The Representation of Women in Early Egyptian Fiction: A Survey

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The evolution of Arabic letters has been marked by a continuous expansion of form and broadening of thematic content. Early Arabic literature included short narrative forms such as the prose romances of the eighth century known as *sîrah* and the fantastic, didactic, and humorous anecdotes known as *qaṣaṣ*. Highly ornate picaresques known as *maqâmât* dominated the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries. Heroic tales and folk ballads flourished in Egypt during the twelfth, thirteen, and fourteenth centuries, and they are still being narrated today by professional reciters in village marketplaces and at country fairs. Longer narrative forms began to be written in Egypt in the nineteenth century. However, whether they are long or short, these prose narratives depict the experiences of men, not women. Male characters are permitted to travel abroad, to explore their own lives, and to comment on the social, political, and philosophical issues of their times, while female characters are kept in the background, only rarely allowed to take an active part in the depicted action, or to fully participate in the recorded discussions.

This marginal role played by women in the narratives written in Islamic Egypt during the nineteenth century, i.e., shortly before the arrival of the European novel, is, of course, consistent with their limited social function within such a conservative society. For example, Rifâ'ah al-Ṭahtâwî's *Takhlîṣ al-Ibrîz fî Talkhîṣ Bârîz* (The Purification of Gold in a Summary Presentation of Paris, 1834) depicts the five-year educational journey of a young Egyptian to Paris, and can be regarded as one of the earliest *Bildungsromane* in Arabic literature.[1] But not once does a woman of any consequence appear within the more than 250 pages of this important sociocultural work. Another novel that truly reflects the zeitgeist of nineteenth-century Egypt is 'Alî Mubârak's *'Alam al-Dîn* (1883), which also depicts the experiences of a young Egyptian scholar, 'Alam al-Dîn, this time in England, and the many cultural challenges he faces abroad without ever permitting a woman to appear on the scene. The fact that these two works mainly deal with serious philosophical questions and important cultural matters (issues which men have always claimed as part of their domain) rather than with everyday

[1] Rifâ'ah Badawî Râfi' al-Ṭahṭâwî, *Ṭakhlîṣ al-Ibrîz fî Talkhîṣ Bârîz*, ed. Mahdî 'Allâm, Aḥmad Aḥmad Badawî, and Anwar Lûqa (Cairo: Wizârat al-Thaqâfah wa al-Irshâd al-Qawmî, 1958).

events and domestic issues, may have justified to the conservative authors of this period the exclusion of women from their didactic works.[2]

Another important literary work of this early period is Muḥammad Ibrâhîm al-Muwaylihî's *Ḥadîth 'Îsâ ibn Hishâm* ('Îsâ ibn Hishâm's Account, 1898–1902), which depicts the many social changes that took place in Westernized Cairo at the turn of the century.[3] The protagonist-narrator of this work and his companion—a powerful Turkish-Egyptian military official who died several years before, and whom he meets in a dream after he has been brought back to life—witness and evaluate their present and past societies. And although they go to different places and meet various people, not one single woman is permitted to share their experiences or contribute to their discussions. It is only when both men decide to spend an evening at a nightclub that they come across the only Egyptian woman to play a role in their story, and a marginal one at that, as the character appears briefly as the clichéd fallen woman who makes her living by seducing and cheating her rich, drunken customers. It is curious indeed that such a literary work of such importance and relative length (350 pages) and which deals with many social, political, and cultural issues does not make room for even one significant female character, either positive or negative.

In Muḥammad Ḥâfiẓ Ibrâhîm's fragmentary novel *Layâlî Saṭîḥ* (The Nights of Saṭîḥ, 1906)—which was modeled after al-Muwaylihî's *Ḥadîth 'Îsâ ibn Hishâm*—the author introduces several characters, all men, only to let them discuss the different social, political, and cultural issues of the day.[4] And although very early in the work the author introduces the Egyptian reformer Qâsim Amîn, also known as the "Liberator of Woman,"[5] because of his efforts to abolish the veil—as one of his characters, he does not permit women to appear on the pages of his work and to participate in the cultural life that is described. It is curious that although the author lets Qâsim Amîn voice his strong objection to the existing social customs and norms, and condemns Egyptian men for hypocritically refusing to permit their women to step out on the streets unveiled, while they themselves lead a dissolute life outside their homes, he does not introduce even one female character.

When in the nineteenth century a group of Syrian and Lebanese authors—mostly Christians who immigrated to Egypt to escape the religious and political persecutions which led to the infamous massacres of 1860—settled in Cairo and

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[2] Plot outlines and detailed critical evaluations of the works mentioned here are included in Saad Elkhadem, *History of the Egyptian Novel: Its Rise and Early Beginnings* (Fredericton, N.B.: York Press, 1985).

[3] Muḥammad al-Muwaylihî, *Ḥadîth 'Îsâ ibn Hishâm aw Fatrah min al-Zamân* (Cairo: al-Dâr al-Qawmiyyah lil-Ṭibâ'ah wa al-Nashr, 1964).

[4] Ḥâfiẓ Ibrâhîm, *Layâlî Saṭîḥ* (Cairo: al-Dâr al-Qawmiyyah lil-Ṭibâ'ah wa al-Nashr, 1964) 6.

[5] Qâsim Amîn (1865–1908) is the author of *Taḥrîr al-Mar'ah* (Woman's Liberation, 1899) and *al-Mar'ah al-Jadîdah* (The New Woman, 1910).

began to participate in the literary and journalistic activities of the city, they introduced new literary genres such as the drama and the novel, and dealt with modern issues and contemporary topics such as women's emancipation, free love, and adultery. One peculiar aspect of this innovative movement was the reluctance of some authors to deal openly with these bold questions for fear of offending the sensibilities of their Muslim readers. Instead, they either hid behind pseudonyms, pretended to be mere translators, put Christian protagonists at the center of their novels and short stories, or moved the whole tale to a non-Islamic country.[6] However, no matter how they tried to camouflage their identities, pacify their readers, or avoid being blamed for the liberal nature of their topics, they all agreed on not placing a Muslim woman at the center of their fiction. It seemed safer for them to ascribe all customs and manners that may be seen as objectionable or offensive by their Muslim compatriots to licentious Christians, decadent Europeans, and exotic Asians rather than to their fellow countrymen. Muḥammad Mas'ûd's *Ghâdaht al-Ahrâm* (Maiden of the Pyramids), Ya'qûb Ṣarrûf's *Fatat Miṣr* (Maiden of Egypt), Ḥusayn Riyâḍ's *al-Fatâh al-Yâbâniyyah* (The Japanese Maiden), and Khalîl Sa'âdah's *Asrâr al-Thawrah al-Rûsiyyah* (Secrets of the Russian Revolution) are some of the best-known examples of this peculiar trend.[7]

Of the very few fictional works published in Cairo near the end of the nineteenth century to deal with Oriental characters, only Sa'îd al-Bustânî's *Dhat al-Khiḍr* (The Maiden Behind the Veil, 1884), Muṣtafâ Ibrâhîm's *Shuhadâ' al-Âbâ'* (Fathers' Martyrs, n.d.), al-Damanhûrî's *al-Yatîm* (The Orphan, 1898), Maḥmûd Khayrat's *al-Fatâh al-Rîfiyyah* (Country Girl, 1905), and Salîm al-Bustânî's two sentimental novels published in Beirut, *Asmâ'* (Asmâ', 1875) and *Fâtinah* (Fâtinah, 1877), tried to project women in a somewhat positive light, and ended up with uninspired, unmemorable, one-dimensional female characters. Also, of the several women that play a leading role in some of Jirjî Zaydân's twenty-three historical romances—as in *Fatât Ghassân* (The Maiden of Ghassân, 1898); *Armânûsah al-Miṣriyyah* (Aramânûsah, the Egyptian, 1899); *'Adhrâ' Quraysh* (The Virgin of Quraysh, 1899); *Ghâdat Karbalâ'* (The Maiden of Karbalâ', 1901); *al-'Abbâsah Ukht al-Rashîd* (al-Abbâssah, the Sister of al-Rashîd, 1906); *'Arûs Farghânah* (The Bride of Farghânah, 1908); *Fatât al-Qayrawân* (The Maiden of Qayrawân, 1912); and *Shajarat al-Durr* (Shajarat al-Durr, 1914)—none, of course, has much in common with the women of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[8] The same argument also applies to Aḥmad Shawqî's four historical novels—*'Adhrâ' al-Hind* (The Virgin of India, 1897), *Ladyâs* (Ladyas, 1899), *Dall wa Taymân* (Dall and Tayman, 1899), *Waraqat al-Âs* (The Myrtle Leaf, 1914)—for none of them deals, even remotely, with contemporary characters or current issues.

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[6] For a discussion of these works, see S. Elkhadem, *History of the Egyptian Novel* 16–18.

[7] Years of publication are not available for these works.

[8] For a complete list of Zaydân's novels and their exact dates of publication, see Elkhadem 58.

The first work to feature a fully developed female character among its fictional personae is Mahmûd Tâhir Haqqî's *'Adhrâ' Dinshway* (The Maiden of Dinshwây, 1906). Sit al-Dâr, a twenty-year-old country girl, plays an active role in this sad story of love, jealousy, and intrigue, which is set in the background of an important historical incident that was triggered by the accidental death of one British soldier in 1906 and resulted in the execution of four innocent Egyptian peasants. By incorporating the story of Sit al-Dâr and her two suitors, the innocuous Muhammad al-'Abd and the malicious Ahmad Zâyid, into the events of this tragic episode, the author injects "moral, amorous, and merry" elements, as well as "some passion and little humor" (2-3 of the author's "Preface") into this "suffocating subject," thus turning this historical document into an "astounding drama."[9] It is Sit al-Dâr who decides—on her own and without asking any man for advice or help—to sacrifice her love to Muhammad al-'Abd and to marry Ahmad Zâyid, the vengeful suitor who has been blackmailing her. If her father had not interfered at the last minute and ordered her to reject the terms of her deal with Ahmad Zâyid, her plan would have succeeded, and she would have saved her father from hanging. It is worth mentioning that by informing her father of the terms of her deal with Ahmad Zâyid, and by yielding to his orders knowing that they will ultimately lead to his destruction, her role is in accordance with the traditional role of any strong-minded Egyptian girl in her circumstances. By portraying her as a courageous but obedient girl, Haqqî has made her convincing and believable, thus creating the very first full-fledged female character in Egyptian fiction.

In 1914, eight years after the publication of *'Adhrâ' Dinshway*, Muhammad Husayn Haykal published his novel *Zaynab*, which also takes place in the countryside.[10] Regarded by many critics as the "first" Egyptian novel of literary merit,[11] Haykal's work also features a young country girl, Zaynab, as one of its main characters. By following her parents' wish and marrying Hasan, a young man whom she does not love, instead of her sweetheart, Ibrâhim, her character is in conformity with the tradition of her society. There is no doubt that she shows some independence by choosing the man with whom she wants to spend her life. However, by yielding to the decrees of her community rather than challenging them, Zaynab becomes a convincing and believable character. Her unhappy mar-

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[9] Mahmud Tâhir Haqqî, *Adhrâ' Dinshway* (Cairo: Wizârat al-Thaqâfah wa al-Irshâd al-Qawmî, 1964) 78. All references are to this edition; my translation.

[10] Muhammad Husayn Haykal, *Zaynab: Manâẓir wa Akhlâq Rîfiyyah bi-Qalam Miṣrî Fallâḥ* (Zaynab: Rural Scenes and Morals by an Egyptian Peasant), Cairo: Dâr al-Ma'ârif, 1974).

[11] See, for instance, H.A.R. Gibb, *Arabic Literature: An Introduction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963) 291–92; Fatma Moussa-Mahmoud, *The Arabic Novel in Egypt (1914–1970)* (Cairo: The Egyptian General Book Organization, 1973) 19; J.A. Haywood, *Modern Arabic Literature 1800–1970* (London: Lund Humphries, 1971) 136; H. Kilpatrick, "The Arabic Novel: A Single Tradition?" *Journal of Arabic Literature* 5 (1974): 93–175; Yahyâ Haqqî, *Fajr al-Qiṣṣah al-Miṣriyyah* (Cairo: al-Hay'ah al-Miṣriyyah al-'Âmah lil-Kitâb, 1975) 41; and Tâhâ Wâdî, *Madkhal ilâ Târîkh al-Riwâyah al-Miṣriyyah 1905–1952*. (Cairo: Maktabat al-Nahḍah al-Miṣriyyah, 1972) 7.

riage to Ḥasan, which is the cause of her suffering and untimely death, makes her a pathetic, but nevertheless a very credible, figure.

Not so with the heroine of Haykal's second novel, *Hâkadhâ Khuliqat* (The Way She Was Created, 1955),[12] which was published more than forty years after *Zaynab*. *Hâkadhâ Khuliqat* is a contrived story of an erratic, vain, and distrustful woman, whom the author presents as the embodiment of the many negative "effects of the social development which Egypt has experienced, and is still experiencing" (10). The private life of this nameless woman is the subject of *Hâkadhâ Khuliqat*: her childhood, her marriage and divorce, her second marriage, the death of both her husbands, and her search for salvation are narrated in great detail, with the purpose of showing that not only her neurotic and egotistic personality, but also her revolt against the traditional roles played by Oriental wives and mothers over the centuries, and her fascination with unrestrained lifestyles, are the cause for her misery and suffering. In addition to presenting as if common occurrences social manners that are not widespread in Egyptian society,[13] the author exaggerates greatly when depicting both the positive and the negative characteristics of his heroine, thus making her extremely unbelievable. She has been portrayed as cruel, shortsighted, foolish, egotistic, and unforgiving, but on the other hand, she is intelligent, disciplined, and ambitious (e.g., she teaches herself German, French, and English, and although she has not finished high school, she reads Goethe, Heine, and Nietzsche, and quotes Schopenhauer, the Bible, the Koran and numerous Arabic poets and thinkers).

When Haykal wrote *Hâkadhâ Khuliqat*, he was a well-known politician, writer, and essayist who advanced his social, literary, and political ideas on many occasions. However, by using such a plain and undemanding genre as the novel as an outlet for a multitude of social views and moral beliefs, and by employing such a neurotic woman as his mouthpiece, he did both his ideas and the genre of the novel a great disservice. Had he constrained his role as a social reformer, had he paid more attention to his function as a storyteller, and had he portrayed his heroine as a temperamental femme fatale, or as an ambitious and well-educated young lady who is striving for independence and emancipation, instead of making her the quintessence of all the ills of her society, he might have created one of the very few memorable female characters in Egyptian fiction, and his novel might have been taken more seriously both as a literary work and as a cultural document.

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[12] Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal, *Hâkadhâ Khuliqat* (Cairo: Dâr al-Ma'ârif, 1981). All references are to this edition.

[13] E.g., her friendship with a German admirer in Upper Egypt in the absence of her husband [102–20]; receiving men in her bedroom, whether accompanied by their wives [126, 140], or not [129–33, 141]; throwing a dinner party at her home in the absence of her husband [184]; leaving her home with the children without her husband's consent [195].

Tâhâ Husayn's autobiographical work, *al-Ayyâm* (The Days, 1927),[14] deals with the life of a blind child who grows up in a village in Upper Egypt, and depicts how he, without bitterness or self-pity, overcomes the many physical and emotional obstacles he faces until he finishes his school and travels to Cairo to join the renowned Islamic University of al-Azhar.[15] Of the very few female characters the reader glimpses in the background of this novel, none is worth mentioning but the mother of the protagonist. Only twice is she permitted, and only briefly, to appear on the scene and to participate in the events of the story: first when her youngest daughter dies, and shortly after that when the cholera epidemic kills one of her sons. Only then does she lose control of her emotions, and ignore the rules and the norms that govern the behavior of a woman in her position, for "She uncovered her head, which it was not her custom to do" (64), and then, "for the first time in her life, she appeared in the presence of men" (69).

Tâhâ Husayn's next work, *Adîb* (Man of Letters, 1935),[16] also an autobiographical work, relates the story of an Egyptian intellectual (presumably a friend of the author's), who is sent by his university to study at the Sorbonne, where he gets involved in the Parisian nightlife, neglects his studies, suffers a psychotic disorder, and dies poor and homeless. Most of the women we encounter in this work are French,[17] and are, therefore, of no relevance to our present topic. However, the protagonist's Egyptian wife, Hamîdah, a poor, illiterate, and extremely passive woman, is in the background of the novel. And although the protagonist describes her as "a generous soul, a content nature, a chaste heart, and a pure conscience" (97), he does not hesitate for a moment to divorce her in order to fulfill the conditions of his scholarship, which can only be granted to unmarried students. And when he informs her of his decision, she does not utter a single word, but sheds her tears, gathers her few things, and quietly leaves her home.

Tâhâ Husayn's next novel, *Du'â' al-Karawân* (Call of the Curlew; written 1934, published 1941),[18] has a young Bedouin girl as its protagonist.[19] *Du'â' al-Karawân* is a story of love, murder, revenge, and reconciliation. It is the

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[14] Tâhâ husayn, *al-Ayyâm* (Cairo: Dâr al-Ma'ârif, 1976). English quotations used here are from *An Egyptian Childhood: The Autobiography of Taha Hussein*, trans. E.H. Paxton (London: Heinemann, 1981).

[15] Tâhâ Husayn (1889–1973), who lost his eyesight at an early age, studied at al-Azhar (1902–1912), received his Ph.D. in 1914 from the University of Cairo, and spent four years (1915–1919) studying in France (Doctorate, 1918).

[16] Tâhâ Husayn, *Adîb* (Cairo: Dâr al-Ma'ârif, 1961). All references are to this edition; my translation.

[17] Such as the chambermaid with whom the protagonist spends his first night on French soil (139–45), and the Parisian girl, Helene, with whom he spends his last days in Paris (162–83).

[18] Tâhâ Husayn, *Du'â' al-Karawân* (Cairo: Dâr al-Ma'ârif, 1960). All references are to this edition; my translation.

[19] As a matter of fact, two of the other leading characters are female, i.e., the protagonist's sister Hanâdi and her mother Zahrah; also, three of the most interesting minor characters are women, i.e., Zannûbah the usurer (38), Khadrah the door-to-door peddler (40), and Nafîsah the fortune-teller (43).

picaresque tale of a young country girl named Âminah, her sister Hanâdî, and their mother, Zahrah. Their story begins after the murder of their dissolute father, when they are forced to leave their village and to start a life of restless wandering. They soon settle in the city, and the two girls find employment as servants in two different households. However, when Hanâdî yields to the seductive charms of her handsome master, the mother sends for her brother, a heartless man named Nâṣir, to come and help them deal with this disgraceful event. When he arrives, he decides to take them all back to his village, and to deal later with this shameful situation. However, before reaching the village, Nâṣir kills Hanâdî in front of her sister, and with the help of her mother, in order to bury the disgrace of his family forever. The following chapters of the novel depict how Âminah escapes from her "devilish" uncle and her "wicked" and "criminal" mother (64, 66), and goes back to the city to avenge her sister. After much plotting and scheming she succeeds in securing employment in the same household in which her sister served earlier. Her plan to gain the young seducer's confidence, and then to punish him for what he has done to her sister, fails when she realizes that both she and her intended victim have fallen in love with one another.

There is no doubt that Âminah is one of the very few independent female characters in Egyptian fiction. However, while the first part of the story (the part that depicts her dreams and aspirations as a young girl, and then deals with her feelings and emotions after the murder of her sister, and also with her determination to escape from her village to avenge her sister) is well motivated and credible, the second part (which describes the time she spends in the city planning to infiltrate her enemy's household, to seduce him, and then to punish him for his crime) is far from plausible. It is definitely not easy to convince the reader that such a simple, illiterate girl is capable of learning how to read and write so quickly, and to devise such an intricate plan to entice, manipulate, and restrain such a sophisticated and refined man like her master. Maybe if instead of giving his story such a happy ending, the author had destined his protagonist to fail—due to her limited physical resources and modest mental abilities—in her attempt to avenge her sister, and maybe even to perish tragically while doing so, the whole story might have become more realistic, and we might have ended up with a convincing story and a plausible female character instead of this contrived plot and highly improbable figure.

Ṭâhâ Ḥusayn's next novel, *al-Ḥubb al-Ḍâ'i'* (The Lost Love, 1943),[20] takes place in France, and has nothing to do with Egypt or its people. The story of Madeleine and Maxim, their love, their marriage, and the sad ending of their relationship is a pathetic melodrama that contributes nothing whatsoever to the development of Egyptian fiction, neither from an intrinsic nor from an extrinsic

[20] Ṭâhâ Ḥusayn, *al-Ḥubb al-Ḍâ'i'* (Cairo: Dâr al-Ma'ârif, 1962).

point of view. However, his next novel, *Shajarat al-Bu's* (Tree of Misery, 1944),[21] is one of the most accomplished novels in Egyptian literature. This one-volume roman-fleuve depicts the life of several members of one Egyptian family through three generations, and touches upon some of the social problems of the middle class at the end of the nineteenth century. As the author states in his "Dedication," *Shajarat al-Bu's* is "an illustration of life in one of the regions of Egypt at the end of the last century and at the beginning of the present one" (5). In this novel Tâhâ Husayn presents some memorable characters, most of whom are men. However, among his female characters, a woman named Zubaydah is undoubtedly one of the most intriguing characters he has ever created. This simple, uneducated wife and mother knows how to criticize and ridicule the unjust attitudes of her patriarchal society without offending the male characters who control her destiny. With a subtle wit and a well-balanced sense of humor, she ridicules some of the basic Islamic principles which belittle a woman's role within society and diminish her function as a full-fledged partner and responsible parent. There is no doubt that the character of Zubaydah is one of the most liberated female figures in Egyptian literature. Her seven-page-long speech (100-07), in which she attacks narrow-minded men who rely on a biased reading of religious texts to degrade women and deprive them of their rightful place in society, has no equal in modern Arabic literature. It is a wonder that censors past and present have missed this passage which pokes fun at religious texts that designate all women as inferior to men in intelligence and faith, and condemns most of them to hell regardless of their deeds and intentions. [22]

Although Tâhâ Husayn's other fictional works—his allegorical novel *Mâ Warâ' al-Nahr: Qissah Lam Tatimm* (Beyond the River: An Unfinished Story, 1946-1947)[23] and his short narrative pieces collected in *al-Mu'adhdhabûn fî al-Arḍ* (The Tormented on Earth, 1946-1947)[24]—touch upon many social ills of "Egypt the Sick" (*Miṣr al-Marîḍah*), they do not include any memorable characters or outstanding figures, male or female.

Three of Ibrâhîm 'Abd al-Qâdir al-Mâzinî's novels are nothing more than contrived tales, full of infantile pranks and foolish antics and populated by card-board characters. And in spite of the many emancipated women we encounter in these works, none of them resembles real-life figures or deals with genuine issues. These amusing low comedies of love, intrigue, and preposterous situations have very little, if anything at all, in common with Egypt and the great

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[21] Tâhâ Husayn, *Shajarat al-Bu's* (Cairo: Dâr al-Ma'ârif, n.d.). All references are to this edition; my translation.

[22] On page 107 of the novel, women are labeled as "*Naqiṣât 'Aql wa Dîn*" (lacking in both faith and mental capacity), and therefore most of them will end up in hell (*Akthar Ahl al-Nâr min al-Nisâ'*) 100.

[23] Tâhâ Husayn, *Mâ Warâ' al-Nahr: Qissah Lam Tatimm* (Cairo: Dâr al-Ma'ârif, 1975).

[24] Tâhâ Husayn, *al-Mu'adhdhabûn fî al-Arḍ* (Cairo: al-Sharikah al-'Arabiyyah lil-Ṭibâ'ah wa al-Nashr, 1958).

majority of its population. The first of these three farces is *'Awd 'alâ Bad'* (A Return to the Beginning, April 1943),[25] which appeared twelve years after the publication of his masterpiece, *Ibrâhîm al-Kâtib* (Ibrâhîm the Writer, 1931). Although the married couple depicted in this fantastic tale about a man who has been changed into a ten-year-old boy—albeit in a dream—resembles real people, and their arguments are the arguments that may take place between a sexist man from the middle class (he still follows the common belief that all women are "lacking in both faith and mental capacity" ["*Naqiṣât 'Aql wa Dîn*," 19]) and his not fully emancipated wife, all the farcical incidents that take place in this slapstick prevent us from regarding it as a serious work that reflects its zeitgeist.

The same argument also applies to al-Mâzinî's two other slapsticks, *Mîdû wa Shurakâh* (Mîdû and Partners, June 1943),[26] and *Thalâthat Rijâl wa Imra'ah* (Three Men and a Woman, 1943).[27] *Mîdû wa Shurakâh* is a plotless and poorly structured low comedy that depends on silly jokes and preposterous situations rather than on dramatic elements and plausible comic developments. Although the four young lovers who are at the center of this insipid story have Arabic names and speak a mixture of classical Arabic and local dialect, they greatly resemble the characters that populate musicals and boulevard dramas, rather than believable Egyptian men and women, and are, therefore, of no relevance to our present survey. Al-Mâzinî's *Thalâthat Rijâl wa Imra'ah* (Three Men and a Woman, 1943) is not much better than the other two novels we have just discussed. Although the title implies that it is the story of one woman and her relationship to three men, it is in fact the story of two women and four men, and the many amorous intrigues that take place between them. While reading this situation comedy, one soon notices that all the characters are but retouched types and artless simulations, and that the erotic elements the author squeezes into his abstruse plot to make it spicy and appealing are foreign and implausible. Al-Mâzinî would have been better advised if he had written these three stories as dramatic sketches or musical libretti instead of putting them in the form of novels, because they are devoid of any literary merit or poetic quality, and as such do not enhance his reputation as a serious novelist, a reputation he deservedly earned with the publication of his first novel, *Ibrâhîm al-Kâtib* (Ibrâhîm the Writer, 1931).

Ibrâhîm al-Kâtib is al-Mâzinî's narrative masterpiece, and his only recognized contribution to the development of the Egyptian novel.[28] Although the title may imply that it is a *Bildungsroman*, or even a *Künstlerroman*, that depicts the educa-

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[25] Ibrâhîm 'Abd al-Qâdir al-Mâzinî, *'Awd 'alâ Bad'* (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Ma'ârif wa Maktabatihâ bi-Miṣr, [April] 1943). All references are to this edition; my translation.

[26] Ibrâhîm 'Abd al-Qâdir al-Mâzinî, *Mîdû wa Shurakâh* (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Nahâr, [June] 1943).

[27] Ibrâhîm 'Abd al-Qâdir al-Mâzinî, *Thalâthat Rijâl wa Imra'ah* (Cairo: al-Dâr al-Qawmiyyah lil-Ṭibâ'ah wa al-Nashr, 1961).

[28] Ibrâhîm 'Abd al-Qâdir al-Mâzinî, *Ibrâhîm al-Kâtib* (Cairo: al-Sha'b, 1970). All references are to this edition; my translation.

tional journey and artistic aspirations of a writer, this novel rather consists of three love stories as experienced by a pedantic middle-aged widower. The first story deals with the love affair he has with a Christian widow named Mary who nurses him during a ten-day stay at a hospital. However, because Mary is hoping to become his wife, and because he would never marry a woman who had been his mistress (25), he ends their relationship, thus destroying this "short dream" (26). In order to forget his love for Mary, Ibrahim takes refuge at his relatives' home in the Egyptian countryside. But instead of finding the peace and tranquillity he seeks, he falls in love with Shushu, his much younger cousin. This playful blonde is depicted in unrealistic and contradictory terms, for although she has grown up in a conservative household that does not permit her to meet men other than those related to her (5), we see how she flirts with both Ibrahim and a young physician who is distantly related to her. This pretty girl, "who has the body of a nineteen year old but the words and gestures of someone under seventeen" (5), discusses Ovid and Nietzsche with Ibrahim, and spends her free time reading Guy de Maupassant, George Bernard Shaw, Alphonse Daudet, Spinoza, Freud, and Tolstoy (136-37), and who, in spite of her young age, "has shed rivers of tears, and spent long nights lamenting [her] dead hopes" (138), and who also exchanges burning kisses with Ibrahim in spite of knowing that they will never belong to one another.

The third woman who falls in love with the protagonist—who, by his own admission, is neither handsome nor young (12-13)—is a liberated twenty-six year old named Layla, who is traveling on her own, and whom he meets in Upper Egypt where he is hiding from his emotional problems. It does not take long until they fall in love and spend most of their time together. But when Layla realizes that Ibrâhîm is still in love with Shushu, she disappears from his life, even though she is carrying his child. Later we are informed that after leaving Ibrâhîm, Layla marries the physician who helped her to get rid of Ibrâhîm's unborn child, and that Shushu marries the young doctor to whom she is related. We are also told that Ibrâhîm has resigned himself to the idea of living without being tied to any specific woman.

There is no doubt that *Ibrâhîm al-Kâtib* is—in spite of several stylistic flaws and technical deficiencies[29]—a very entertaining novel. The author's use of modern narrative devices (such as changing the sequence of incidents to maintain the suspense, or the use of parallel narration of two or more stories) and his concern with extremely sensitive themes and motifs (such as free love and abortion) also make this one of the earliest modern Egyptian novels. However, in spite of his attempt to introduce emancipated female characters, he does not succeed in presenting a single woman who is credible and convincing. The three women he introduces to the reader are—by any measure—either too liberated for this

[29] See Elkhadem 40, n. III.5.5.

conservative society, or foreign and artificial to a degree that makes them seem like poor imitations of the heroines one encounters in European romances.

Al-Mâzinî's *Ibrâhîm al-Thânî* (Ibrâhîm the Second, May 1943)[30] is a continuation of *Ibrâhîm al-Kâtib*, and the protagonist of this work is "What Ibrâhîm al-Kâtib [the protagonist of the first book] had once been before he changed greatly" (7). He is, however, as pedantic and opinionated as ever. Almost everything in this entertaining novel—plot, characters, and milieu—seems simulated and affected, and its most striking characteristic is its insincerity. If it weren't for the book's effervescent style and the author's charming sense of humor, *Ibrâhîm al-Thânî* would not be worthy of notice. *Ibrâhîm al-Thânî* depicts Ibrâhîm's married life, and two of his love affairs. His first encounter with Tahiyyah, who was "as good as engaged" (28) to a cousin of Ibrâhîm's, is depicted in detail: how they fall in love with each other, how they get married in spite of the objection of their families, and how they "lived happily ever after" (53). Nevertheless, when Ibrâhîm goes through his mid-life crisis and yearns to "hear words of love and admiration" (10) from other women, his trusting and understanding wife, Tahiyyah, introduces him to several young women, believing that he does not seek anything other than innocent companionship and harmless reassurance. One of these "innocent" encounters is with an intelligent and emancipated thirty-year-old school teacher named Mîmî, and it soon develops into a passionate love affair that lasts two years. When the protagonist decides to regain his freedom, he manipulates Mîmî, as if she were a mindless puppet, into marrying a violent and idle cousin of hers, so that she may atone for falling in love with him. The second affair is with a twenty-year-old girl named 'Aydah, who is experiencing emotional, health, and family problems. After lasting one year, this relationship ends only because 'Aydah dies in very sad circumstances (106 ff.).

After describing these two passionate love affairs in some detail, and even inserting a few passages that have erotic connotations (45, 47, 81, 92, 95), the author—as if he had suddenly remembered the conservative society in which he lives—assures his readers that to the mature and liberated Mîmî, and to the Lolita-like 'Aydah, he was nothing but "a father, a brother, and a friend" (210), and that "maybe due to his asceticism and temperance" (211), they did not exchange anything more than innocent kisses (92, 167). By doing so, the author has undermined his own credibility, for not only has he depicted a faked setting, simulated characters, and unconvincing motivations, he has even presented them as if they were the most common phenomena of his society. Although the three women he deals with in this novel—the loving but meek wife, the emancipated but gullible mistress, and the free but confused spirit—do share some characteristics with the women of their time, al-Mâzinî has, by

[30] Ibrâhîm 'Abd al-Qâdir al-Mâzinî, *Ibrâhîm al-Thânî* (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Ma'ârif wa Maktabatuhâ bi-Miṣr, [April] 1943). All references are to this edition; my translation.

exaggerating their qualities to such an absurd degree, made them seem more like caricatures than flesh and blood creations.

Of Tawfiq al-Ḥakîm's five novels, only his last one, *al-Ribâṭ al-Muqaddas* (The Sacred Bond, 1944), has a female character at the center of its action. His first novel, *'Awdat al-Rûḥ* (The Return of the Spirit, 1933),[31] is the story of a middle-class family which consists of a forty-year-old illiterate spinster, her two brothers, a cousin, and a nephew. All the events that take place in this family, especially the love that its male members feel for a playful girl who lives nearby, and the effects which the Egyptian Revolution of 1919 has on all of them, is narrated in an authentic, humorous, and highly entertaining way. Although the author realistically depicts the appearance of the two female characters that play small roles in this story, he does not deal seriously with their inner lives. Al-Ḥakîm's second novel, *Yawmiyyât Nâ'ib fî al-Aryâf* (Diary of a Prosecutor in Rural Egypt, 1937),[32] which is an unsolved mystery story written in the form of a journal, has only one woman in it, the extremely beautiful country girl Rîm. And in spite of the fact that she is suspected of being involved in the murder of Qamar al-Dawlah, her brother-in-law, and that she herself soon becomes a victim of another murder, the author does not give her a chance to express her thoughts or reveal her emotions. Al-Ḥakîm's third novel, *'Uṣfûr min al-Sharq* (Bird from the East, 1938),[33] which depicts the impact of European culture on a young Egyptian student who studies in Paris, does not feature any Egyptian females characters; the only woman who plays a role in this work is a French girl named Susi, whom the young student adores, and whom he soon loses when she decides to go back to her former lover, Henri.

Al-Ribâṭ al-Muqaddas,[34] al-Ḥakîm's fourth, and last, novel, depicts the relationship between a middle-aged, reclusive writer and his admiring apprentice, a coy and beautiful twenty-year-old girl. However, as soon as he discovers that his coquettish devotee is not only a married woman and a mother, but is also on the verge of implicating him in an intrigue that could easily ruin his good name, he ends their relationship. In spite of the fact that he has met her only four times, and that they have exchanged nothing but words, he becomes obsessed by her memory, and starts writing "letters to her phantasm" (77), and idolizing her as if she were a saint. After the writer has spent a year in constant company with her image, the woman's husband, who has known of his wife's admiration for the writer, enlists his help, and gives him his wife's diary to read, hoping that it will clarify things for both of them. The woman's "red notebook" informs him of her dissatisfaction with her traditional role as a wife and a mother, and admits of

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[31] Tawfîq al-Ḥakîm, *'Awdat al-Rûḥ* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Âdâb, 1973).

[32] Tawfîq al-Ḥakîm, *Yawmiyyât Nâ'ib fî al-Aryâf* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Âdâb, 1972).

[33] Tawfîq al-Ḥakîm, *'Uṣfûr min al-Sharq* (Cairo: Dâr al-Ma'ârif, 1974).

[34] Tawfîq al-Ḥakîm, *Al-Ribâṭ al-Muqaddas* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Âdâb, n.d.). All references are to this edition; my translation.

having an affair with a movie star. She even tells the story of another unfaithful wife "who wanted to live, and to breathe a little" (123), and whose husband would later commit suicide out of shame and desperation. After finishing these confessions, the writer, who regards his former apprentice as "more than his own wife" (155), and thinks of himself as her "spiritual husband" (195), breaks into tears. When the writer agrees to act on the husband's behalf and to meet with her in order to convince her to agree to a quiet divorce, and to give the husband custody of their daughter, she denies everything, claiming that her confessions are—in spite of their "feverish tone" (210)—nothing more than a fictional work written by a gifted storyteller. When they fail to agree, the woman tries to seduce the writer, and when she is about to succeed, and his resistance begins to dissolve "like a statue of sand" (257), the telephone suddenly rings thus bringing him back to himself and to the real world. Later when he hears of her divorce and realizes that, "according to the norms of society, she is now a free woman" (268), he thinks of having her as a mistress, but then drops the idea, and resumes his solitary life.

In *Al-Ribâṭ al-Muqaddas*, Tawifîq al-Ḥakîm tries—as Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal later does in his *Hâkadhâ Khuliqat* (1955)—to depict the life of a young, liberated woman who is not satisfied with the narrow-mindedness of her society, and is willing to fight for her right to choose her own lifestyle. And here, too, the author injects too many ideas about convention, tradition, and societal norms into his novel, and overburdens his female character with too many outrageous views and unconventional concepts so that she becomes unreal and wholly unconvincing. The amorous adventures of this wealthy and frivolous wife, the rational and highly Westernized reaction of the betrayed husband, and the juvenile behavior of the infatuated writer appear feigned and simulated, for they do not touch upon the lives of the majority, not even the minority, of Egyptians. Also, the ideas the author advances in this novel about marriage and fidelity are not only illogical and inconsistent, they are even sexist and immoral. The author states, in all seriousness, that a husband's infidelity should be mitigated by the fact that he, being the breadwinner, uses his own money to finance his extramarital adventures, while an unfaithful wife would be "embezzling" her husband's money if she made herself attractive for other men; as well, a husband's adulterous affairs differ entirely from those of his wife's, because he can never bring strange blood into the family, while a wife could easily do that (228-30). It is a pity that Haykal's *Hâkadhâ Khuliqat* and al-Ḥakîm's *al-Ribâṭ al-Muqaddas*, two of the very few Egyptian novels that revolve around the life of a female, and depict her struggle to emancipate herself and to gain some freedom of choice, have failed so miserably in spite of the fact that they have been written by two of the most distinguished Egyptian men of letters.

Another early novel that seriously deals with a female character is 'Abbâs Mahmûd al-'Aqqâd's *Sârah* (Sara, 1938).[35] However, although this ode in prose may be ranked highly as a literary work, it does not really fall within the boundaries of this survey, for it deals with a woman who is not Egyptian; as such, she does not adhere to, or even recognize, the social norms of her guest country. Because al-'Aqqâd repeatedly depicts her as a playful divorcée who enjoys every minute of her life without regard to any moral code or social obligation (e.g., 39, 92), we may find her outrageous behavior fascinating, but we cannot regard her as representative of Egyptian women, or even sharing any qualities, whether positive or negative, with them. She is—like Mary, the Christian nurse loved by the protagonist in al-Mâzinî's *Ibrâhîm al-Kâtib*—totally foreign in character, attitude, and sensibility, and therefore of no relevance to our present discussion.

Mahmûd Tâhir Lâshîn's *Hawwâ' bilâ Âdam* (Eve Without Adam, 1943)[36] is undoubtedly the best, if not the only, Egyptian novel that revolves around a convincing female character, and deals with real social issues in a plausible manner. As opposed to other similar novels, the heroine of this story has not been created by the author as the embodiment of his social ideas, or as a mouthpiece to voice his cultural comments. The story of Hawwâ', a poor and unattractive thirty-two-year-old schoolteacher who struggles to educate herself, to advance in her profession, and to participate in the social issues of her time, ends sadly because she misreads the signs around her, and overestimates her own social gains and intellectual achievements. In spite of the wide social gap that separates her from Ramzî, the shallow, aristocratic young man whose sister she tutors, Hawwâ' permits herself to fall in love with him, and deludes herself into believing that his occasional remarks to her, and their insignificant conversations are the expression of love and admiration, and that one day he will ask her to marry him. But when she hears that Ramzî has agreed, without any hesitation, to his father's plan to marry him to a rich girl from his social class whom he has seen only once before, Hawwâ' is jerked back into reality. Consequently, she suffers emotionally and deteriorates physically, and, on Ramzî's wedding night, she takes her own life.

Lâshîn's novel, his one and only, is a masterpiece of narrative literature, and an authentic cultural document. Hawwâ''s intellectual and social struggle is depicted without sentimentality or exaggeration, and the wide gap that separates the classes in Egypt is treated without rhetorical embellishment or hyperbolic distortion. However, Lâshîn's most important achievement in this novel is his masterful delineation of the thoughts, moods, and emotions of a sensitive, self-educated, poor woman, and her development from a lonely and frustrated girl into a neurotic spinster. His superb depiction of Hawwâ's humble, superstitious,

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[35] 'Abbâs Mahmûd al-'Aqqâd, *Sârah* (Cairo: Maktabat Gharîb, n.d.). All references are to this edition.

[36] Mahmûd Tâhir Lâshîn, *Hawwâ' bilâ Âdam* (Cairo: Matba'at al-I'timâd, 1934)

but endearing background is unsurpassed in the novels of his time. His use of humorous situations, comical contrasts, and ironic discrepancies contributes greatly to the narrative objectivity of this magnificent literary achievement.

As the above survey has shown, Egyptian novelist have, like their European counterparts, often included women in their stories, and some have even put women at the center of their tales. However, the social and religious climate of this Islamic country has imposed certain moral and stylistic restrictions on the authors of this early period. Also, the fact that all the writers who have contributed to the rise and development of the Egyptian novel were men has given these works a biased, if not a sexist, attitude. Many of them have chosen non-Egyptian women for their love stories, or have depicted their liberated heroines as misguided women and neurotic creatures, thus reassuring their readers that in spite of the unconventional tales they have just witnessed, they still live in a proper and righteous society.