikūn* (Humorists, Cairo: Dār al-hilāl, 1991). See, A.Sh.A., 'Saʿīd Ṣāliḥ… Wadāʿan "li-l-mubhij wa-l-mubtahij wa-l-muthaqqaf bi-lā iddiʿāʾāt"', *Al-Dustūr*, 6 August 2014.

Shaykh Ḥassan publicly criticizes Jamāl's moral conduct in the mosque: "Naturally, this announcement was considered a slip of the tongue and no one paid it any mind." (*Luṣūṣ* 48/55) Abū Jamāl reacts by revealing the *shaykh*'s secret and the latter is driven out of the neighbourhood: "And because, when all was said and done, the Shaykh was a stranger and an outsider, what Abu Gamal said was not taken as a mere slip of the tongue. The people of Manshiyat Nasir refused to host the Shaykh even until the next morning." (*Luṣūṣ* 49/56)

The second character is the Copt ʿĀdil from Sūhāj (chapter 12), nicknamed Koftes *(kūftis* or *kūftas)*. This nickname sounds like an insult to him, because it reminds him of the humiliating episode that excluded him from his group of friends when he was a child.

In *Luṣūṣ*, names and nicknames bear an implicit ironic meaning that is sometime made explicit through wordplay. For example, ʿĀdil is "Man of Just Mind" (*Thieves* 90); a tenant introduces his wife as "the Beauty Queen of Bani Sueif" despite her ungraceful appearance; Jamāl means 'beauty', and the narrator adds "but I really should call him the Guy with Style" (*Luṣūṣ* 25/29). [437] In particular, critics suggest that the choice to name the rival father and son respectively Abū Jamāl and Jamāl plays with the evolution of Egyptian politics: the father, a product of the Nasserist revolution, names his first-born son after the President;[438] the son, who diverges from his father's vision for his individualistic entrepreneurship and moral conduct, "is a shadow of Sadat".[439] The struggle between these ideologies is rendered with ironical echoes of Nasserist vocabulary and revolutionary discourse.

ʿĀdil first attaches to Abū Jamāl, then he befriends ʿĀmir and joins his marijuana-smoking gang, contributing to their high times with his sense of humour: "Adil loves jokes and banter *[al-nikāt wa-l-qafashāt]*. He always gets the punch line. And Amer has a crying need for a pal *[nadīmᵃⁿ]* who can appreciate his puns when they're having a high time. It was only a matter of days before Adil became one of the bango gang." (*Luṣūṣ* 101/101)

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[437] The English translator renders the wordplay based on the double meaning as proper names and common nouns. In some cases, the common meaning is made explicit as additional information, even without any wordplay. This is the case of ʿĀdil mentioned here. We think that this choice is due to the recognition of an overall ironic strategy, which consists in naming the characters after a quality contrasting with their personality or behaviour.

[438] El Sadda, *Gender*, 192.

[439] Booth, 'Introduction', xv.

In order to explain ʿĀdil's personality, the narrator reports two key episodes related to his religious identity: when the young boys first treated him as a "Koftes" and when his father, the village's carpenter, failed to repair the mosque's roof. Here the narrator adopts ʿĀdil's perspective, then distances himself and doubts of ʿĀdil's reliability as a storyteller. In the end, the Copt is an outsider both in the village of origins and in the urban neighbourhood. This questions religious harmony and equality in Egyptian society, contesting the official discourse in which this issue is given for granted as part of the Egyptian cultural heritage.

While *Luṣūṣ* employs a sarcastic tone of to comment on contemporary religious dynamics, *al-Fāʿil* resorts to a certain ironic distance. For example, the university demonstration is led by students who are close to the Muslim Brotherhood. The narrator admits that "they were the most powerful opposition [he]'d ever seen in [his] life" (105/114), but he does not share their fervour. Another example is found in chapter 11, which describes religious awakening in the countryside, where religious habits used to be informal. It mentions an indoctrinated *shaykh*, Osama Bin Laden, and a transnational proselytizing group.

The narrative set in the Heliopolis building, on the contrary, reminds of the first novel's style, since sarcasm and coarse language expose moral laxity. The events take place during the Holy Month of Ramaḍān. The Doctor, who works there as a doorkeeper, initially stays away from the prostitution network by increasing his religious practice, but eventually his resistance falls. His initial religious attachment is ridiculed by the nickname *mawlānā* ('your Worship', an honorific form of address meaning 'our Master, our Lord').[440] At the end of the story, the Doctor wants to make a scandal about the prostitution network, but his plan is illogical and turns against him.

Finally, a short funny anecdote portrays the struggle between security forces and political religious dissent, a central component in the contemporary Egyptian political landscape. This episode is set in the 1980s in Fayyūm City:

> I heard the tales – or rather, the divine miracles – of Sheikh Omar Abd al-Rahman, who used to preach at the mosque under the noses of State Security agents and then walk the

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[440] In *al-Fāʿil*, there is not the same insistence on ironic names and nicknames as in *Luṣūṣ*. *Mawlānā* is the only overtly ironic nickname. The protagonist is called *al-adīb* (the writer, the author), but it is not always ironic.

streets surrounded by a throng of supporters. State Security was unable to arrest him due to the press of people and the multitude of blind doubles dressed like the Sheikh. Each time they thought they'd finally arrested the sightless sage and each time their victim would tell them he was a look-alike and that the sly old fox had fled to Asyut or Minya or some other place. (126/134)

Several elements generate humour here: the ruse of the look-alikes *(ashbāh)* evokes the artificial nature of doubles; the repetitiveness of the action makes it mechanical; blindness, usually associated with wise religious figures, might be a handicap but turns into an advantage; finally, the colloquial word *"il-dāhiyya"* ("the sly old fox", literally 'calamity, sly devil'), used to define the *shaykh*, reflects the security forces' frustration.

The playful tone of this episode mocks the difficulties of the national authority in facing the resistance of a specific group. Similarly, humour heightens the critical attitude of other groups in the novels: for example, students dispel the fear of being tortured by laughing, while Bedouin history consists of various attempts to elude central control.

# 6.5 Conclusion

Since *al-Fāʿil* does not follow a clear plot, humorous anecdotes contribute to the development of all the narrative threads and cover various aspects of the narrator's identity as a worker, an aspiring writer, and an urbanized Bedouin. These accounts exploit humour at two levels: on the level of action, humour is performed by lively characters, almost outcasts, who are put in amusing situations; on the level of narration, a certain distance unmasks the odd and the incongruous in life and social relations. The narrating voice oscillates between involvement in the action and detached observation.

This 'in-betweenness' is the condition of the migrating subject. It leads to develop the quest for identity as a central theme and self-mockery as a key stylistic feature. Self-mockery targets both the individual (Ḥamdī as a character and narrator) and the communities he belongs to (the Bedouin family, students, prisoners, workers, and marginalized urban migrants). When comedy is performed by these groups, it functions as social glue and provides some relief. In some episodes examined above, humour can be seen as a form of resistance: in construction work, odd behaviors break the heavy daily routine and social constraints; non-national communities such as the Bedouin and

religious movements resist central authority; finally, family history is an alternative to official history.

The episodes presented above share some humour-generating techniques. First of all, there are many doubles who duplicate the narrator's displacement or his life on the city's margins. In this way, his experience is compared to other migration trajectories, which are never entirely successful. This lack of success provides a sort of consolation. Moreover, the double is a projection and reminds of Bergson's concept of the mechanical encrusted on the living. This creates incongruities and generates a comic effect.

Another recurrent image is the rivalry between the city and the countryside, which has a long tradition in popular humour. Anecdotes play on stereotypical images of cultivated citizens, gullible peasants, and sly Bedouin. At the same time, humour smooths these stereotypes, since they are alternatively embodied by the narrator's fluid identity or mocked by him.

Humorous characters are constructed through their odd behavior, preceded or followed by brief physical descriptions. These illustrate the narrator's observation ability and give a certain fixity to the characters, as if they were captured by a camera. In these descriptions and in the actions, there is a focus on the lower parts of the body or on some grotesque physical features. The focus on the body is accompanied by sexual references and vulgar expressions, which are not as frequent as in *Luṣūṣ*.

Language plays a significant role in creating the humorous tone. The Bedouin dialect and the workers' jargon are distinctive traits of the communities portrayed in *al-Fāʿil*; similarly, *Luṣūṣ* characterized the inhabitants of the *manshiyya* through a colloquial register, coarse words, and hashish smokers' jargon. When these registers are juxtaposed with more formal ones, there is room for ironic distance and commentaries.

Besides this, the narrator dialogues with the language of official historiography and historical novels to construct a historical counter-discourse: for instance, Maḥfūẓ's literary representation of the 1919 revolution is mentioned. The narrating voice introduces also popular storytelling about his ancestors and gossip circulating in the Bedouin community. Folklore reinforces community ties, but narrator's skeptical attitude questions the veracity of oral story-making and his own story-writing.

Several of these aspects have already appeared in Abū Julayyil's first novel, but *al-Fāʿil* relies less on sarcasm and more on irony and playfulness.

# Chapter 7

# HUMOUR-GENERATING TECHNIQUES: A COMPARATIVE LOOK

> Some two decades earlier, in the mid-eighties, the city of Alexandria saw the opposition strike a blow that was, back then, quite unprecedented anywhere in Egypt. It was in a number of summer theaters – where troupes would put on plays starring comedians of the first rank, like Sayyid Zayyan, Mohamed Nigm, Waheed Saif, and a very young Mohamed al-Heneidi – that the seeds of Alexandria's first political protest against its oppressors in the modern era took root. Audiences took to whistling at and applauding any scene that bore a trace, however faint, of political subversion. And if we bear in mind that these were family theaters first and foremost – since throughout the eighties and nineties Egyptian families would spend the summer months in Alexandria – then we can add to this the fact that they raised a generation of children who received their first political lessons there and later, as tumultuous youths, would put them into practice.[441]

> We only talked about things that would lighten the mood: films we'd seen recently, some interesting new music, tales of the wonders and oddities recited by taxi drivers, the jesters of the city.[442] […]
> Ihāb was carrying a copy of the English translation of *Wikālat ʿAṭiyya* by Khayrī Shalabī.[443]

After having examined the four novels as separate case studies, this chapter will compare them to illustrate how the combination of textual elements generates the overall humorous effect. We shall identify similarities and differences in the novels of the corpus, focusing on the interplay of humour with narratological categories, intertextual references, and stylistic features. These considerations will help us draw our conclusions

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[441] Nael Eltoukhy, *Women of Karantina*, trans. Robin Moger (Cairo and New York: AUC Press, 2014), 31-32. Original Arabic: Nāʾil al-Ṭūkhī, *Nisāʾ al-Karantīnā* (Cairo: Dār Mīrīt, 2013).

[442] Aḥmad Nājī, *Istikhdām al-ḥayāt* (Beirut: Dār al-tanwīr, 2014), 147. The English translation of this excerpt, by Ben Koerber, is taken from Marcia Lynx Qualey, '"Using Life": A Novel Excerpt on Trial in Egypt', *Arabic Literature (in English)*, 25 January 2016.

[443] Ibid., 172.

in the next chapter and reflect on the impact of this sub-genre on contemporary Egyptian fiction.

# 7.1 Narratological aspects

## 7.1.1 Narrators

All four novels employ first-person narrators who are writers or aspiring writers. Their attitude towards the story ranges from direct involvement to detachment, which activates different mechanisms of humour: the narrators of *Riḥlāt*, *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa*, and *al-Fāʿil* may be defined as participant observers of the community they satirize, whereas the narrator of *Min al-tārīkh* is more detached. The latter embodies many incongruities, which turn him into the victim of irony.

The participant observers seek identification with the characters and setting to involve the readers in a verisimilar story, close to their experience. Their complexity increases from *Riḥlāt* to *al-Fāʿil*, where the narrating voice is a fragmented self. They achieve this identification with similar techniques, such as their role as authoritative guides and the choice of anonymity or an evocative name.

The narrator of *Riḥlāt* is called Ibn Shalabī to evoke the Arab cultural heritage, especially *adab*, which aimed at entertaining while instructing. This name is also reminiscent of modern prose narratives known for their satirical vein: al-Muwayliḥī names his narrator ʿĪsā ibn Hishām to recall the classical *maqāma*, whereas al-Shidyāq crafts a semi-autobiographical name for the protagonist of his travelogue,[444] which parodies different writing conventions including the *maqāma*.

Basing the narrator's name on the author's surname facilitates the identification with the implied author. Furthermore, this name is extended to all Egyptians (called *banū Shalabī*) to seek identification with the implied reader. Ibn Shalabī, in fact, is the best representative of his national community and an ordinary man like them. Similarly, al-Tūnisī named the protagonists of his dialogic narratives is-Sayyid and Sayyida, two

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[444] The protagonists are Fāriyāq and his wife Fāriyāqa.

proper names that literally mean 'Mr.' and 'Mrs.' respectively, who represent Everyman and Everywoman.[445]

While *Riḥlāt*'s narrator presents himself as an ordinary participant, he is also an acute social observer. Having gained some experience and critical distance from his own society thanks to time-travelling, he plays the role of the mentor. When he reports about his journeys, he acts as a guide who examines various facets of Egyptian society to expose its shortcomings. This didactic dimension of satire is well integrated with the fictional events and the overall humorous effect is not reduced by any claim for social or moral reform.

Since this role is more effective with dialogic interactions, Ibn Shalabī splits himself into two (a savvy commentator and a naïve victim) or encounters some historians and rulers of the past with whom he exchanges questions and answers, drawing a comparison between the two eras. His view of contemporary Egyptian society virtually coincides with that of the implied author and implied reader: his way of relating the events confirms their knowledge of social injustice, oppression, and hardship in everyday life. Sometimes a certain distance with the implied author emerges, revealing that the narrator acts like a know-it-all and someone who complains about the situation but does not fight to change it.

Unlike Ibn Shalabī, the narrator of *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa* is anonymous. He seeks identification with his coterie, a subaltern group which represents Egyptian society. He guides the reader into the urban underworld, which becomes a familiar environment thanks to his internal perspective. Over the novel, this narrating voice increases his knowledge about the events but, conversely, becomes more introspective.

Even more introspective is the narrator of *al-Fāʿil*, who starts his account as an anonymous Bedouin and later tells that his name is Ḥamdī. He presents himself as a liminal observer, who oscillates between being involved in the events and judging them from the outside.

Indeed, when he narrates the stories of his Bedouin family and co-workers, he mixes admiration and contempt: he shares some features with them, but feels somehow superior.

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[445] Booth, *Bayram*, 315. These dialogic narratives do not include any diegetic dimension, but are entirely based on the protagonists' exchange of ideas via direct speech.

In other words, he distances himself from the narrated events, revealing their contradictions and the characters' naïveté. The same ambivalence is found in Ḥamdī's attitude towards himself, ranging from admiration to self-mockery.

The narrating voice of *Min al-tārīkh* is very complex, since it is the narrator-author of Nuʿmān's biography, which oscillates between scholarly and fictional writing conventions. As a first-person narrator, he is a character witnessing the story from a certain distance: he is an anonymous scholar who hails from Dayrūṭ and collects information about a boy of the same village. As a writer, he arranges the oral and written sources, classifies them as reliable and non-reliable (often using the first-person plural), and declares that his aim is defending Nuʿmān from his detractors.

Sometimes this narrating voice hides and the events appear on the foreground, as though they were presented from an external perspective. Still, most of the time he is intrusive: he makes commentaries about the villagers' accounts, because he knows more than his sources and the characters; however, in some cases he admits to know less than the characters, because he has not accessed the correct sources.

In this way, he embodies many contradictions: he wants to be authoritative, but the story slips through his fingers; he relates the events in an apparently detached way, but his opinion appears from the way he arranges the sources and footnotes; finally, his aim is informative, but his style is redundant.

Unlike Ibn Shalabī, the narrator-biographer is not a social observer who ridicules his own society. It is rather the novella's implied reader who notes the incongruity of his reports and the absurdity of the fictional world. Instead of being the agent of humour, this narrator becomes the subject of ridicule. He is laughable for his flowery prose and the big effort he puts in documenting a trivial story. Still, the reader sympathizes with him because he tries to craft a positive image of Nuʿmān, but hopelessly fails.

By arranging the events, describing the characters, and reporting their words, the narrator shapes the script of the characters and orients the reader's affiliations. These two aspects are relevant in humorous novels because they correspond to the cognitive processing and attitudinal positioning respectively, which are necessary for the creation and appreciation of verbal humour. Larkin Galinañes argues that the narrating voice of

humorous novels is consistent in his attitude toward the characters. He seeks the positive identification of the implied reader with himself and those characters he favours, and negative identification with the opposing characters.[446]

When dialogues prevail, the character's script is shaped by the content and diction of his/her utterances. For example, the protagonist of *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa* attracts a positive affiliation because he speaks in a direct way and supports freedom. At the same time, the narrator and the clique, whose internal perspective is adopted, admire him. The reader, thus, is oriented to side with him and is ready to forgive his excesses.

On the contrary, in *Min al-tārīkh* dialogues are scarce and the village's voices are filtered by the narrator. This narrative technique breaks the illusion of realism and places a certain distance between the events on the one hand and the narrator and implied reader on the other. While this narrator focuses on the external dimension of events and utterances, as if they did not affect him, they happen in the same society he belongs to. Like Nuʿmān, he is the product of the rural world he distances from thanks to his knowledge and command of language.

Finally, all four narrators are writers or aspiring writers, who belong to the community of Egyptian intellectuals.[447] This status allows them to ridicule the literary establishment. Shalabī targets some renowned writers and journalists as well as the internal dynamics of intellectual circles. The narrators of Shalabī's and Abū Julayyil's novels look at their own intellectual endeavours with self-mockery.

To sum up, we have identified two narrative strategies: either the narrator seeks identification with the portrayed community and the implied reader or he distances himself to judge the world from the outside. In both cases, experimental techniques break the illusion of realism.

As we have illustrated, these narrators are 'in-between' members of marginal groups within the Egyptian national community. Therefore, they offer an eccentric perspective

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[446] Larkin Galinañes, 'Narrative Structure', 145.

[447] The anonymous biographer of *Min al-tārīkh* mentions some historians and existentialist writers, but we do not have any information about his own recognition as a scholar; Ibn Shalabī is a journalist who knows many contemporary writers and intellectuals; the anonymous narrator of *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa* is an aspiring novelist, works as a journalist, and knows some intellectuals; the narrators of *al-Fāʿil* and *Luṣūṣ* are aspiring writers.

on society and reveal its incongruities. On a formal level, the narrators of *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa* and *al-Fāʿil* adopt their group's jargon and storytelling techniques.

These communities may experience a displacement, but they identify with a specific place, as we shall illustrate in the following section.

## 7.1.2 Space and time

In our analysis of the novels, we have examined the techniques of space representation, focusing on the homology between space and characters. In the first place, marginal spaces host unconventional subjects like vagrants, hash smokers, and daily workers, whose surviving strategies are reminiscent of picaresque characters. This underworld bursts with vitality and responds to its own internal logic: it appears as a topsy-turvy world in comparison to official spaces.

Secondly, this homology regards the indigenousness of the place and characters. Villages and popular districts are the homeland of authentic Egyptians, such as the villager, Bedouin, and urban *ibn al-balad*, who become the stereotypical representatives of their communities. Therefore, they talk in a local form of colloquial Arabic and their sense of humour mirrors their folk and street culture.

This technique is exemplified by Ṣāliḥ, whose existence coincides with that of the den, and the labourers of *al-Fāʿil*, who work and live in dilapidated houses. A single building (or buildings with similar features in *al-Fāʿil*) is depicted as a microcosm that embodies the urban and social changes. The den and the apartment building, in fact, mirror the characters' precarious living conditions, sense of crowded alienation, and semi-legal status. This representation combines nostalgia and criticism, and Abū Julayyil extends this two-fold approach to the depiction of the Bedouin village.

This shift from the village to the city coincides with the main trends of spatial representation in Egyptian fiction, *i.e.* the village novel, a focus on the margins, and a return to the city centre. The four novels depict respectively an Upper Egyptian village, Old Cairo, and the informal urban districts where countryside and city merge.

These settings revive the traditional narrative trope of the rural-urban rivalry in a humorous way. For example, *Min al-tārīkh* does not portray the village and the city in

detail, but links them with idyllic nature and awe-inspiring buildings respectively. When the two worlds encounter, they are contrasted: the village preserves the beauty of nature, but is reluctant to implement social change, whereas the city is the site of refinement and education, as well as exploitation of the dispossessed.

In *al-Fāʿil*, the Bedouin village and the city become the sites of a double alienation. This alienation starts with the previous generations, whose misadventures 'in-between' the desert, the village, and the city shape a family story of migrations.

While reinterpreting the rural-urban rivalry, these novels do not employ another canonical spatial opposition found in Egyptian satirical writings and fiction, *i.e.* the comparison of Egypt and the West.


With their focus on recent urban changes in liminal neighbourhoods, Shalabī and Abū Julayyil give a new meaning to some public spaces. For instance, the café is commonly depicted in Egyptian literature as a site of aggregation, cultural debate, and political activism. While preserving the function of social gathering, the hash den in *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa* hosts an alternative sub-culture, whereas the café in *al-Fāʿil* becomes a transit place where daily workers are hired.

Similarly, *al-Fāʿil* ridicules the empowering role of university as a cultural institution and site of the students' political engagement, thus challenging the reader's encyclopaedic knowledge and the fictional tradition. In this novel, university is the site where the protagonist fails both in his studies and relation with the other sex, and establishes a network of friends unconcerned with politics. Still, because of his accidental involvement a students' demonstration, he is arrested.

Prison is another place that carries two opposite scripts in these writings: the negative script of torture and humiliation is subverted by the positive image of a supportive community, which adopts the counter-culture of laughter. In *al-Fāʿil*, the sense of humour shared among the prisoners dispels their fear, whereas the Storehouse of banners in *Riḥlāt* is initially designed as a prison, but later becomes a state within the state. There Ibn Shalabī enters a counter-community of people who enjoy buffoonery, practical jokes, sarcasm, breaking social conventions, and entertainment by means of intoxication (mainly drinking).

To use a metaphor taken from *al-Fāʿil*, urban spaces undergo a process of demolition and construction. By mapping the city, these writers revive the urban heritage and record the changes made by the population and the authorities. This strategy is relevant in *Riḥlāt*, in which Shalabī brings back to life the monuments of Old Cairo, a traditional district that was neglected by urban modernization and recently renovated as a touristic attraction.

Shalabī digs beneath the touristic image of *khān* al-Khalīlī, *maqhā* al-Fīshāwī, the Fatimid mosques, the Ayyubid citadel, and Mamluk palaces to suggest that these monuments preserve national history and identity. His archaeological recovery of the past coincides with his appraisal of Arab cultural heritage and folk culture, in an attempt to link the Egyptian-ness to the genius of the place.

An image symbolizing urban change is the earthquake. *Al-Fāʿil* portrays how the 1992 earthquake affected Cairo's population and caused displacement, although it did not affect the protagonist. *Riḥlāt* mentions the earthquake which destroyed al-Ḥakīm mosque in 1303 and refers metaphorically to this natural phenomenon to describe the boisterous guffaw of some grotesque characters.


Like spatial displacement, anachronism can provoke laughable misunderstandings. This is a key humorous strategy in *Riḥlāt*, whose characters travel across time, bringing with them their mentality, way of speaking, and material culture. In addition, we can see the protagonist's parents in *al-Fāʿil* as out of place in the city's hospital, as if they came from another era.

However, our research has focused less on time than on space. We have noted that the novels of our corpus move from chronological to fragmented time: *Min al-tārīkh* follows the chronological order of biographies; in *Riḥlāt*, the protagonist jumps from one era to another, bouncing back and forth the Fatimid and Ayyubid periods (chapters 1-7) and later following the chronological order, when he enters the Mamluk era (chapters 8-24).

*Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa* renders the routine at the hash den in a repetitive present and explores the past with some flashbacks. The time of the discourse accelerates in the last part of the novel, in which the narrator briefly summarizes and partially omits (ellipsis) what happens after Ṣāliḥ's arrest. Finally, in *al-Fāʿil*, time is fragmented and there is no chronological progression. It follows the narrator's mental associations and gives the novel a circular structure.

In all four novels, it is possible to isolate small temporal units corresponding to the main character's adventures. As Propp remarks, this anecdotic structure is typical of travelogues and biographical accounts, in which the main narrative thread can be divided into self-contained episodes. Their brevity favours the explosion of humour.[448] The novels of our corpus fit into the models of the travelogue and the biographical account. In addition, the episodic structure evokes humorous anecdotes and the *maqāma*.

## 7.1.3 Characters

After looking at the characters in relation to the narrating voice and space representation, this section focuses on them as a specific narratological category. The novels of our corpus are constructed around the (mis)adventures of a male protagonist who maintains a clearly-defined and consistent image all over the episodes of his biographical account or travelogue.

This coincides with Larkin Galinañes's considerations about the construction of humorous types. She notes that, since the first chapters, such characters are presented through a broad range of illocutionary acts (their physical descriptions, actions and reactions, reported speech) pointing at a limited range of salient characteristics, which are confirmed again and again in the subsequent episodes.[449] In other words, these fictional personae are well-defined, uncomplicated, and consistent in their behaviour.

Every time that the characters appear in the narrative, they evoke a specific script in the reader's mind, *i.e.* a set of defined traits and expectations as to their behaviour. Over the novel, these expectations may be incongruous with the events or the reader's encyclopaedic knowledge of the world, but these incongruities are playfully solved.

For example, Nuʿmān is the perfect victim: he is an orphan of humble origins who does not receive formal education and is at the mercy of other people. Since he is a naïve and simple character, he is the target of what Muecke calls '*ingénu* irony', which is very recurrent across literatures.

Referring to Muecke, Paniconi defines Dhāt – the female protagonist of the homonymous novel by Ṣ. Ibrāhīm – as an *ingénu[e]*, who seems eccentric to society but

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[448] Propp, *On the Comic*, 158-60.
[449] Larkin Galinañes, 'Narrative Structure', 144-45.

activates the ironic look on society itself.[450] She appears as naïve because her capacity of judgement is lower than that of the narrator and implied reader. In Nuʿmān's case, we can bring this asymmetrical relation to its extreme, wondering whether he has any capacity of judgement at all. To obtain this effect, the narrator rarely mentions Nuʿmān's feelings and thoughts or, if he does, dismisses them as inappropriate. Furthermore, he reifies the boy as if he were a puppet, as it happens when he is tossed in the air in the lady's house and when he is carried back and forth on the mule's back.

Since the beginning, *Min al-tārīkh* creates expectations of doom for Nuʿmān and, in the subsequent episodes, the reader wants to know what else will happen to him. The reader's awareness of dealing with a humorous fictional text creates a certain distance, which enables him/her to enjoy situations which are patently unenjoyable to the protagonist.[451] The opposite of the innocent victim is the trickster, like Ibn Shalabī: every time he appears, the reader knows that he will succeed and wants to know how. Both types of characters activate one of Triezenberg's humour enhancers, *i.e.* repetition and variation.

Another humour enhancer is the use of shared stereotypes, including stock characters. When we read a story about a popular agent or victim of humour, we feel a pleasant expectation of amusement to come. All four novels exploit stock characters of the Arab cultural heritage and attach to them some stereotypes shared in Egyptian culture.

In *Riḥlāt*, several stock characters are transferred into the modern context. Ibn Shalabī revives the model of the trickster, epitomized by Juḥā and traditionally found in the *maqāmāt*, shadow plays, folkloric and *adab*-anecdotes. Ibn Shalabī evokes this type of character because, in his time-travels, he plays different roles and is misunderstood for somebody else, until he reveals his innate nature and turns the events to his advantage.

His picaresque features are adapted to everyday life in contemporary Egypt, where he is preoccupied with poverty, traffic, overpopulation, political oppression, tourism, and the media. Thus, the social issues and the setting (Old Cairo) are familiar to the reader, even though the story takes place in the past. Furthermore, his adventures point at the

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[450] Paniconi, 'Narrare il disincanto', 144-45. For '*ingénu* irony', Paniconi refers to D.C. Muecke, *The Compass of Irony*, 91.
[451] On this aspect, see Larkin Galinañes, 'Narrative Structure', 151.

continuity between the two historical periods, as though the stereotypical image of the Egyptians was rooted in the past.

As it happens in other satirical writings, the various facets of Egyptian society, as encountered in Ibn Shalabī's journeys, are discussed in light of his own social background. He summarizes the stereotypical features of the ordinary Egyptian of the 1970s: he lives in the city; does a humble job, but is intellectually prepared, since is also a journalist; experiences the socio-political changes of his time, like consumerism, corruption, Westernization, and the increasing gap between the rich and the poor; is generous, patient, artful, and witty; and his qualities balance his defects, such as opportunism and a certain passivity to politics, which are justified as survival strategies.[452]

This ordinary Egyptian is usually praised in the novel, so that a moderate criticism to him, emerging from the fictional events and the narrator's guiding attitude, can be tolerated. The main target of criticism are his opponents, *i.e.* the rulers and those who oppress the lower classes. Like Ibn Shalabī, the opponents are characterized by a set of well-defined and consistent features: they are despotic, corrupted, cruel, and unconcerned with the risk of falling into disgrace. The two social groups (the rulers and the oppressed, *al-awāʾil wa-l-awākhir*) are constructed as monolithic categories responding to the clear-cut opposition of 'we' vs 'they'.

One of the rulers in *Riḥlāt* is Qarāqūsh, a stock character who epitomizes whimsical rule and unfair justice. When the protagonist meets Qarāqūsh, he ridicules him by activating both popular anecdotes and modern vaudeville theatre. Similarly, when Ibn Shalabī plays the proverbial role of the court jester, he mixes references to classical literature and contemporary popular humour circulating in jokes, films, and cafés. While his performance is anachronistic for the times of the Mamluk sultan and falls flat on the level of the story, on the level of the discourse the implied reader is amused by his efforts and laughs with him. He/she appreciates Ibn Shalabī's humour thanks to their common knowledge, which is superior to that of the opposing characters.

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[452] On the stereotype of the genuine Egyptian in the construction of this character, see also Bushnaq, *Der historische Roman*, 502-5.

The court jester is traditionally considered as a wise fool, who speaks the truth to the rulers without fear of reprisal thanks to his supposed lunacy and entertaining abilities.[453] Ibn Shalabī alternates wisdom and foolishness as survival strategies in his daily life, as Juḥā usually does: sometimes he resorts to his intelligence and eloquence, and sometimes he pretends to be a fool. Even when he acts like a fool, his naïveté can reveal the shortcomings of society.

Unlike Ibn Shalabī, the protagonist of *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa* embodies the two qualities simultaneously: he is a sage in fool's clothing, whose unintelligible words contain a proverbial wisdom. He knows that playing the fool is an effective survival strategy, but he does not apply it in a conservative way. On the contrary, he pushes freedom of speech to its limits. The well-off customers of the den, whom he ridicules, forgive him, but he pays the consequences for defying the political authorities.


While Ibn Shalabī is an outsider in the halls of power, Ṣāliḥ, Nuʿmān, and Ḥamdī are somehow outsiders in the city. They are genuine Egyptians on the one hand, but on the other they belong to marginal social, regional, and ethnic groups who are exposed to ridicule. In particular, *Min al-tārīkh* and *al-Fāʾil* revive the type of the village yokel and Bedouin respectively, two stock characters of *adab*-anecdotes and regional popular humour.

Nevertheless, the protagonist is not alone in being ridiculed or mocking his opponents, since his belonging to a small community is central in generating the humorous effects. We have examined some comic episodes depicting circles of friends having fun, such as the guests at the lady's house, the aspiring intellectuals at the den, and Ḥamdī's cliques at university and in prison.

Furthermore, the protagonist's belonging to the community is reinforced by some characters that we have defined as doubles: Nuʿmān's doubles are his father and the narrator; Ṣāliḥ is imitated by the members of the coterie, including a female character; and Ḥamdī's doubles are his co-workers and male relatives. Therefore, *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa* is not

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[453] See, e.g., Beatrice K. Otto, *Fools Are Everywhere. The Court Jester around the World* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

only the story of the hashish waiter, but also the biography of the coterie; similarly, *al-Fāʿil* places the protagonist into a Bedouin and a national history of rural-urban migration.

# 7.2 Intertextuality

## 7.2.1 Literary heritage

Stock characters evoke a clear script and revive the popular and literary tradition of humour. Mustajāb, Shalabī, and Abū Julayyil share with other contemporary novelists a broad interest for the Arab cultural heritage, comprising literary models, oral storytelling, and folk culture.

In our analysis, we have focused on two types of interaction with the classical literary models to generate the humorous effect. The first type consists in recalling those established forms that are already inscribed into the comic tradition and using them as broad hypotext. This regards not only stock characters, but also the textual structure and the thematic focus. The second type of interaction consists in reproducing a specific text or writing tradition with parodic effects.

The first trend is exemplified by *Riḥlāt*, which revives the *maqāma* in its humorous aspects: the episodic structure, the trickster, the journey in the urban world, the eloquent display, and the dramatic irony of playing a ruse at somebody's expenses. Critics suggest that the classical *maqāma* portrayed Muslim society of its day and parodied some established forms of discourse in the eloquent display, two aims that are found in Shalabī's comic narrative. Even though Shalabī does not reproduce the rhetorical patterns of the classical *maqāma*, he combines other elements to achieve formal virtuosity.

Besides this, *Riḥlāt* gives a new form to the modern travelogue, which is sometimes seen as a neo-*maqāma* for its episodic structure and unconventional ideas subverting the social norms. In the modern travelogue, the physical displacement and multiple encounters are the narrative devices for the satirical dissection of society and the comparison of different lifestyles. Following this tradition, *Riḥlāt* juxtaposes the episodes, integrates the social observation with the fictional events, and develops the sub-genre of time-travelling.

We can place *al-Fāʿil* in the same trend of intertextuality, since it employs the literary type of the Bedouin in self-contained anecdotes to develop the theme of nomadic identity in the contemporary city. The humorous anecdotes about the Bedouin in pre-modern literature and Egyptian folklore are the hypotext.

Sadan argues that the literary figure of the Bedouin in *adab* compilations is admired and ridiculed at the same time.[454] While the wise fool and the farmer are treated with a similar ambivalence in the anecdotes, the Bedouin attracts those motifs that other folkloric traditions attach to them. Sadan suggests that this ambivalence reflects later echoes of the process of acculturation, which he defines as "the adaptation of the Arab elements to the civilization of the sedentary countries which they conquered in the seventh century."[455]

The anecdotes convey admiration for the Bedouin's hospitality, self-control, and *murūwa* (the ideal of manhood, comprising all-knightly virtues, such as manliness, generosity, and sense of honor). Furthermore, the Bedouin displays his cleverness and eloquence in sharp retorts and in tricking the gullible sedentary man.[456]

This positive image alternates with mockery for his ignorance in matters of religion, primitive manners (which may include scatological humour), and ugly appearance. Since the Bedouin is not familiar with the comforts of life, when he is invited at the table of a refined man, he does not follow the hygienic rules, is a glutton, and is shocked by new types of food, wine, and music. Sometimes he turns these ridiculous situations in his favour and is praised.

Going back to *al-Fāʿil*, the anecdotes about the narrator's forefathers stress both the contrast of nomad *vs* sedentary in the Fayyūm area and villager *vs* city dweller. The narrator admires his ancestors and proudly transmits their legendary stories. However, the positive image rooted in a legendary past is challenged by the negative reality that the narrator sees, which reveals opportunism, cowardice, internal rivalry, and ignorance of

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[454] Joseph Sadan, 'An Admirable and Ridiculous Hero: Some Notes on the Bedouin in Medieval Arabic Belles Lettres, on a Chapter of Adab by al-Râghib al-Iṣfahânî, and on a Literary Model in Which Admiration and Mockery Coexist', *Poetics Today* 10, no. 3 (1989): 471–92. Sadan focuses on a chapter on table manners taken from *Muḥāḍarāt al-udabāʾ* by al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (d. 1108/9).

[455] Sadan, 'An Admirable and Ridiculous Hero', 473.

[456] Sadan suggests that the Bedouin is comparable to the literary figure of the poet for his sharp retorts and improvisation in invective poetry.

city life. Since the narrator retells the same story in different version and interrupts it with his commentaries, he also mocks the conventions of storytelling and folk epics.

Similarly, *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa* revives the anecdotic tradition about intoxication induced by wine or drugs, which may lead to elation and euphoric mood. The connection between hashish and humour is well-established in classical and Mamluk literature,[457] and is still alive in Egyptian popular culture. Shalabī reinterprets this tradition by developing the main narrative thread as a series of gatherings at the hashish den. He depicts these sessions, the smokers' idle talk, and their collective culture of humour.

## 7.2.2 Historiography

A second type of interaction with writing models that we have found in the novels of our corpus regards both classical and modern historiography. *Riḥlāt* and *Min al-tārīkh* reproduce the formal conventions of classical historical and biographical writing by means of parody, *i.e.* the transformation of the elements of the hypotext. The aim is not ridiculing the hypotext, but rather creating a synthesis of the two texts and engaging the reader in the creation of a new meaning.[458]

Classical biography is not humorous in itself, even though it may alternate serious information about its subject with amusing anecdotes. *Min al-tārīkh* follows the biographical literary conventions in the disposition of the material, reported discourse, use of passive voice, and evaluation of the sources' reliability. It also reproduces the style of the annals to summarize different events that happen in the village in a certain period.

In a modern fictional text, these conventions allow to achieve some effects which differ from the original sources. For example, reported discourse reproduces the village's polyphony in a novel that adopts the internal collective perspective. The same technique creates the impression of objectivity, needed in classical biography, but it also disrupts the mimetic conventions of realist fiction. The overall effect is comic because this

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[457] Danilo Marino, 'Raconter l'ivresse à l'époque mamelouke. Les mangeurs de haschich comme motif littéraire', ed. Monica Balda-Tillier and Adam Talib, *Annales islamologiques*, no. 49 (2016): 55–80.

[458] Kassem-Draz, Mehrez, and Paniconi, who have studied parody and pastiche in al-Ghiṭānī's novels, refer to the concept of parody as discussed in Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1982) and Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000 [1985]).

biographical model is anachronistic, too refined for the trivial subject, and mixed with other narrative discourses (folk epics and village novel).

*Riḥlāt* is the other novel of our corpus that reuses the stylistic features of pre-modern historiography to create the fictional world. Its employs the writings of two Mamluk historians as hypotext (Ibn Taghrībirdī's *Nujūm* and al-Maqrīzī's *Sulūk* and *Mawāʿiz*), achieving a certain continuity with the novel's historical setting. These sources provide some historical data about specific aspects: the *khiṭaṭ* maps the architecture and social history of the city, whereas the court chronicles follow the political events and rulers of the Mamluk dynasty.

Shalabī quotes these sources *verbatim*, sometimes reproducing long passages. The serious purpose of using historical sources to understand the past becomes a parodic game, which reveals the fictionality of the text: the historical accounts are 'out of place', since they are presented as direct or reported speech of fictional characters (the historians themselves as fictional personae, the narrator, and even Emir Khazʿal). This creates a confusion as to time (anachronism between the story and the historical sources) and subjects (who is the author?), which blurs the boundaries between documentary and fictional writing, original and falsification.

Furthermore, the quotations are digressions interrupting the main narrative but, in turn, can be interrupted. For instance, some historiographical passages are followed by a commentary or witty repartee in Egyptian Colloquial Arabic, and this juxtaposition of multiple textual models and registers generates the humorous effect.

*Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa* and *al-Fāʿil* do not reproduce the conventions of historical writing, but are concerned with problematizing official historiography with the stories of the coterie and family respectively. These stories, told from the internal perspective of subaltern groups, reveal what official historiography has erased. *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa* challenges the official discourse about the Arab-Israeli conflict and the impact of liberalization in the 1970s, while *al-Fāʿil* questions the integration of the Bedouin community into the nation state.

The interest in crafting a historical counter-discourse leads to re-write some significant events. A common trend in our novels is the focus on episodes of political upheaval and mass protest. Both *Min al-tārīkh* and *al-Fāʿil* reconsider the involvement of marginal communities in the 1919 revolution. *Min al-tārīkh* mentions the assault to the British train

in Dayrūṭ, only to deny that Nuʿmān's father was involved; it also confounds this political upheaval with other national and local "troubles".

*Al-Fāʿil*'s narrator, instead, tells that his family took part in the upheaval only to revenge a relative, who had been exiled with Saʿd Zaghlūl. The participation of the Bedouin was not politically conscious, rather consisted in destroying the railway line and looting the police stations. It ended with some family members imprisoned and no recognition as revolutionaries. This alternative version challenges also the fictional and cinematic representations of the events (for example, Maḥfūẓ's *Trilogy* and the films based on it, which are mentioned in the novel).

Finally, *Riḥlāt* portrays mass protest focusing on the throng with a mixture of criticism for its irrationality and admiration for its subversive culture of laughter. These episodes activate the carnivalesque and obscene side of humour, since the temporary subversions of power relations is celebrated with excesses and insolent language.


## 7.2.3 Across genres

Intertextuality in these novels includes also other genres, such as poetry, drama, and cinema. These can be interpreted as references to the Egyptian cultural scene and popular satire to reinforce the sense of humour.

The first example is the metaphor of theatre in *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa*. As the members of the clique imitate the hashish waiter, comedy actors draw inspiration from popular culture to revive the type of the wise fool and simple-minded. Thus, theatre can be seen as a mirror reflecting society. The fictional events lead to comment about the interaction of popular and literary humour and the mechanism of identification in satirical theatre.

This metafictional metaphor is well-integrated in the plot, since the clique loves theatre, cinema, and popular culture. Shalabī's appreciation of popular culture is found also in his parody of Western films, when the protagonist of *Riḥlāt* enters the Storehouse riding a horse. This parody mocks the character and the language of commercial cinema itself.

Furthermore, Abū Julayyil chooses a famous Egyptian comedy for a bitterly-humorous scene. His cousin watches *Khallī bālak min Zūzū* (1972) many times, till the cinema's

ceiling collapses on his head and he is injured. All these references, which are easily deciphered by the Egyptian audience, are linked to entertainment.

Another genre found in some, albeit a small, degree is satirical poetry. In *Min al-tārīkh* we can read only a few lines of the invective against Nuʿmān's father. The poem is so dull that the reader's attention is diverted to its authors, *i.e.* the religious authorities who condemn the father as an outcast, but are fooled in the subsequent episodes.

In *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa*, the poem praising Ṣāliḥ and mocking the oppressors is the product of collective oral creation. It is one of the references to colloquial poetry *(shiʿr al-ʿāmmiyya)* found in this novel.

Finally, *al-Fāʿil* links invective to Bedouin identity. The narrator rather mentions the foul-mouthed slang he crafts with his university friends to mock those who do not understand their code language. He also refers to the local rivalry between his native village and the neighbouring hamlets, expressed in idioms, one anecdote, and one line of poetry. The Bedouin poetic tradition is found also in his forefather's habit to host poets and singers who composed "[p]raise poems and songs of scorn" (*al-Fāʿil* 147/155).

These trans-generic references are not humorous in themselves, but facilitate the perception of comedy and satire of the themes they are attached to.


# 7.3 Themes and style

Even though it is not easy to compare the stylistic features of the four novels, which vary with the thematic focus and the peculiarities of each author, we can identify some common aspects that contribute to the production of humour.

On a broad level, we can say that Shalabī's novels contain a constant flux of humour in the form of witty dialogues, the narrator's jabs, and scenes in which the characters perform as entertainers. On the contrary, in Mustajāb's novel dialogues are almost absent and humour is found at the intersection of the formal, discoursive, and semantic levels. These levels create incongruity thanks to the complex narrative structure which includes footnotes and repetition, as in the case of the three interrupted rituals. Abū Julayyil adopts an intermediate strategy, since humour emerges in some performances and anecdotes, which the narrator observes with a certain degree of self-mockery.

The writers, who are interested in the lower classes and the texture of ordinary life, tackle similar social issues in their novels, such as injustice, inclusion/exclusion, and precarious living conditions. We have noted a certain evolution, due to the publication of these works over three decades. For example, the underworld moves from central Cairo in *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa* to other neighbourhoods in *al-Fāʿil*. However, the thematic focus remains the interplay of the self and the community in moments of socio-political change.

In this context, humour serves to criticize the shortcomings of Egyptian society, reconsider the self-representation, and reveal the absurdities of life. Collective humour in *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa* and *al-Fāʿil* has an affiliative and relief function, whereas the stereotypes employed in *Riḥlāt* criticize many aspects of society with a comforting effect on the audience.

The novels of our corpus employ humour for social rather than overtly political satire. For instance, all four novels target the incongruity between appearance and lack of morality, especially in religious matters. This is achieved with different styles: *Min al-tārīkh* condemns superstition and ignorance through the contradictory anecdotes contained in the main text and footnotes, as well as one anecdote ridiculing a futile religious dispute; *Riḥlāt* resorts to the carnivalesque in the fight between the Storehouse and the authorities; *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa* contains one anecdote about an opportunistic *shaykh*; and *al-Fāʿil* mocks the government's attempts to repress the religious opposition.

In the latter novel and *Riḥlāt*, political satire is indirect, because it focuses on the effect of politics on ordinary people, whereas *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa* attacks specific authorities and policies. All three novels contain some episodes that employ humour to temporarily subvert power relations on an individual or collective level.


To achieve these effects, the authors employ two recurrent stylistic features: repetitions and physical descriptions. Repetition is a humour enhancer on the macro-level of structure, whereas it conveys the effect of mechanical actions on the micro-level of single episodes. As suggested by Bergson, human beings are comical when they gives the same impression of an object or mechanism. This is exemplified in the comic scenes of *Min al-tārīkh*, where we find formulaic names, repeated gestures with a magical effect, and irrelevant details interrupting the tension, whereas *al-Fāʿil* employs repetition both within

single anecdotes (especially the one about the landlord) and in metanarrative commentaries.

A similar mechanical effect is given by the focus on single parts of the body, as though they were reified. This is very frequent in *Min al-tārīkh*, where the focus on the lower parts of the body, which are the object of rituals, mocks superstitions and the social control of sexuality.

Before the humorous episodes, *al-Fāʿil*'s narrator briefly describes the characters with a detached style. Some unusual or grotesque details of the description trigger the comic effect, as though the body externalized their moral defects. The lower parts of the body activate the obscene side of humour to ridicule the victim's social standing.

Shalabī makes a different use of descriptions. Picturesque details link the subjects to the setting and, especially in *Riḥlāt*, the grotesque features of some characters place them into the world of horror and fantasy.

Shalabī is a master of humorous techniques that we find, to a lesser extent, in the other authors. We can mention anachronism, misunderstandings, metaphors with animals, nicknames, and description of the characters' laughter. As regards rhetorical figures, his dialogues and narrative sequences are full of wordplay, double-entendre, neologism, parallelism, and assonance.

We have also examined Shalabī's ability to use the dialect as a literary language with its wide range of nuances and registers. The creative resistance of dialect is one of the themes of *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa*, fictionalized by the participation in the dictionary project, and a linguistic transgression which parallels the humorous transgression of the stories. This linguistic variety interrupts the official discourse of the authorities and historians in *Riḥlāt*.

Similarly, in *al-Fāʿil* the colloquial expresses ironic commentaries on laughable situations and is juxtaposed to a high register. Like in *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa*, this linguistic variety is one of the components of the jargon characterizing the group of friends. Initially the reader perceives the estranging effect of this jargon, but is soon involved in the logic of that community.

Mustajāb's novel, instead, is written in an elaborated literary Arabic. It is significant that the only dialogues in the text, which interrupt the three rituals, are in Egyptian Arabic.

To sum up, this chapter has illustrated the main humour-generating strategies in *Min al-tārīkh*, *Riḥlāt*, *Ṣaliḥ Hēṣa*, and *al-Fāʿil*.

It has looked at the interplay of humour and narratological categories, focusing on the construction of characters in relation to the narrating voice, space, and time, while the episodic structure highlights their (mis)adventures.

Then, it has examined the appropriation of the comic tradition, taken from both literary and popular culture, to portrait social behaviours and power relations. While this tradition provides motifs and characters, other writing conventions established for serious purposes are parodied. All four novels, in fact, re-read official historiography.

Finally, this chapter has looked at the novel's thematic and stylistic features. This aspect is related to the context, since it identifies the targets of humour and how the authors combine formal innovations with the representation of Egyptian society.

All these elements activate sense of humour in an artistic way. Our study has focused on the functions of humour and the textual elements that create this effect. It has also allowed to look at Mustajāb's, Shalabī's, and Abū Julayyil's literary output and investigate the connections between them. The findings of our textual and contextual analysis will be outlined in the next chapter.

# CONCLUSIONS

The present study has argued that the four novels by Mustajāb, Shalabī, and Abū Julayyil are representative of a humorous sub-genre in Egyptian contemporary fiction and a trend within satirical prose. As we have illustrated in our analysis, humour structures these literary texts, allows the progression of the story, and is found in some metafictional passages.

Amongst the many trends of satirical writing, the present research has focused on sense of humour emerging from the depiction of eccentric characters in marginal environments, respectively a simple-minded victim in a poor Upper Egyptian village, a trickster moving across high and low social strata in Old Cairo, a wise fool in a hash den, and a Bedouin in the precarious underworld of daily labourers.

This sub-genre interacts with the main literary innovations from the 1980s till the 2000s, combining attention to reality with non-realist modes of representation. Mustajāb employs intertextuality and metafiction, especially in his original use of footnotes; Shalabī experiments with the nuances of orality, folk culture, and storytelling; and finally, Abū Julayyil resorts to fragmentation, repetitions, and the focus on the self.

Like their contemporaries, all three novelists reappropriate the cultural heritage with direct manipulation or indirect references. Their interest in *turāth*, as Caiani notes also for other Arab writers (see above, 2.5), does not only activate irony for the purpose of political criticism. Rather, it is part of a broad aesthetic and ideological project. In the examined novels, cultural heritage provides the episodic form and stock characters and allows a playful game with the literary antecedents, which requires the direct involvement of the reader to be fully appreciated.

Besides its dialogue with contemporary literary trends, this sub-genre employs a set of humour-generating techniques which differentiate it from other novels with a more

serious tone and plot progression. We shall now illustrate these techniques as the main findings of our close textual analysis.

All four novels construct their comic characters with clearly defined traits which are consistent over the evolution of the story. To this aim, they resort to stereotypes (especially about Egyptians) and stock characters taken from Arabic literature and folklore. These proverbial characters, including picaresque types, victims, and oppressors, heighten the humorous effect and are adapted to the contemporary context. In this way, they redefine the boundaries of Egyptian-ness in a playful way and allow a certain degree of self-mockery, since the audience can identify with them.

These fictional personae emerge as comic types through their physical description, dialogues, collective comedy performances, reported discourse, or anecdotes. The narrators' construction of the discourse, in fact, oscillates between identification and ironic distance: Shalabī privileges identification, Mustajāb adopts detaching techniques, whereas Abū Julayyil oscillates between the two poles.

In these novels, the Arab cultural heritage is revived mainly through historical writing in the form of biography, annals, and topography. The parodic interplay with historical sources in Mustajāb and Shalabī disrupts the realist representation, exaggerates or de-contextualized the sources' linguistic register, and ultimately challenges their official account. Even when no historical sources are mentioned, humorous anecdotes about a certain social group allow a re-reading of official historiography, as it happens with the Bedouin and the intellectuals at the hash den. In this case, another layer of the cultural heritage is activated, *i.e.* storytelling and popular culture. Family legends in Abū Julayyil's novel challenge the official narrative about the sedentarization of the Bedouin, whereas Shalabī and Mustajāb activate café culture and village gossip respectively.

Among the recurrent stylistic features, we have identified repetition both in the episodic structure and within single episodes. As it frequently happens in verbal and visual humour, the body becomes a vehicle for the comic. In the novels of our corpus, physical features are exaggerated, reified, described from a detached perspective, or linked with the sexual sphere. Yet, obscene and scatological humour is limited: we find it only in public protests activating the carnivalesque culture of laughter in Shalabī and in mild sexual allusions in Abū Julayyil.

The eccentricity of characters and events is conveyed by a vivid language, hybrid registers, and the jargon of the margins, all of which defies literary conventions. Shalabī crafts abundant wordplay with different nuances of ECA, which permeates the dialogues and affects also the narrating voice. The jargon of hash smokers is paralleled by Abū Julayyil's jargon of construction workers and Bedouin dialect. On the contrary, Mustajāb achieves the humorous effect by juxtaposing the refined literary language of his composition with trivial deeds.

Similar themes appear in all novels, adapting to the context at the time of publication: rural-urban rivalry, migration, crisis of the national community and affiliation to alternative communities, corruption and social injustice. Politics have a different weight in these narratives. *Ṣāliḥ Hēṣa* is the most direct in its satirical criticism of Egyptian leaders, with the second part of this novel relying on dark humour and sarcasm, whereas *Min al-tārīkh* and *Riḥlāt* adopt oblique strategies: the former confines the political scenario, characterized by wars and revolutionary change, to the background; while the latter criticizes the leaders as a monolithic group, whose negative traits are not attached to a specific person, but are rather interchangeable. Finally, *al-Fāʿil* exemplifies the critical attitude of all three authors: political negligence manifests itself in everyday life and the attitude of ordinary people, marked by wide-spread opportunism and incongruity between appearance and ethics.

In other words, satirical criticism becomes a satire of mores, exposing the flaws of both the rulers and ordinary people. In these novels, the subversion of power relations is not limited to the relation between citizens and rulers, but involves also different social strata, the centre and the margins, the licit and the illicit.


Our study of literary humour allows us to say that al-Ṭūkhī's *Nisāʾ al-Karantīnā* (discussed in the introduction of our study) does not appear in a vacuum. Rather, its innovative combination of sense of humour and literary qualities is anticipated by other Egyptian authors. The motifs and textual strategies of this fictional sub-genre provide a context to understand the peculiarities of *Nisāʾ al-Karantīnā*. In addition, this literary trend negotiates its place within the canon, with its interplay of high and low registers, popular and literary heritage, humorous style and satirical representation of society. All these aspects deserve to be studied by literary criticism.

Some of the humour-generating techniques that we have found in our corpus are employed also in al-Ṭūkhī's novel. It depicts the underworld of semi-legal activities, a topsy-turvy world where rogues and criminals become heroes. While employing an epic tone to narrate trivial deeds, it plays both with folk epics and the generational novel, a canonized model in Egyptian fiction.

This focus on a marginal community allows a re-reading of Alexandria's official historiography and cosmopolitan myth, subverted by collective, yet often incongruous, storytelling and the insertion of popular culture. The latter technique is exemplified by a new version of the story of the criminal sisters Rayā and Sakīna, already popular in the press, theatre, and television.

In addition, the characters' contradictions are embodied in their physical appearance. Their depiction exploits the comic effect of ugliness, grotesque exaggeration, and ridiculous contrast between appearance and ethics. They are constructed mainly as doubles. Hybrid language mocks the characters' idiosyncrasies and official discourse, makes extensive use of Egyptian Colloquial Arabic, and is more obscene than in the novels of our corpus.

Finally, *Nisāʾ al-Karantīnā* integrates the main narrative with some commentary about the functions of popular humour in Egyptian society. For instance, it explains that satirical theatre worked as a safety valve in the 1980s, providing both evasion and indirect political criticism (see above, the opening quotation in ch. 7). Furthermore, regional humour ridiculing the reputation of a city or social group is influenced by the new media, since it takes the form of battles on blogs (*Women* 32) and cartoons (*Women* 284).


Our investigation may be continued in many different directions. For instance, further studies may expand the sub-genre of Egyptian humorous novels, while exploring the stylistic and thematic peculiarities of each text and author. Conversely, our analytical framework may be applied also to other trends in satirical writings, which subvert the canons of fiction even more openly. In fact, our analysis does not focus on the literary value *per se*, but on textual strategies and humour enhancers.

Future research may focus on a specific writing model in one literary tradition, for instance the satirical travelogue in Egypt,[459] or select one of the strategies we have identified to compare it across literary texts from different Arab countries. In particular, stock characters may adapt to different literary traditions: the village yokel/simple-minded is a suitable lens to examine the village novel;[460] whereas, professional entertainers (such as the court jester and the political satirist) activate the local tradition of popular humour and subvert different power relations according to the context.[461]

In conclusion, the interplay of humour, satirical criticism, and literature involves authors and readers in a complex game. While humour can be one of the weapons of satire to ridicule a person or a behaviour, it also adds amusement to the reading experience, strengthens positive affiliation, and reveals something about the absurdity of life. As al-Ṭūkhī explains in this interview, satire and humour have complimentary but different effects in works of literature:

> Many writers describe *[Nisāʾ al-Karantīnā]* as sarcastic, but I [don't] think [so]. Its sense of humour is not sarcastic because […] sense of humour is more innocent *[barīʾ]*. When I become sarcastic, I have a target and shoot to it. But [when I use] sense of humour, I have the whole world as a target.[462]

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[459] For instance, the satirical travelogue is employed by Shalabī in *Fallāḥ miṣrī fī bilād al-faranja* and by the satirical journalist Maḥmūd al-Saʿdanī in his series of semi-autobiographical books featuring *al-walad al-shaqī* (naughty boy or *enfant terrible*). At the beginning of his career, al-Saʿdanī was a short story writer; later, he became popular with the audience as a critical voice in Egyptian journalism.

[460] Besides Mustajāb's *Min al-tārīkh*, we can mention two village novels whose main protagonist is an outcast who breaks the community's rules in social occasions: *ʿUrs al-Zayn* (1966, *The Wedding of Zein*) by the Sudanese al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ (1929-2009) and *Laylat ʿurs* (2003, *Wedding Night*) by the Egyptian Yūsuf Abū Rayya (1955-2009). *Laylat ʿurs* won the *Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature* in 2005.

[461] In this respect, it is worth considering *Qiṭṭ abyaḍ jamīl yasīru maʿaī* (2011; *A Beautiful White Cat Walks with Me*, 2016) by the Moroccan Yūsuf Fāḍil (b. 1949). This novel is based on the conflict between the father, who used to be King Ḥassan's court jester but is fired, and the son, a satirical comedian disillusioned by Marxism. *Qiṭṭ abyaḍ jamīl yasīru maʿaī* was longlisted for the *International Prize for Arabic Fiction* in 2014.

[462] Nael Eltoukhy interviewed by AUC Press, *The man behind 'Women of Karantina'*. The interview is in English. The transcription is ours.

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[463] I include in this section the novel *Luṣūṣ mutaqāʿidūn* by Abū Julayyil and the short story collection *Dayrūṭ al-sharīf* by Mustajāb, since I have often referred to them in my analysis of the corpus.

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