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Beyond Occidentalism:
Europe and the Self in Present-day
Arabic Narrative Discourse

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Abstract

The paper deals with the theme of the representation of Europe in present-day Arabic narrative discourse. In the first part, which is mainly theoretical, the notion of Occidentalism is defined with particular reference to the concept of "the political unconscious" elaborated by the American literary theorist Fredric Jameson. After a brief discussion of some Egyptian narrative works that exemplify Occidentalist representations of Europe, the paper centres around a new tendency emerged in the Arabic narrative output of the 90s where the relationship between the definition of the Self and the representation of Europe appears inverted with respect to Occidentalism. In order to examine this tendency, the paper carries out a textual analysis of two recent novels by the distinguished Egyptian author Baha Taher: *al-Ḥubb fi-l Manfā* (Love in Exile, 1995), and *Wāḥat al-Ghurūb* (The Sunset Oasis, 2006: awarded the International Prize for Arabic Literature 2008).

Keywords

Introduction

Europe has been a recurrent presence in modern Arabic narrative, from the neo-*maqāmāt*[1] of the nineteenth century up to the present-day novels and short stories, and has exerted such an appeal on modern Arab authors that almost all the great names of Arabic literature have dealt with the theme in one or more of their works. In the early Arabic novels, written during the first half of the twentieth century, the most common plot revolved around the journey of a young Arab hero to Europe in order to complete his studies abroad, and the ensuing love affair with a local woman, identified with the European civilisation as a whole. In the narrative works of the last decades, the dynamics of the plot and the representation of the European characters have undergone significant changes, but Europe has not lost its appeal as a literary subject and keeps being a major point of reference also for the new generations of Arab writers.

Despite the relevance of the theme, the existing studies on the Arab representation of Europe still lack of an adequate critical insight, and the first extensive monograph was only published in 2006 by the Egyptian scholar Rasheed el-Enany: *Arab Representations of the Occident. East-West Encounters in Arabic Fiction*[2]. el-Enany's study is a remarkable path-breaking work that provides a rich diachronic survey of the representations of Europe and the United States in modern Arabic narrative, but lacks a thorough theoretical part and its most important achievements are mainly of a descriptive and documentary nature.

The present work is part of a long term research project on "Occidentalism" aimed at developing a general theoretical framework for the study of the representation of Europe in modern Arabic narrative, largely based on the notion of *the political unconscious* elaborated by the American literary theorist Fredric Jameson[3]. The first part of the project consisted in a doctoral research that was focused on the literary construction of Europe and the Self during the first half of the twentieth century, and in particular on the analysis of three milestones of modern Arabic literature: the *maqāma* by Muhammad al-Muwaylihi *Ḥadīth 'Īsā Ibn Hishām* (Isa Ibn Hisham's tale, 1907) and two novels by Tawfiq al-Hakim: *'Awdat al-Rūḥ* (The Return of the Spirit, 1933) and *'Uṣfūr min al-Sharq* (A Bird from the East, 1938) . The findings of the doctoral thesis were developed in several publications, and in particular in an article presented in Hamburg at a conference in honour of the Syrian intellectual Sadik al- Azm[4]. While the first part of the research-project dealt with the early stages in the development of modern Arabic narrative, this paper is centred around the present-day Arabic narrative discourse, and is focused in particular on a new tendency in the representation of Europe and the Self emerged during the 1990s.

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1 The *maqāma* is a narrative genre of the Arabic literary tradition characterised by the use of the rhyming prose and the presence of typified characters. During the 19th century the genre underwent a process of rejuvenation that led it to become the narrative form preferred by the Arab authors to represent the impact of European modernity on the Arab societies.

2 el-Enany (2006).

3 Jameson (1981).

4 The analysis of Occidentalism in *'Awdat al-Rūḥ* and in the *neo-maqāma* by Muḥammad al-Muwaylihī *Ḥadīth 'Īsā Ibn Ḥishām* forms the core of my article: "Occidentalism as the Political Unconscious in the Literary Construction of the Other", in Graf Arnd, Fathi Schirin, Ludwig Paul, *Orientalism and Conspiracy. Essays in Honour of Sadik al-Azm* (expected to be published in 2009 by I.B. Tauris). For an earlier analysis in Italian language on the literary construction of Europe and the Self in *'Awdat al-Ruh* see Casini (2008)..

The first section: "Occidentalism in modern Arabic narrative" re-elaborates the findings of my previous researches on Occidentalism in the light of some new readings, and in particular of the contributes given by Richard Jenkins and Zygmunt Bauman to the current sociological debate on "collectivity" and "identity"[5]. The section surveys the current understandings of Occidentalism and explains my choice to elaborate a different approach to this notion based on the empirical analysis of the process of formation and representation of modern Arab identity.

The second section: "Beyond Occidentalism" highlights the distinctive features of the new relationship between the definition of collective identity and the representation of Europe in some major Arabic narrative works published during the last twenty years. If Occidentalist narratives are distinguished by the symbolic construction of the Self through the contrast to an imagined European other, the new narrative discourse is characterised instead by the expression of a sense of estrangement and exile from the community of belonging, the elaboration of a critical and deconstructive stance to the hegemonic representations of nationhood, and the acknowledgment of modern European culture as an inner component of the identity of the authors.

The third and the fourth sections are dedicated to demonstrate how this new tendency is embodied by two recent novels by the contemporary Egyptian author Baha Taher: *al-Ḥubb fi-l Manfā* (Love in Exile, 1995), and *Wāḥat al-Ghurūb* (The Sunset Oasis, 2006).

Occidentalism in modern Arabic narrative

Occidentalism and modern Arabic narrative: a theoretical approach

The exceptional interest aroused by the publication of Edward Said' *Orientalism* in 1978, and the many debates that have been inspired by the book in the following years, have brought many scholars with different academic backgrounds (anthropology, literary studies, political science) to attempt the reverse route of the one followed by Said and research on specific conceptions/images/constructions of the Occident as many examples of "Occidentalism". In some cases the studies on Occidentalism have been concerned with the same topic as Said' *Orientalism* (discourses on the Orient by Western writers, scholars and intellectuals) and have made use of its theoretical apparatus, but have widened the original scope of Said's study by focusing on the way the representation/construction of the Oriental Other has been used to produce specific images of the Occidental Self[6]. More frequently, instead, the category of Occidentalism has been applied to the study of the construction of the Occident by non-Western subjects. The application of Occidentalism to this latter field of studies, that regards directly the theme of the present paper, deserves to be analysed in some detail in order to highlight what are its most evident shortcomings and explain our own reformulation of the notion.

While the third definition of Orientalism given be Edward Said implies the existence of "a corporate institution" that lies behind, limits and permeates any possible discourse on the Orient[7], the notion of Occidentalism (as it is understood in the current academic debate)

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5 See: Jenkins (2002) and Bauman (2002).

6 This understanding of Occidentalism, derived from Edward Said's notion of Orientalism, is discussed by the anthropologist James G. Carrier in his introduction to the volume *Occidentalism: Images of the West* (Carrier 1995).

7 "Taking the late eighteenth century as a very roughly defined starting point Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient"(...) so authoritative a position Orientalism

does not refer to any kind of pre-definite limitation or pattern for a discourse on the Occident, but is referred to either: a) any image, conception or construction of the Occident, or b) one single form of representation: negative and dehumanising. The first kind of use can be identified in the Introduction to *Arab Representations of the Occident* by Rasheed el-Enany[8], or in the essay on "Cargoism and Occidentalism" by the anthropologist Lamont Lindstrom, who defines Occidentalism as "the discourse among Orientals about the West"[9]. The second kind of use has been popularised by the bestseller *Occidentalism* by Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit where Occidentalism is defined as "the dehumanising picture of the West painted by its enemies"[10].

The notion of Occidentalism employed in the present paper does not refer to any of the current understandings of the term, whose connotations appear to be either too general (the mere fact of representing the Occident) or too specific (a single kind of image) to describe the relationship between the definition of the Self and the representation of Europe in modern Arabic narrative discourse. Our definition of the concept moves instead from the empirical analysis of two apparently contrasting phenomena, the first related to the formative process of modern Arab identity, and the second to its representation:

- Modern Arab identity (like modern Arabic narrative) developed in a dialogical interaction with European modernity, in the context a cultural movement (the Arab Cultural Revival: *al-Nahḍa*) that led the Arab intellectuals to define themselves through concepts that were foreign to their cultural tradition[11].

- Modern Arabic narrative is marked by the pronounced tendency to define collective identity through the contrast to an imagined European Other.

These two phenomena, as it has been remarked, are only apparently in contrast with each other. The weakening of the role of Islam as a marker of the Arab identity and the parallel appropriation of concepts and social institutions emerged in Europe, can explain the need for the Arab writers to reassert the distinctive traits of their collective identity *vs.* Europe, because (as the contemporary sociological studies on collective identity demonstrate): *it is precisely the absence of clarity and definition at the borders of collectivities that necessitates this work of boundary maintenance*[12].

Since the time of the French occupation of Egypt in 1798, the debate over collective identity has represented one of the key and most recurring issues in modern Arabic thought. In their attempt to confront the challenge brought to the Arab world by the expansionism of the modern European powers, the Arab intellectuals of the 19th century started to emphasise the importance of change and reform (*iṣlāḥ*), both in strictly juridical terms and as general principles for the organisation of the society. In the works of the great Islamic reformers of the second half of the nineteenth century, the emphasis on change was coupled with the description of the defining traits of the Arab-Islamic identity where Islam was invested with unprecedented meanings and functions presented as a return to the spirit of the Islamic

(Contd.)
has that I believe no one writing, thinking, or acting on the Orient could do so without taking into account of the limitations of thought and action imposed by Orientalism" (Said 1995, p.3)

8   el-Enany (2006).

9   In Carrier (1995), p.36.

10 Buruma and Margalit (2004), p. 3.

11 In reference to modern Arabic thought see Hourani (1983). As regards modern Arabic narrative and the genesis of the new narrative genres see especially Hafez (1993) and Shalan (2002).

12 Jenkins (2002), p.20.

revelation. During the first decades of the twentieth century the nation replaced the pan – Islamic *umma* as the most successful model of "imagined community[13]" among the Arab intellectual élite, and the novel and the short story superseded the *maqāma* as the dominant genres in modern Arabic narrative.

Throughout the twentieth century, Arabic narrative has given a decisive contribution to the construction and spread of alternative images of collective identity and has subsumed Islam within an essentially secular discourse, deeply permeated by modern European culture. The passage from a religious to a secular representation of collective identity has coincided with a deep transformation in the representation of Europe. The Otherness of Europe has not been expressed in the traditional religious terms, but through the emphasis on the different nature of the Europeans with respect to the "Egyptians", "Arabs" or "Orientals", depending on the "imagined community" of each author.

With reference to Fredric Jameson' notion of "the political unconscious"[14], **Occidentalism in modern Arabic narrative can be understood as "a strategy of containment" whereby collective identity is contained within a coherent and unitary image through the contrast to an as much unitary image of Europe.** As the following pages are going to demonstrate, Occidentalism has played its primary role as a tool in the domestic politics of the Arab societies where the competition for political and cultural hegemony has often taken place through the narrative construction of rival images of the Self and of its European Other.

The "political unconscious" in the literary construction of the Other

The notion of "the political unconscious" was elaborated by the American literary theorist Fredric Jameson in 1981, in an ambitious study dedicated to the discussion of key issues related to the question of Interpretation and the elaboration of a new hermeneutic theory. The fundamental assumption of *The Political Unconscious* is the rejection of the conventional distinction between cultural texts that are social and political and those that are not, and the recognition that there is nothing which is not social and historical and that everything is "in the last analysis" political:

> The assertion of a political unconscious proposes that we undertake just such a final analysis and explore the multiple paths that lead to the unmasking of cultural artifacts as socially symbolic acts. It projects a rival hermeneutics to those already enumerated; but it does so, as we shall see, not so much repudiating their findings as by arguing its ultimate philosophical and methodological priority over more specialised interpretative codes (….)[15].

What is of particular interest in Jamesons' theoretical effort, for our definition and analysis of Occidentalism, is his understanding of ideology in terms of **strategies of containment** ("whether intellectual or –in the case of narratives– formal") and his re-reading of Lukacs' concept of **totality** as a "methodological standard", part of a critical, "negative" and

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13 With the expression "imagined community" I do not refer only to the nation, but to the enlarged use of this notion suggested by Richard Jenkins to refer to any representation of collective identity. Jenkins re-elaborates on Anderson's definition of the nation and states that: "although Benedict Anderson got it right when he introduced us to the notion of "imagined communities", he got it wrong in failing to push the argument to the realisation that all communities are, of necessity, imagined" (Jenkins, 2002, p.21).

14 Jameson (1981).

15 Ibid. pp.20-1.

demystifying operation whereby a text's "ideological closure" can be unmasked and made visible[16]. According to Jameson, any narrative text is marked by its historical and ideological determinacy, that is, by the interpretative framework employed by the author in his representation/interpretation of Reality. The political unconscious of a text can be grasped by the critic through the reconstruction and analysis of the narrative strategies employed by the author to contain the elusive and heterogeneous reality that is being represented.

With reference to our definition of Occidentalism, the notion of **strategy of containment** is applied to the particular way in which the process of symbolisation of the authors' imagined community (as opposed to the image of Europe) is articulated within each text. In order to give an example of alternative "Occidentalist" narratives, the strategy of containment of two novels by Tawfiq al-Hakim (*'Awdat al-Rūḥ*, 1933) and (*'Uṣfūr min al-Sharq*, 1938) will be briefly illustrated. In each of these two works (which I have examined at length elsewhere[17]) the narrative construction of the European Other serves to legitimise a different form of collective identity: the Egyptian territorial nation (*'Awdat al-Rūḥ*) and a wider Oriental community[18] (*'Uṣfūr min al-Sharq*).

In **'Awdat al-Rūḥ** (1933) the imagined community is the Egyptian territorial nation whose Pharaonic spirit, according to the author, has been moulded by the unique environment of the Nile Valley and has survived up to the present. While the European nations are described as weak and divided communities dominated by individualism and threaten by class conflict, the Egyptian nation is imagined as an organic whole, where the peasants act as one single person and are willing to bear any kind of suffering in the name of their leader (*al-ma'būd*: the worshipped).

al-Hakim's definition of the spirit of the Egyptian nation is based mainly on the environmental determinism elaborated by Hippolyte Tayne[19]. According to the novel's conservative understanding of nationalism, the social behaviour of the citizens and the very spirit of the nation are determined by the environment. al-Hakim focuses only on the social behaviour of the Egyptian peasants who are regarded as the heirs of the Pharaonic spirit of Egypt. He describes them as willing to sacrifice themselves for their leaders just as the ancient Egyptians did for their Pharaohs when they built the pyramids. To support this view (which coincides with the class interests of the Egyptian landowning elite), al-Hakim contrasts the obedient nature of the Egyptian peasants to the revolutionary nature of the European workers who are represented as a threat to the unity and progress of their community. The part of the novel where the strategy of containment of the text emerges to the surface is the direct speech of a French archaeologist (quite interestingly used as the author's intrusive voice) in his dialogue with an English officer. The following quotations from

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16 Ibid, pp.52-3. The concept of "strategy of containment" is derived from Marx's theory of ideology, and in particular from his analysis of petty-bourgeois ideology in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. According to Jameson, Lukács' great achievement in his *History and Class Consciousness* is to have understood that "such strategies of containment can be unmasked only by confrontation with the idea of totality which they at one time imply and repress".

17 See footnote n.4

18 During the thirties Egypt assisted to the development of a widespread anti-liberal tendency among the intellectuals who started to re-define the identity of the nation as part of a wider Oriental community. This tendency, usually referred to as "orientalism", has been extensively studied by Gershoni and Jankowski (1995).

19 Gershoni and Jankowski (1986, pp.130-36) consider "environmental determinism" as one of the most important influences on the Egyptian territorial nationalism of the 20s and the 30s.

the speech of the archaeologist refer respectively to the ancient builders of the pyramids and the contemporary Egyptian peasants:

> Our languages have terms only for the material reality. We cannot imagine the feelings that have made of all these people a single person capable of bearing on his shoulders huge stones for the length of twenty years. He was smiling, cheerful, and friendly, happy to suffer in the name of his idol (al-ma'bud: the worshipped)" (al-Hakim, 1988, 2nd vol. p.56 – our translation).

> This is the other difference between them and us: our workers, when they suffer together, let grow among them the seeds of revolution, the discontent for what they suffer, disobedience. Their peasants, when they suffer together, feel a secret satisfaction, and the pleasure for the unity in sufferings. What a wonderful industrial people for the day of tomorrow!! (al-Hakim, 1988, 2nd vol. p.57 – our translation).

In **'Uṣfūr min al-Sharq** (1938) Tawfiq al-Hakim associates the Egyptian identity to a wider Oriental community described throughout the novel as the dwelling of the Spirit and opposed to the materialism of the declining Western civilisation. al-Ḥakīm's characterisation of the Orient and the Occident is based on his reading of the works of two celebrated European intellectuals: Henry Bergson and Osvald Spengler[20]. The political implications of the novel's opposition between the spiritualism of the Orient and the materialism of the Occident are made explicit in the last chapter, when the young hero reveals that the Oriental spirit of Egypt has been polluted by Western ideas such as: "a generalised state education", "the right to vote", "the parliamentary system". This identification between the Occident and the weak Egyptian democratic institutions has the function to discredit them in favour of an authoritarian political alternative which is presented as more consonant with the ("Oriental") nature of the Egyptian people.

Beyond Occidentalism

Europe and the Self in present-day Arabic narrative discourse

In several Arabic narrative works published after the beginning of the 90s, it is possible to detect a new kind of relationship between the definition of collective identity and the representation of Europe, one which not only differs from the Occidentalist pattern that has been described so far, but which is articulated inversely to it. If Occidentalist narratives are characterised by the symbolic construction of two internally coherent communities divided by imagined hard-edge boundaries, the new narrative discourse is distinguished instead by:

a) The expression of a sense of estrangement and exile from the nation and from any other form of collectivity.

b) The elaboration of a critical and deconstructive stance to the hegemonic representations of nationhood.

c) The representation of a composite and variegated image of Europe, and the acknowledgment of modern European culture as an inner component of the identity of the authors.

The juxtaposition between Occidentalism and the three literary phenomena that have been just enumerated, reveals how each of the three (which is usually studied separately from the other two) is interrelated with the others in one single tendency. If Occidentalist

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20 The influence of these intellectuals on the Egyptian thought of the thirties has been studied by Gershoni and Jankowski (1995). With particular reference to their influence on *'Usfūr min al-Sharq* see Starkey (1987).

representations of Europe are functional to legitimise "homogeneous" and "hard-edged" images of collective identity, the acknowledgment of modern European culture as part of the Self can be understood, instead, as part of a wider critical discourse aimed at questioning the hegemonic representations of collective identity (and of nationhood in particular) and unveiling their contradictions.

a) Narratives of estrangement and exile

Exile (in Arabic: *manfā* or *ghurba*) has been a recurring theme in modern Arabic literature since the end of the 19th century, when the European powers forced some of the most important representatives of the Arabic *Nahḍa* (the Arab cultural and literary revival) to leave their countries for their opposition to the foreign rule. After all the Arab countries achieved independence, during the 1960s, the reference to exile became more articulated and was often associated with an existentialist mood in the Arabic literary output, under the influence of writers such as Camus, Sartre, and Kafka. The prevalent term employed by the Arab writers of the generation of the Sixties to refer to their own sense of exile was *ghurba*, whose root means also to be/feel strange, and, in the eight verbal form (*ightaraba*, infinitive: *ightirāb*) was used with the meaning of: "to become estranged" and "to estrange oneself". In Egypt, the literary expression of *ghurba* and *ightirāb*, as a sense of exile experienced by the writers in their own country, became one of the hallmarks of the narrative of this generation, and was widely used by the young authors as a narrative tool to express their criticism to the authoritarian nature of Nasser's regime[21].

During the last fifteen years the concept of *ghurba* and its narrative representation have undergone significant changes, not only in the works of the new writers (the so called "generation of the 90s") but also in those by authors of previous generations. The sense of estrangement expressed by terms like *ghurba* and *gharīb* has assumed new connotations that have drawn the meaning of the word *ghurba* very close to that of the other term employed by Arabic language to refer to exile: *manfā*, whose root has the literary meaning of: "expelling", "excluding", "banning". The new condition of estrangement is represented in many contemporary Arabic novels as "an exclusion" and "a banishment" from the nation and from any other form of collectivity. It is an exile from History that takes the form of the impossibility for the characters to be active actors within their social contexts, and implies their interment in a space compressed within closed horizons, where it is not possible to project one's existence towards any imaginable future[22]. In this respect, the statement by the Egyptian author Nura Amin, that the writers of the 90s are "trapped in the present[23]" can be also applied to describe the existential condition experienced by many characters of Arabic narrative works published during the last two decades.

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21 The concept of *ightirāb* has been extensively discussed by the Egyptian writers of the 60s generation in their most famous journal: *Galleri 68*. A synthesis of that debate is reported in my introduction to the Italian translation of some short stories published in *Galleri 68* (Casini, 2003).

22 The expression "closed horizon" has been recently used by the Egyptian scholar Sabry Hafez to characterize the narrative of the new generation of Egyptian authors (his lecture at the 8th Congress of EURAMAL, Uppsala, June 2008). This expression can be specified with reference to Koselleck's notion of "horizons of expectation". According to Reinhart Koselleck, in the modern age, "experience", as the organizing principle for action in the present became replaced by "horizons of expectation" (Koselleck, 1985). The lack of such horizons in the existence of present-day Arab intellectuals can explain many of the transformations occurred in the narrative field.

23 In Hafez (2001), p. 197.

Exile is a dominant theme in the two novels by Baha Taher that have been selected for analysis, which employ both terms *ghurba* and *manfā* with very similar connotations. The condition of exile experienced by the protagonists of the two novels takes the form of their long stay in a foreign place (a northern European city at the beginning of the 80s in *al-Ḥubb fī-l Manfā*; and the remote oasis of Siwa at the time of the British colonial rule in *Wāḥat al-Ghurūb*), in a physical distance from home that hints at the inner distance that separates them from their national community.

b) From Isis to Scheherazade : deconstructions of nationhood

In the context of the prolonged political paralysis (i.e. the absence of any structural reform both at the social and at the institutional levels) that has marked the life of many Arab countries during the last decades, the Arab authors have started to regard the hegemonic representations of their national identity as devoid of any correspondence with the real conditions of their societies, as an impediment more than a spur to political and social change. This is the case of the representation of Palestine in the novels *Ra'aytu Rām Allāh* (I Saw Ramallah, 1997) by the Palestinian Murid al-Barghuti and *Bāb al-Shams* (The Gate of the Sun, 1998) by the Lebanese Elias Khuri, where the traditional accounts on contemporary Palestinian history and identity have been deconstructed in order to create the basis for a new approach to the Palestinian issue, beyond any illusory or mythical image of Palestine.

An especially critical attitude towards the existing representations of the nation can be observed in the Egyptian novels *Wāḥat al-Ghurūb*[24] (The Sunset Oasis, 2006) by Baha Taher and *Awrāq al-Narjis*[25] (Leaves of Narcissus, 2001) by Somaya Ramadan. In these two novels, the *deconstruction* of the dominant images of the Egyptian nation - traditionally embodied by the trope of Isis - is paralleled by the valorisation of the Arab oral/popular heritage embodied by the trope of Scheherazade.[26] The shift from Isis to Scheherazade as the most representative feminine trope in current Egyptian narrative, well illustrates the new attitude of the Arab authors to the hegemonic representations of the nation:

Isis and Scheherazade, the Egyptian Pharaonic goddess and the legendary narrator of the *Arabian Nights*, are both widespread tropes in contemporary Egyptian literature but have emerged in two different moments of the literary history of the country. The trope of Isis emerged concomitantly with the first mature Arabic novels (which are also Egyptian novels) and can be observed in some of the most important works published during the first half of the Twentieth century such as *Zaynab*[27](1913) by Muhammad Husayn Haykal, and *'Awdat al-Rūḥ* (The return of the spirit,1933) by Tawfiq al-Hakim, where the heroine with whom the young protagonists falls in love, is identified with the Egyptian goddess. The function of the female character associated with Isis is that of "reviving" the Pharaonic spirit in the heroes of the novels, the male representatives of the Egyptian land owning elite who are given the task of leading the national community towards progress and independence. In this sense, the trope of Isis and the exaltation of the Pharaonic past associated with it, are related to the

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24 See the analysis of the novel in this paper .

25 The novel has been awarded the Naguib Mahfuz prize for literature in 2002.

26 In *Awrāq al-Narjis* the protagonist's nanny is characterized as a storyteller, and her stories leave a deep mark on the identity of the protagonist. In *Wāḥat al-Ghurūb*, the trope of Scheherazade is embodied by three different characters and performs a key function in the narrative structure of the text.

27 *Zaynab* is usually considered the first mature novel in modern Arabic literature.

Egyptian territorial nationalism of the liberal age: a modernist but politically conservative understanding of nationhood, especially as far as the themes of class and gender are concerned[28].

Scheherazade appeared also quite early in modern Egyptian literature, in works by Tawfiq al-Hakim and Taha Husayn published during the thirties, but it was only three decades ago that she became a popular trope in modern Arabic narrative, especially after the publication of *Layāli Alf Layla* (Arabian Nights and Days) by Naguib Mahfouz in 1982[29], when she started to be referred to as a symbol of the disruptive/"decentring" forces of oral popular narrative and female imaginative wit.[30] While the nationalist reference to Isis has been incorporated within the rhetoric of the Egyptian state, the stories narrated by Scheherazade constitute a counter-narrative that cannot be appropriated by any institution. In *Layāli Alf Layla*, for example, they lead the Sultan Shahrayar to understand the real nature of his power, confess that he is no more than "a poor man", and, finally abdicate. It is only at this final point of the novel, when he has lost all his past confidence and power that Scheherazade begins to love him.

c) Europe as the Self

In a chapter dedicated to the study of the Arab representation of Europe after the end of the 60s (and significantly titled "humbled encounters"), Rasheed el-Enany considers the Egyptian novel *Aṣwāt* (Voices) by Sulayman Fayyad (published in 1970) as a major literary divide between "proud" and "humbled" encounters with Europe, because in no other Arabic novel before, he can detect such a complete abnegation of the Self and glorification of the Other[31]. A similar approach to that of *Aswat* is observed in a later novel published by an author of the same generation as Fayyad: *Muḥāwala li-l Khurūj* (Attempting to get out, 1980) by Abd al-Hakim Qasim, where the European partner of the protagonist seems to embody the only possible "way out" for him from the oppressive context of the Egyptian society.

The tendency that emerged in Egypt during the 90s, and that is being discussed in this chapter, represents a new turning point in the perception/representation of Europe and the Self. In novels such as *Awrāq al-Narjis* by Somaya Ramadan (2001) or *al-Ḥubb fi-l Manfā* (1995) and *Wāḥat al-Ghurūb* (2006) by Baha Taher, the image of Europe is not univocal, neither in a positive nor in a negative sense, or rather, it is the very possibility/legitimacy to represent unitary images of Europe as the Self that is questioned. The characters are not portrayed as representatives of a collectivity, their identity is exclusively personal, heterogeneous, and composed by elements that belong to different cultural traditions.

The chapter "Parable of Homeland" in *Awrāq al-Narjis* can best illustrate how the representation of Europe as part of the Self intertwines with the particular condition of "exile" experienced by the protagonist. The heroine/narrator (Kimi) describes what she names as "the map of her exile": the pictures and images that decorate the wall of her room in Dublin. These images are referred to as a projection of her personal identity:

> On the wall James Joyce shoved his hands nervously inside the pockets of his loose
> trousers as he stood before a summer cabin, submerged in thought, his eyes blurred

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28 On this respect Shalan 's analysis of *Zaynab* and *'Awdat al-Ruh* is particularly illuminating (Shalan, 2002).

29 Mahfouz (1995). See also the critical study by al-Musaawi (2003), chapter ten pp. 375-87.

30 al-Musaawi (Ibid.) regards Scheherazade as an emblem of "the postcolonial Arabic novel".

31 El-Enany (2006). "Proud encounters" and "Humbled encounters" are the titles of two chapters dedicated to the study of the Arab representation of Europe in the post-colonial period. The first considers the decades of the 50s and the 60s, while the second analyses the texts published from 1970 up to the present.

behind round lenses and a summer cap on his head, looking a little haughty as nearsighted people often unwittingly do. He is ignoring Samuel Beckett, whose incomparable head had been sculptured from the expansive volume of Deidre Blaire's massive biography. Beneath them, Gauguin's brown girls smile to fiancés who never arrive, and next to the smiling brown girls is a cheap reproduction of a painting of a Chinese woman with a confused head, called "The Woman with the Confused Head", looking steadily at a postcard that pictures an extremely complex directional sign carrying the names of no less than twenty villages simultaneously. This sign exists. There was also an old man with wide gray eyes staring in hopeless regret at the picture of a small harbour: a sailor whose face the salty breeze has tanned a heavy, impervious leathery brown readying a small wooden boat for departure. But the woman whose map that was didn't know so then[32].

In London, in the interiors of the houses of other Egyptian émigrés, she had observed "maps of the nation" that reconstructed Egypt through its objects: worked fabrics, woven rugs, papyrus, statuettes and photographs. Kimi realises that her map is of a very different nature, because it evokes "a nation without a territorial correlate, a homeland constantly remade according to the need ", and she wonders why her map remains as remote as could be from Egypt.

al-Ḥubb fi-l Manfā
(*Love in Exile*, 1995)

Exile

The relevance of the theme of exile in this novel by Baha Taher is emphasised also by the title (*al-Ḥubb fi-l Manfā*) where the concept of *manfā* (in exile) refers not so much to the physical location in which the love story (*al-ḥubb*) between the Egyptian protagonist and an Austrian woman (Brigitte) takes place (un unnamed European city) as to the existential condition experienced by both lovers. At the beginning of the first chapter, the hero/first person narrator presents his exile as the consequence of a banishment, when he defines himself as "a Cairenne whose City had expelled *(ṭaradathu)* to exile (*ghurba*) in the north[33]", but shortly after this statement, the reader learns that the protagonist has not been banished or expelled from Egypt, at least not in a literal meaning, since it was him who preferred to move to Europe after divorcing from his wife. As the following pages will attempt to highlight, the connotation of the word "City" in the protagonist's definition of his condition of "exiled person" can be referred to the Egyptian national community. The protagonist's estrangement from the nation begins far before his travel to Europe and is symbolised in the novel by his progressive marginalisation in the workplace and the family in the years that followed the death of the Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser.

A fervent Nasserite, the protagonist has been the editor in chief of the newspaper where he works as a journalist, but looses this position when he refuses to write an article in praise of the policies of the new president Sadat. After this episode, he is given less and less space in the newspaper to express his political views, and this condition becomes even worse when he accepts a position as a foreign correspondent from Europe. During his stay in Europe, at the present time of the story, he is asked to write a column on the most weird and bizarre

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32 Ramaḍān (2002), pp.37-8; Ramadan (2002 English tr.), pp.31-2.

33 Ṭāhir (1995), p. 6. Taher (2001, English transl.), p.3.

events of the week, and the director makes him understand that even if he does not write at all, the newspaper is not going to complain.

The family is the other social environment where the protagonist experiences his marginalisation, and can also be regarded as a metaphor of the Egyptian national community. If the protagonist is not able to adapt to the social changes of the country after the death of Nasser (he even writes a biography on the old President which remains completely unsold) the wife undergoes a progressive transformation which is parallel to that of the Egyptian society (she evens abandons her secular/feminist ideals and dresses the veil). The social transformations of the Egyptian society are reflected also by the behaviour of the protagonist's two children, who embody the two different faces of the emerging Egyptian community: the business oriented or *"infitāḥī*[34]*"* (Hanadi, the daughter) and the religious-fundamentalist (Khalid, the son).

When the protagonists phones Hanadi and Khalid from Europe, he is not able to find a way to communicate with them. Hanadi seems only interested in the presents she can get from the father:

> "I am not thinking about the score (in the exams). I am thinking about something more important."
>
> "Which is?"
>
> "The gift you will give me when I pass my exams".
>
> "Like?"
>
> "Like you should start saving right now. This year I'd like a membership in the Equestrian Club. I want to learn how to ride horses"
>
> "Is that very expensive?"
>
> "Well, we're talking about five hundred, a thousand, as much as you like.[35]"

Khalid was supposed to visit his father in Europe with the occasion of an international competition of chests in which he was going to take part, but he informs him that he has withdrawn from the completion because he has read a *fatwā* which states that playing chests is prohibited in Islam. In a following conversation, some weeks after, he openly contest his father's authority when he forbids his sister to go with her friends to the club (*al-nādī*):

> His voice come though calmly: "Peace be upon you."
>
> "We have been through that already. What's the story with your sister?"
>
> "Well, Father, immoral things take place at the club and there are bad young men and I…" his voice grew angry as he said "if, I a man, have stopped going to the club, how can expect me to let *her* go? (….) Hanadi is no longer a little girl, and here I am in charge of her".
>
> "Are you raising your voice at me Khalid? And you are in charge of her? I haven't died yet, my son"[36].

The protagonist's marginalisation in the family and the newspaper goes along with his feeling of belonging to a generation that has been defeated by History and that has lost any citizenship in the present. The historical defeat experienced by the generation of the

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34 L'aggettivo *infitāḥī* si riferisce in questo caso al tipo di atteggiamento e di mentalità ingenerate dalle politiche di privatizzazione (*infitāḥ*) promosse dal presidente egiziano Sadat.

35 Ṭāhir (1995) p.85;Taher (2001English tr.) p.96..

36 Ṭāhir (1995) p.182; Taher (2001) p.206

protagonist is defined as a form of "death" by his old colleague Ibrahim, who quotes a verse by the Egyptian poet Ahmad Shawqi to explain to his friend how their old political disagreements (Ibrahim is a communist and an old critic of Nasser) do not matter anymore: *death has erased all traces of enmity between us*[37]. The "death" to which Ibrahim refers to consists in the irrelevance of their respective convictions at the time when the story is settled (1982). They can keep disagreeing about the past, but both of them have lost any influence on the present.

A similar condition of *exile* is experienced also by the protagonist's Austrian partner (Brigitte), she herself a victim of her social milieu. After having lost her baby and her African husband for the racism of her community, when both of them were beaten by a group of young men of her town, she seeks a complete isolation from politics and "the world", considering that this is the only way to protect herself and her new relationship. For large part of the novel, Brigitte and the protagonist succeed in protecting their love (*al-ḥubb* of the title) from the influence of the outside world, and in particular from the dramatic events of the War of Lebanon that is taking place in those months. But when the massacre of Sabra and Shatila occurs, and the protagonist receives a phone call from his friend Ibrahim from the refugee camp of Sabra, he is no more able to keep his love in exile (*fi-l manfā*). The protagonist's attempt to overcome his exile and recover a role in society marks the beginning of the end of his relationship with Brigitte and leads him to a new personal and political defeat.

A supranational and cross-cultural community of belonging

The condition of "exile from the nation" experienced by the protagonist does not impede him to identify with a supranational and cross-cultural form of imagined community whose symbols and cultural references are those shared by the militants of the leftist movements of his generation from all over the world. This internationalist community is not projected towards an utopian future but is only evoked with a deep nostalgia for the past, in order to recall a period full of expectations that have not been fulfilled.

The symbolic imaginary of the community with which the protagonist identifies is represented in the novel through the reference to two historical events: the Spanish Civil War and Pinochet' coup in Chile in 1978 (only four years before the present time of the story). The Spanish Civil War is referred to as one of the great myths that permeated the intellectual and political militancy of the protagonist's generation and shaped its imaginary with the poems by Federico Garcia Lorca, Ernest Hemingway' novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and, more generally, the idea that internationalist solidarity could have a key role in the making of History. The coup led by general Pinochet in Chile and the assassination of the president Salvador Allende symbolises instead the end of this age of great expectations and the beginning of a new era marked by disillusionment, individualism and the lack of participation in political life. The symbolic imaginary evoked by these two historical events is shared by the three main characters of the novel: the protagonist, Ibrahim and Brigitte.

The reference to Pinochet' coup in Chile occupies large part of the first chapter ("Just another conference") whose key event is a press-conference on the violations of human rights in Chile where the protagonist, Brigitte and Ibrahim meet by chance. The protagonist is reluctant to attend that conference because he believes that whatever he will write it will never be published by his newspaper, or it will be shortened and manipulated so much as to become incomprehensible. When he finally arrives to the conference hall and finds out that

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37 Ṭāhir (1995) p.20; Taher (2001) p.22

only few colleague journalists have attended, he reflects upon the lack of international solidarity in the present and contrasts it with the years of his youth, during the rule of Abdel Nasser, when it was not rare to read the poems by Neruda in the pages of the main Egyptian newspapers:

> Who did you want to come? Who cares now, here or everywhere else? Who cares about a conference held by a committee named The International Doctors Committee for Human Rights about human rights violations in Chile? What Chile and what rights? The time of horror, my friend, was over when they slaughtered thousands in the capital's soccer stadium there. The time of shedding tears over Allende was over when the military killed him They killed him three years after Abd el-Nasser died (…)

> (…)Who remembers Neruda now? I don't remember reading Neruda's name in any newspaper in my country since grief killed him after the military pounced on his country ten years ago. Then finally silenced him, so he wouldn't sing, wouldn't say: "On the shores of all countries my voice rises, because it is the voice of those who have been silent, because all who have not known singing have sung today through me". In the old days, as a young man I read Neruda's poems in our daily newspapers, even in the evening newspapers. Back in the days when the papers said that a people's victory in any country meant freedom for us; the days when we cried over Kwame Nkrumah and Patrice Lumumba (…)[38].

If the event that gathers together the protagonist, Ibrahim, and Brigitte is a press conference on human rights in Chile, the personal memories and the cultural references that unite them most are those related to the Spanish Civil War. When Ibrahim learns that the organiser of the conference on Chile (Dr. Muller) had participated to the Spanish Civil War in the international brigades together with Brigitte's father, he immediately looks at him "as he saw him for the first time". The protagonist recalls all that the Spanish War meant for them in their youth:

> In our youth, that War which we did not live through and which we only knew by reading about it, meant many things to us: the dream of a new world, one united against dictatorship and injustice, the dream which collapsed leaving behind a few symbols: Hemingway and "For Whom the Bell Tolls", Malraux and "L'Espoir", Picasso and "Guernica", and Lorca's poems, the symbols that fixed our imagination in our early youth[39].

The Spanish War and the poems by Lorca had a deep influence also on the life of Brigitte. Her father, who had taken part to the War of Spain on the side of the Republicans, conveyed to her his passion for Lorca. She started reading Lorca's poems when she was still an adolescent and she kept reading them at the university with her husband (Albert), a student from Equatorial Guinea who was completing a thesis on Lorca. The description of the particular way in which Albert used to recite Lorca's poems, with the rhythm typical of African music, emphasises the power of these poems to bridge between cultures and create an universal language:

> He agreed to my request and started reading out loud those beautiful lines from Lorca's "Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias". I have never in my life known anyone read poetry like Albert, nor have I to this day been moved by anything like his way of reciting Lorca's pained lament of his friend, the bullfighter. His voice did not shake or change, it came out naturally from his larynx as if he were continuing the conversation we had before he read the poetry. Then gradually the whispering voice, the sad voice, turned into a

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38 Ṭāhir (1995), pp.11-12; Taher (2001), pp.10-11.

39 Ṭāhir (1995), p. 51; Taher (2001), p.55

plaintive African song in which the long vowels were lengthened even further to sound like deep continuous moans, as if the lips never closed, to keep the anguish pouring continuously from that broad chest and from the roaring waterfall of his larynx. (….) Suddenly Lorca takes off his hat and his Spanish garb to stand there, naked and black, beating the drums in that forest as he elongates his anguished groans over Ignacio[40].

The memories of the Chilean coup and the War of Spain intertwine with the echoes of the War in Lebanon that is taking place during the present time of the story. When Israel invades Lebanon, the protagonist is shocked by the indifference of his newspaper as well as that of the European press. This indifference causes him an immense pain that leads him to suffer from an heart attack which almost kills him. When he comes out of the hospital, the love relationship with Brigitte makes him able to witness in a more detached way the tragic events of the Lebanese War, until one morning he receives a phone call by Ibrahim from the refugee camp of Sabra in which his friend dictates him an article where he describes the tragedy that has occurred during the night.

The actantial structure of the novel: The subversion of the dichotomy the Self vs. Europe

The protagonist's reaction to the massacre of Sabra and Shatila represents a turning point in the structure of the novel because it triggers the sequence of events that forms the core of the story. Before the massacre occurs, the text is largely introspective, dominated by dialogue and the free direct thought of the protagonist, that is centred around the memories of his life. After the massacre, instead, the protagonist attempts to reassert his existence as a political subject by denouncing what has occurred in Lebanon. The political activism of the protagonist provokes the counter-reaction of an Arab Prince from the Gulf who resides in the City and trades in arms with Israel. This contrast between the attempt of the protagonist to overcome his condition of exile with the help of his European friends *vs.* the repression of this attempt by the Arab Prince and his young Egyptian assistant is the manifestation, at the "superficial level" of the text, of the main axis that lies behind the actantial structure of the novel.

The categories of "actantial structure", "actants", and "actantial functions" employed in this part of the present work, refer to the critical studies by Algirdas Julien Greimas and his theory of narrative structures. The fundamental idea that informs Greimas' work is the distinction between two different levels in any given text.: a "superficial level", characterised by the actions of different "characters", and a "deep level" that governs and determines the superficial level of the text through the presence of "actants" . Using linguistic terminology, the "actants" may be described as forces that belong to the syntactical order of the utterance, while the characters are only manifestations of the formers in the semantic order. An actant is usually represented by an abstraction (Freedom, Justice, Mankind), and can or cannot be embodied by one or more characters in the text.

The following analysis of the actantial structure of *al-Ḥubb fi-l Manfā* (and in particular of the functions: *subject*, *object*, *helper, opponent*) highlights how the novel is articulated inversely to the *occidentalist* pattern that contrasts the Arab collective Self *vs.* Europe. In this novel the function of *opponent* is performed by an Arab prince, while the *helper* is the European civil society:

The **subject** can be identified with the **secular and rationalist tradition in modern Arabic thought** that spans from the "pioneers of the *Nahḍa*" (the dominant figures of the

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40 Ṭāhir (1995), p.109; Taher (2001), p.124.

Arabic Cultural Revival) in the first half of the 19th century up to the present generation of Arab intellectuals[41]. The characters who embody this intellectual tradition in the text are those of the protagonist and Ibrahim. Despite their different political options (respectively nasserist and communist) and their past contrasts, they belong to the same intellectual tradition (both of them are secular and rationalist freethinkers) and end up co-operating in denouncing what has occurred in Sabra and Shatila. In this respect, the fact that the protagonist writes his first article on the massacre from Ibrahim's dictation is particularly telling.

The **object** that is sought after by the *subject*, is **the regaining of a cultural and political space** that has been lost at the hands of religious fundamentalist movements after the alignment of the Arab regimes to the international interests of the United States. Since the second half of the 19th century, journalism has been the privileged means by Arab writers and intellectuals to circulate their ideals of reform, and has given a decisive contribution also to the genesis of modern Arabic narrative discourse[42]. It is no accident, therefore, that the characters of the protagonist and Ibrahim are both journalists and that the protagonist's main concern after the massacre is to find the largest possible readership for his articles: "I wrote everything I found out and sent a letter to the newspapers in Cairo every day containing what I heard, reactions, and what the newspapers here said. For the first time I began sending articles to the Arab papers published in Europe without even bothering to follow up and find out what was published and what was not. What mattered was to write as much as possible, for ultimately something must get through"[43]. The attempt to organise a huge demonstration to protest against the massacre of Sabra and Shatila and Isralel's complicity in it, can be understood as a means to attain the same *object*.

The **helper** can be identified with **the European progressive and democratic civil society** that attempts to support the efforts of the *subject*. In the superficial level of the text the *helper* is embodied by the several European groups and individuals that co-operate in the organisation of the demonstrations as well as the characters of Bernard (a colleague journalist and a friend of the protagonist) and Brigitte who take part in the demonstration.

The **opponent** is represented by **the axis that connects American and Israeli policies with Islamic fundamentalist thought.** The function of *opponent* is performed by two different characters in the text: the Arab Prince and his young Egyptian assistant (Yusuf). The Arab Prince trades in arms with Israel and supports the American policies in the Middle East, but at the same time he indoctrinates Yusuf in Islamic fundamentalist thought and leads him to believe that only a strict adherence to the principles of Islam can lead to a victory of the Arabs against Israel. When the protagonist discovers that he trades in arms and refuses to co-operate with him in the publication of a new Arab newspaper, the Prince uses his power to dismiss both Brigitte and the protagonist from their respective jobs, and forces them to live the City and separate from each other.

The transformation of the character of Yusuf in the text is parallel to that of the son of the protagonist and is particularly telling of the preoccupation of the old generation of Arab intellectuals for the future of Arabic culture. In his first meeting with the protagonist, Yusuf reveals him that he is a Nasserite and that when he was a student of journalism in Egypt he

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41 The idea of a continuity between the effort of the first innovators of the Arabic cultural tradition such as Rifā ʿa al-Ṭahṭāwī and the secularist and democratic thought of contemporary Arab intellectuals is claimed by Baha Taher himself , in an essay whose emblematic title is *Abnāʾ Rifāʿa*: "The sons of Rifāʿa al-Ṭahṭāwī".

42 On this respect see Hafez (1993)

43 Ṭāhir (1995), p.216-17; Taher (2001), p.246-47.

used to read his articles in the newspaper and regarded him as a hero and a model. The transformation of the *actantial* function of this character from the *subject* to an *opponent* takes places in parallel with his indoctrination by the Emir who leads him to think that the real enemy of "the Arab nation" is secular thinking.

Wāḥat al-Ghurūb
(*The Sunset Oasis*, 2006)

Exile

Exile is a dominant theme also in this historical novel by Baha Taher set in the remote oasis of Siwa at the time of the British occupation of Egypt. Here the hero (Mahmud) is an officer in the Egyptian army married to an Irish woman (Catherine). He belongs to an important family of merchants that lost its fortunes for the cheat of a Greak trader when the protagonist was still completing his studies, a setback that forced him to live the university and join the army in order to get an immediate income. Since his early youth, Mahmud had been exposed to the thought of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, and afterwards to the nationalist ideas of Mustafa Kamel and Abdallah al-Nadim. His devotion to the nationalist cause culminated in his participation to the anti-British insurrection of 1882 led by Ahmad Urabi. When the insurrection failed and he was interrogated as a suspect insurgent, he condemned the revolt and kept his position in the army under the British control.

The "banishment" of Mahmud from Caro is the starting event of the story, and consists in the decision of the British head of the army to send him on a mission to Siwa, to recover the control over this rebellious oasis. Though situated in the Egyptian territory, Siwa is more distant from the world of an high class Cairenne (*effendi*) living at the turn of the Twentieth century than any European capital. Both the language and the social mores of the inhabitants of the Oasis are completely obscure to Mahmud, whose feelings of strangeness (*ghurba*) from the population of Siwa are emphasised by the particular nature of his task, that of collecting taxes for the central government controlled by a foreign country. Mahmud's wife, Catherine, decides to follow him in his mission not only to remain close to her husband but also for her archaeological interests. She believes that the tomb of Alexander the Great can be hidden somewhere in Siwa (where the Macedonian conqueror was identified as the son of the Egyptian God Amon) and she is resolved to discover it.

As in the novel *al-Ḥubb fi-l Manfā*, the exile of the protagonist is not determined by the travel but precedes it. The narrative function of the travel is that of bringing to light his condition of isolation within the community, as well as the personal and political contradictions that have marked his life. Mahmud's condition of exile can be described as an exile from the Self, characterised by a lacerating feeling of guilt for having betrayed both his nationalist convictions (when he accepted to keep serving in the army after the British occupation of Egypt) and the great love of his life: the south Egyptian servant Nima (when he refused to acknowledge his love for her, because of her social status).

The existence of Mahmud in the Oasis appears as a condition of "death in life", and actually, before the arrival of Catherine's sister (Fiona) in Siwa, and his desperate attempt to cure her from her illness, life appears to have lost any interest for him. When he accepts to be transferred to Siwa instead of resigning from the army, he consciously chooses a probable death, since he knows that the crossing of the desert is extremely dangerous, and that even if he succeeds in reaching the Oasis he will be probably killed by the local population who have already killed his predecessor. The presence of death materialises soon

in the story, when, during the journey in the desert, the group of travellers is surprised by a violent sandstorm. In the apex of the storm Mahmud feels that he is not scared by death and he even desires to die:

> During those moments, when I wasn't able to breath and the air did not arrive to my lungs, I wished to die, I invoked death with all my heart. I was embracing the shivering body of Catherine when a lightning thought insinuated into my mind: let it come! It is painful but it does not scare me. Let it come soon... the end, the end as a beautiful rest from a weight that I cannot bear. Let it come[44].

During Mahmud's stay in the Oasis death becomes a daily presence in his life. The definition of Siwa as *Wāḥat al-Ghurūb* (the Sunset Oasis) is related in the novel to the particular cult of the ancient inhabitants of Siwa who worshipped the God Amon not simply as the God of the Sun but as "the God of the dying sun" believing that the Oasis, situated at the extreme West of Egypt, was the gateway to the land of the dead. The presence of death is recalled by the ancient tombs scattered all around the area and by the name of the mountain that dominates the main village: *Jabal al-Mawtā* (the mountain of the dead). Mahmud can see death also in the looks of the inhabitants of Siwa when he meets their eyes. He well knows that in spite of their polite manners, they desire to kill him because he is there as the representative of an occupying force.

Accepting of taking control of the Oasis in the name of a puppet government whose authority he does not recognise, Mahmud keeps betraying his nationalist ideals and his own Self, and subjugates the only people in Egypt who had been able to defend their independence. The extreme consequence of Mahmud's contradictory stance is symbolised by his co-responsibility in the murder of the rebel, intelligent, and beautiful Malika, nephew of the only wise member in the assembly of the elders of Siwa: the shaykh Yahya, and a clear personification of life in the deadly atmosphere of the Oasis.

The deconstruction of the Pharaonic myth

The most explicit evaluations on the Ancient Egyptian civilisation in *Wāḥat al-Ghurūb* are found in an isolated chapter which is narrated by the ghost of the Macedonian emperor Alexander the Great, whose tomb (according to what emerges in the novel) lies somewhere among the ancient temples of Siwa. In this chapter, which radically diverts from the other chapters of the novel, Alexander relates the story of his life and describes his encounter with the Egyptian civilisation, that he contrasts with the Greek one. Alexander describes Greece as the cradle of poetry and art, refers to its divinities as gods of mirth (*bahja*), and opposes them to the Egyptian gods whose monstrous images lead the population to believe under the effect of fear:

> The Gods of Greece accompany the believer to the peaks of Olympus in order to share with him their joy in the celestial dwellings, while the Egyptian Gods make you feel that you are extraneous to them and insignificant in a world dominated by these terrifying beings. They instilled in me a strong anxiety which generated a second Alexander, a person tormented by this particular question: what is more appropriate to govern people here in our world: mirth or fear?[45]

The Pharaonic civilisation is also associated to the political use of religion at the service of an undisputed leader/God. The association between the Pharaohs/Gods of Ancient Egypt and

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44 Ṭāhir (2006), p.35. Our translation.

45 Ṭāhir (2006), pp.108-09. Our translation.

the modern Egyptian leaders emphasised with positive connotations by Tawfiq al-Hakim in *'Awdat al-Ruh* shortly after the revolution of 1919, is here revised by Baha Taher in the light of the history of contemporary Egypt. As Alexander himself explains, it was after he was recognised as the son of the Egyptian God Amon in the temple of Siwa that he realised that "fear and not wisdom is the basis of power"[46].

The chapter narrated by the Macedonian Emperor is just a short parenthesis in the overall structure of the novel, where the representation of ancient Egypt is direct and explicit. In the rest of the work, the author resorts to more subtle means to elaborate his critical stance towards the Pharaonic symbols of Egyptian nationalism. In this respect, a key element of the text's strategy is Catherine's search of the tomb of Alexander in the ancient temples of Siwa. Her quest, that constitutes the main driving force of the events in the Oasis, leads Catherine to distance herself from Mahmud and get closer to Wasfi, the young aristocratic official of Turkish origin who conspires against Mahmud. In the particular role performed by the character of Wasfi it is possible to note again in this novel the inverse use of a narrative means employed by Tawfiq al-Hakim in his narrative construction of the nation. While in *'Awdat al-Ruh* the Turkish mother of Muhsin is the anti-national character par-excellence and despises the Egyptian peasants (the heirs of the ancient Egyptians according to al-Hakim), in *Wāḥat al-Ghurūb* it is the Turkish Wasfi who glorifies the Pharaohs and the accomplishments of the Ancient Egyptian civilisation.

The contrast between Mahmud and Wasfi emerges from the beginning as a difference of opinion on Pharaonic Egypt. One night, Wasfi, visiting Mahmud and Catherine in their house, brings Catherine his books on the history of the Oasis. When he asserts that all the temples of Siwa were built in the period that preceded the Persian invasion of the country, Mahmud comments sarcastically that it was a great idea to build the temples instead of organising an army to defend themselves from the Persians.

The contrast between the two continues a little later, this time on Alexander's presence in Egypt. When Catherine asks Wasfi if he considers Alexander an Egyptian leader or a foreign occupant, Wasfi answers her that Alexander was definitely Egyptian because the Egyptians themselves regarded him as a Pharaoh. He adds that his soldiers must be regarded also as Egyptians because they remained in Egypt for several decades and some of them married with Egyptian women. To these words of Wasfi, Mahmud replies ironically by asking Catherine if the Irish people consider also the British troops as Irish because of their long occupation of their country.

The comments of Mahmud on the idleness of the Ancient Egyptians in the occasion of the Persian invasion of Egypt, and to their submissive attitude towards the occupying forces of the Emperor Alexander, are explicit allusions to the present time of the story, that is, the period of the British occupation of Egypt (1882 – 1922). The association between the two epochs is suggested by Wasfi himself, whose euology of the Pharaohs and Alexander, is coupled by an analogous praise of the Khedive and an harsh condemnation of the 'Urabi anti-British revolt of 1882, in which the protagonist himself had taken part.

The Pharaonic age, traditionally associated to the spirit of the Egyptian nation, becomes here related to the British occupation of the country. The deconstruction of the positive image of Pharaonic Egypt finds its culmination in the final event of the story, when Mahmud attempts to *undermine* the ancient temples of Siwa with dynamite. This event is also a

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46 "Hunāka ta'allamtu anna al-khawf la al-ḥikma huwa asās al-mulk" (Baha Taher, 2006, p.120).

metaphor of the text's narrative strategy, and its *undermining* the Pharaonic past as the foundational myth of the nation.

An Irish Scheherazade

In *Wāḥat al-Ghurūb* there are three characters who can be associated with Scheherazade: the South Egyptian Nima (the "great love" of the protagonist Mahmud in the years of his youth), the Irish Fiona (sister of Mahmud's wife Catherine), and the Siwan Malika. Nima and Fiona are to a large extent homologous characters. They have a special ability in storytelling, and their narrations exert a deep fascination over Mahmud. The knowledge of popular narrative gives them a particular wisdom and the ability to understand the deep and hidden sides of reality. In one of the moments in which Mahmud remembers his relationship with Nima he explicitly refers to himself as Shahrayar, the king of the frame story of the *Arabian Nights*. Malika is less directly identifiable with the Scheherazade of the *Arabian Nights*, but she embodies some of the distinguishing features usually related to this trope: she is a wise and enterprising woman who rebels against the fanatic rules of the Siwan society and succeeds for many years in intruding in the world of the men by resorting to her feminine wit.

Each of the three female characters associated with Scheherazade (Nima, Malika, and Fiona) is related to a different stage in the development of the protagonist's identity. The character of Nima evokes the first "betrayal" committed by Mahmud, when, in the days of his youth, refused to acknowledge his love for her because of her social condition of servant bought by his father at the slaves' market. The betrayal concerns not only the relationship of Mahmud with Nima but also that with his own Self. In this sense, it performs the semiotic function of an ontological "fall" from which the protagonist will not be able to recover.

The protagonist's attempt to cure Fiona from her illness represents also, at a deeper level of the text, his desperate attempt to cure and recover his own Self. If Catherine is driven to the Oasis by a specific goal (the search of Alexander's tomb), the role of Mahmud is for large part of the novel that of a *subject* without an *object*, since he experiences the dangerous travel to Siwa as a form of exile without return, and does not expect anything from the future[47]. When Fiona reaches Catherine and Mahmud in the Oasis, she appears to him as the embodiment of sincerity and coherence in a moment when his existence is dominated by incoherence and oppressed by feelings of guilt. The redemptive function exerted by Fiona over Mahmud is highlighted also by the fact that the need to find a treatment for her leads him to the garden of Shaykh Yahya (the uncle of Malika) where for the first time he is given access to the wisdom of the Shaykh.

Given the relevance of the role performed by Fiona, her characterisation as an "Irish Scheherazade" (a collector of the Irish oral narrative heritage and a storyteller) deserves a further comment. Postcolonial studies of the Scheherazade trope have especially related the use of this trope to the rediscovery of the indigenous tradition in Arabic narrative and the attempt to liberate the Arabic novel from European literary models. This identification between the reference to Scheherazade and the search of an "indigenous" element in the Arabic narrative tradition is far from being a re-proposition of the *occidentalist* dichotomy: Self *vs.* Europe. The parallel made in *Wāḥat al-Ghurūb* between the South Egyptian tales of Nima and the Irish tales of Fiona emphasises, instead, the cross-cultural nature of the trope.

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47 The word *ghurūb* (twilight) of the title is emblematic of Mahmud's condition in the novel and can be read as a reference to the late stage of his life and the stringency of death (Amon was worshipped in the Oasis as the God of the dying sun) .

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