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Over the last couple of decades, attention in literary analysis has been directed towards issues of minorities, stereotypes and the understanding of representatives of subcultures in society. This is more than an academic fad, as it reflects an increasingly complex and cacophonous development within literature and audience tastes. In a globalizing world, many people feel the need to understand others through literary treatments that no longer merely exoticize or demonize alien cultures.

Forming part of the series Edinburgh Studies of Modern Arabic Literature, this is an analysis of such a development in the Egyptian novel. Barely one hundred years old, the modern Egyptian novel appeared during colonialism and blossomed in the wake of the Second World War and national independence. In this setting, the Other tended to be the Europeans, and the self an Egyptian national who was often homogenized in terms of culture, religion, ethnicity and gender, even if there was a strong awareness of class. The cultural policies of the newly independent Egypt strongly encouraged this homogenization as part of the nation-building endeavour. As noted in the introduction, while there was a development and a certain relaxation in state cultural policies during the tenures of presidents Gamal Abd al-Nasser (1954–1970), Anwar as-Sadat (1970–1981) and Hosni Mubarak (1981–2011), an Islamist counter-narrative emerged, quite critical of the state cultural project. The Islamist current was sceptical about most cultural genres, which it considered imported and perhaps even immoral, and tended to focus on its own cultural expressions. Instead of influencing the novel and producing Islamist novels it tended to isolate the novelists within a fairly narrow sector of Egyptian society.

That said, over the last three decades, Egyptian novelists have decisively broken with all these authoritarian and homogenizing projects. This development is what Youssef terms the new-consciousness novel, with a particular aesthetics of difference (p. 27). By this she refers to not only a new-found interest in the ethnic, religious, social and cultural pluralism and complexity of Egyptian society, but also in the dynamism of differ-

Keywords  Novel, Egypt, realism, minority experience, cosmopolitanism
ence. That is, the powers that uphold and perpetuate these differences, whether it be minority isolationism and self-discipline, or majority practices and state policies of differentiation and exclusion—and how all this is fought over, reasserted and sometimes overcome. Most of the novels are set in such minority environment, which may entail very particular and unusual spaces and times and even language. And they tend to develop in multiple subplots, as the author wants to explore the complexity of the issue.

The book is structured in four analytical chapters, each dealing with two novels. The first two, Idrīs ‘Alī’s al-Nūbī and Bahā Ṭahir’s Wāḥat al-Gharb (Sunset Oasis) deal with old and marginalized ethnic groups (Nubians and Amazigh) at the edge of geographic Egypt and at the margins of society, but at the centre of the modern state’s projects and self-assertion. The second two, Yūsuf Zaydān’s ‘Azzāl and Mu’tazz Futayha’s Ākhīr yahūd Iskandariyya deal with religious minorities (Copts and Jews) and their connection to a transnational community of believers, but also tend to invoke a nostalgic cosmopolitanism. The third of these chapters deal with two novels by the same author, ‘Imārat Ya‘qūbiyān (The Yacoubian Building) and Chicago by ‘Alā’ al-Aswānī, one set in one particular building in the historical centre of modern Cairo, the other in the Egyptian emigré community. Here Youssef addresses al-Aswānī’s efficient and appealing but also somewhat simple writing style, far removed from literary modernism’s experiments in form and style, and discusses it under the recurrent theme of realism, and its connections to mass culture. Finally, with the last two novels, Ashraf al-Khumaysi’s Manāfī’ al-rabb and Mīrāl al-Ṭahāwī’s al-Khibā’ (The Tent) we are back at the margins, in an isolated oasis and among Bedouins, where the desert itself is explored as a metaphor for the human and as the setting of tales, mirages and death.

The epilogue makes the claim of a role of the new-consciousness novel in preparing the ground for the revolution of 2011, and it raises the question of continuity or break after the revolution. Here three novels are analyzed: Jirāfī by Hishām al-Khashin, al-Ṭābūr by Basma ‘Abd al-Azīz and ‘Uṭārid by Muhammad Rabī’. All of them take the reader back to central Cairo, and from the minorities to the majority. And yet, the majority itself is dissolved into cultures and policies of differentiation, and the protagonists also feel marginalized, but struggle to conquer back control of their lives. The interpretation moves from the previous chapters aesthetics of difference to what it calls “unruly politics”
Minorities in the Contemporary Egyptian Novel is thus a highly composed work, with a structure that dictates hard editorial choices. The authors are introduced very briefly and we don’t learn anything about their other works. Background knowledge about the minorities, their history and the geographical settings is provided, but at a minimum. For this is not about them, but about their entry into the Egyptian novel of the twenty-first century. Which is why it is perhaps more regrettable that the reception of the novels is barely mentioned and their way to a broader public through adaption as films or TV dramas is omitted. In spite of the subject, this is about literature in a very classical sense, not about its sociology, or about a broader Egyptian cultural debate, although Samia Mehrez, Richard Jaquemont and Sabry Hafez are listed as an inspiration (p.6). Remarkably, Joseph Massad’s controversial reading of the Yacoubian Building in relation to another minority, gays, isn’t even mentioned.

What we do get, however, is a sound introduction and reading of the novels, a sensible and not overly theory-ridden discussion about literary and aesthetic themes and choices. And an overall claim to the novel genre’s special dialectical relationship to human experience in historical times and social and cultural spaces.