The politics of imagining the West in the Egyptian novel

Resignifications of the European woman trope from the 1960s to the Arab Spring

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This article is a study in the poetics and politics of imagining the West in modern Arabic literature. It focuses on the deployment of the European woman trope in four Egyptian novels published between 1959 and 2012 and describes the re-enactment and transformation of this trope in relationship to the authors' new critical attitudes toward hegemonic nationalist imaginaries in the second decade of the Twentieth century and in the early 2000s. After the 1960s, de-othering the European woman trope became also a means of questioning the hegemonic images of the Self that had been constructed against stereotyped images of Europe. This process led the authors in the early 2000s to re-imagine collective identity in the light of their aspiration to a democratisation of political life.

Keywords: Occidentalism, Egyptian novel, European woman trope, national allegory.

1. Introduction

Representations of the West were long recognized as a distinctive feature of the Arabic novel and a 'perennial theme' of modern Arabic literature (Badawi 1993). Scholars of modern Arabic literature, however, tended to frame their studies of these representations through the epistemological lenses of the civilizational encounter between the East and the West without feeling the need to place the very paradigm of civilization under critical scrutiny. Rasheed El-Enany, for example, grounded his extensive diachronic study of 'the East-West encounter' on the initial hypothesis that a culture that had 'produced' him could not possibly be anti-Western, and nor could his intellectual exponents (El-Enany 2006: 2). Hence, the author's critical analysis of his rich corpus was largely determined by the need to prove this initial hypothesis. Zahia Smail Salhi, on her part, conceived the study of occidentalim in the Maghrebi literature as the study of "the Maghrebi experience of the East-West encounter" (Salhi 2019). In her monograph, she discussed several theorizations of occidentalism but neglected the most fecund

strand of this emerging field of studies, the one pioneered in the early 1990s by James Ketelaar (1991) and Xiaomei Chen (1995) and furtherly developed in the early 2000s by Alaistair Bonnett (Bonnett 2004). This strand focuses on the political functions performed by non-Western representations of the Occident in domestic political debates and underscores the strategic implications of occidentalism.

My decades-long research on occidentalism in the Arabic novel is grounded on a radical criticism of civilizational paradigms and aims at mapping the political use of literary imaginaries of the West.[1] This article focuses on the deployment of the European woman trope in Egyptian novels published from the 1960s to the Arab Spring. It describes the re-enactment and transformation of this trope—as it had been deployed by the leading Egyptian novelists of the 1930s—in relationship to the authors' new critical attitudes toward hegemonic nationalist imaginaries in the second decade of the Twentieth century and in the early 2000s. In the period between the two World Wars, references to Europe were used strategically in the construction of the Egyptian national imaginary and the dissemination of specific ideas of modernity. During these years, European heroines acted as internal mediators between the Egyptian male heroes and their desire for modernity as in the model of triangular desire theorized by René Girard with reference to the European novel. From the turn of the 1960 onward, the personality of European heroines came to be described in greater detail than in the earlier period as part of a process of de-othering narrated through the perspective of the Egyptian male protagonists. De-othering and de-mythizing the European woman trope became also a political means of questioning the hegemonic images of the Self that had been constructed against stereotyped images of Europe. This literary re-signification of the trope took place in the context of the end of the British colonial presence and the new role of authors vis-à-via the state. If, during the liberal age (1923–1952), the novelists held political responsibilities and their works often reflected the worldviews of the country's political leadership, in the following decades their position within the literary field changed notably as they came to be seen as the critical conscience of the nation (Jaquemond 2008).

2. Early re-significations of the trope at the turn of the 1960

The emergence of the European woman trope in the Egyptian novels of the 1930s can be explained considering the contradictions inherent in the use of 'the new woman' as a national icon (Casini 2024: 62 –65). This icon was widely used in newspapers' cartoons between the 1910s and the 1920s (Baron

[1] My monographs *Modernità arabe* (2012, co-written with Maria Elena Paniconi and Lucia Sorbera) and *Occidentalism and the Egyptian Novel. Politics, Poetics and Modernity* (2024) are among the outcomes of this line of research.

2007) and, as a literary trope, was popularized in the early 1930s by al-Ḥakīm's national allegory *'Awdat al-rūḥ* ('The Return of the Spirit,' 1933) with its heroine Saniyya. Although the 'new woman' represented "a positive view of linear modernity and hopes for a strong future," it was also a problematic presence for the country's male nationalists, revealing "deep anxieties over alienation and loss that accompany modernity" (Stevens 2003: 82).[2] During the 1930s the very ideal of linear modernity that this icon epitomized became the object of severe criticism. The European woman trope allowed the authors to articulate this criticism and, at the same time, remove the troubling modern female subjectivity from the imaginal domain of the nation.

In the novels of the 1930s, the European woman trope condenses specific imaginaries and desires that the Egyptian heroes project onto Europe and acts as an 'internal mediator' (Girard 1976 [1966]) with modern European civilization. Alongside the relationship with the character of a European woman, the hero undergoes a temporary metamorphosis into what he believes to be the 'ontological essence' of the woman-mediator. The hero's dissatisfaction with his new being, often associated with a nervous breakdown, leads him to repudiate the mediator in the name of his old self (Ḥusayn's *Adīb*), a new identity which results from an alternative mediation (al-Ḥakīm's *'Uṣfūr min al-sharq*), or a difficult synthesis between his popular cultural heritage and the scientific spirit of European civilization (Ḥaqqī's *Qindīl Umm Hāshim*).[3] *al-Sayyida Fīyinnā* ('Lady Vienna,' 1959) by Yūsuf Idrīs and *al-Sākhin wa al-bārid* ('The Hot and the Cold,' 1960) by Fatḥī Ghānim inaugurated a new trend in the 'civilizational novel' where the narrative functions performed by the European woman trope are inverted with respect to this earlier novelistic tradition. In both novels, the hero is a middle-age Egyptian man who visits Europe on a business trip and is determined to have a romantic adventure with a local woman. In both texts the Egyptian heroes overcome their preconceived ideas of European women and discover in 'the Other' a neglected part of their own Self.

al-Sayyida Fīyinnā by Yūsuf Idris is a short novel set in Vienna centred on the detailed narration of the one-night romantic encounter between two married people: an Egyptian petty official on a work mission to Europe (nicknamed Darsh) and an unnamed Austrian woman who works as a secretary in a private company. The story is divided into two main parts. The first narrates the hero's somewhat harassing courtship of the woman, while the second describes their intimate relationship in her apartment. Third person narration is employed to describe the different stages of the story with

[2] In al-Ḥakīm's celebrated national allegory *'Awdat al-rūḥ*, the heroine Saniyya is significantly ousted from the narrative – and thus from the national community—in the mid part of the story (Casini 2024: 47, 64).

[3] On these novels see Casini (2024: 61 –86).

extreme detail. The narration centres first on the hero's attempts to draw the woman's attention and flirt with her, and, secondly, on their sexual relations in her flat. These distinct moments in the text perform two opposing narrative functions. The first discloses Darsh's fantasies about European women and the cultural imaginary embedded in his desire. By contrast, the second part displays the clash between the hero's expectations of the encounter with the object of his fantasies and his actual experience.

Darsh's experience in the flat of the unnamed heroine is one of both estrangement and recognition. While approaching the flat, he becomes unsettled by the woman's self-confidence when she reciprocates his kisses. However, once in the apartment, it is the feeling of a sense of familiarity, while observing the objects spread all over the place, that reminds him of his home and family in Cairo and that ultimately undermines his sexual desire. This experience of recognition of the fantasized Other as similar to the Self – too similar for rising mimetic desire according to the Girardian model— culminates when the hero visits the flat's "very small toilet, just like those found in Egypt" (Idrīs 1977: 144). There, in the toilet, his attention falls on the clothesline, which reminds him of the one used by his wife to hang out their daughter's underwear to dry. It is at this point that Darsh's idealized image of Europe as an ontologically superior Other begins to falter; the way his thoughts are articulated are particularly effective in conveying this mental process: "What is then the use of Europe if their people make use of the same things that we use in Egypt?" (Idrīs 1977: 144). When he notes the quantity of children's underwear on the clothesline, his image of the sensual woman who brought him to the flat is replaced by that of an amazingly active mother who finds the time and strength to work and take care of her children. Interestingly, this also leads him, for the first time in his life, to think of himself as a father:

> How strange was it! He had carried her daughter with her (from one room to another) and she had talked a lot to him about her children. However, he did not realize that she was a mother until he saw those children's underclothes. She was a mother with a house, a husband and some children. And what was even stranger, is that for the first time in his life he also realized that he was a father with a house, a wife and a daughter with underclothes similar to the ones in front of him with their strong smell of soap (Idrīs 1977::145).

Darsh's final self-recognition in the woman he has chosen as his mediator with European civilization has been interpreted by Rasheed El-Enany as "a manifestation of the newly found national pride and self-assurance in the post-independence period" where Europe is deprived of its halo and set on an equal footing with the self (El-Enany 2006: 90–1). El-Enany's reading of this work, however, overlooks the hero's feelings of estrangement and insecurity that occupy centre stage in the second part of the

narrative, as the demythization of the European mediator enables a deep critical questioning of the individual and collective self on the part of the Egyptian hero. This process of self-criticism is further developed in Fatḥī Ghānim's novel *al-Sākhin wa al-bārid*, where the hero's feelings of estrangement and insecurity are explicitly related to his upbringing in Egypt.

al-Sākhin wa al-bārid by Fatḥī Ghānim is set in northern Europe, in various locations in Sweden, Denmark and Norway, and the story narrates the intense love affair between a middle-aged Egyptian employee of a large paper-company (Yūsuf) and a Swedish young woman (Julia) married to an elderly orchestra conductor. Right from the opening pages of the text, attention is placed on the exploration of the hero's complex personality, his weaknesses and insecurities, and his limited understanding of the reality that surrounds him. The hero's condition of estrangemen—described as *ghurba* and *ightirāb*—is traced back to his difficult relationship with the towering figure of his father, a trope that during this decade a younger generation of Egyptian authors would intrinsically associate to president ʻAbd al-Nāṣir.

The novel opens with the image of Yūsuf sitting at a café in front of a theatre in Stockholm. The scene insists on his feelings of frustration because he is unable to understand the name of the opera written on the playbill. A short flashback shows how Yūsuf's feelings of loneliness (*waḥda*) had developed in the morning, culminating at lunch time at a self-service café in a park when his tray had fallen from his disabled right hand. His feelings of embarrassment (*irtibāk*) had soon turned into an acute sense of estrangement (*ghurba*) and nostalgia for home. Yūsuf appears conscious that he is tormented by a pathological instability that does not allow him, under any circumstances, to achieve inner peace or real satisfaction.

During a conversation with Julia, in the middle part of the novel, Yūsuf traces the origins of his emotional instability in the death of his mother and his conflictual relationship with his father. He tells Julia that he had a very close relationship with his mother who died when he was still a child. He was thus left alone with his father who married another woman who forced him to live with his grandparents. His father was a leading surgeon whom he much admired, but his disability in the right hand had prevented him from following in his footsteps. When he spotted Julia in the theatre, he thought that she resembled his mother more than any other woman he had seen in Egypt. He also explains to Julia that his conflicting feelings towards his father had generated a divided personality that made him unable to have a stable relationship with another human being.

The characterization of Yūsuf's father as a heartless man, at once feared and admired, and the narrative focus on the hero's feelings of alienation and estrangement constitute two hallmarks of the

poetics of the Egyptian literary generation of the 1960s.[4] While the father can be easily identified with president ʻAbd al-Nāṣir, the deceased mother seems a wider reference to the Egyptian homeland. In this sense, the identification of the European heroine with the lost mother is a particularly striking feature of this novel which stands in open contrast with the deployment of the European woman trope in the canonical narratives of the 1930s.

Following Yūsuf Idrīs and Fatḥī Ghānim, younger generations of Egyptian novelist deployed the European woman trope as a narrative device for internal political criticism, such as the case of Sulaymān Fayyāḍ's *Aṣwāt* (Voices, 1972) and Bahāʼ Ṭāhir's *al-Ḥubb fī al-manfā* (ʻLove in Exile,' 1995) demonstrate (Casini 2008, 2024). These novels made a large use of intertextuality by re-signifying traditional themes and tropes of the Egyptian national imaginary. This process reached its apogee in the early 2000s with the publication of two influential historical novels, Bahāʼ Ṭāhir's *Wāḥat al-ġurūb* (ʻThe Sunset Oasis,' 2006) and ʻAlāʼ al-Aswānī's *Nādī al-sayyārāt* (ʻThe Automobile Club of Egypt,' 2012). *Wāḥat al-ġurūb* operated a radical deconstruction of the very foundations of the Egyptian national imaginary while *Nādī al-sayyārāt* provided the allegory of an inclusive 'patrie' where the British heroine is fully integrated within the new imagined community.

3. The European woman trope in the early 2000s: *Wāḥat al-ġurūb* (ʻThe Sunset Oasis,' 2006) by Bahāʼ Ṭāhir

Wāḥat al-ghurūb is set in the remote oasis of Siwa at the time of the British occupation of Egypt in the aftermath of the ʻUrābī revolt of 1882. Maḥmūd is an officer in the Egyptian army who belongs to an impoverished merchant family. Starting in his early youth, Maḥmūd was exposed to the reformist thought of Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī and, later, to the nationalist ideas of Muṣṭafā Kāmil and ʻAbdallāh al-Nadīm. His devotion to anti-colonial ideas culminated in his participation in the anti-British insurrection of 1882 led by Aḥmad ʻUrābī. When the insurrection failed, he was interrogated as a suspected insurgent. By condemning the revolt during the interrogation, he was able to keep his position in the army. This led him to live under the burden of his betrayal and lose all interest in life.

The story begins with the decision of the British-led army to send Maḥmūd on a dangerous mission to Siwa to retake control over this rebellious oasis for the purposes of tax collection. The space

[4] *Ghurba and ightirāb* are among the main themes explored in fictional writings and critical essays by the Egyptian literary avantgarde magazine *Jālirī 68* (Gallery 68). This magazine represented the first collective voice of the authors of the 60s generation to emerge after the Arab defeat in the Six Days War. Many short stories published in the special number of the magazine of April 1969 oppose the young hero to the character of his father (or the father of his fiancé) which clearly stands for ʻAbd al-Nāṣir and a pervasive political power. On this see Casini (2003) and Kendall (2006).

of the oasis seems to incarnate Maḥmūd's inner condition, as it is permeated by the presence of death. The title of Siwa as 'Wāḥat al-ghurūb' (the Sunset Oasis) is related to the particular cult by the ancient inhabitants of Siwa, who worshipped the 'the God of the dying sun' (Amon), 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 also 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). Death is evoked to Maḥmūd also by the gaze of the local population, who clearly wish for his death despite their apparent polite manners when dealing with him.

Maḥmūd agrees to take control of Siwa on behalf of a puppet government whose authority he does not acknowledge and therefore he continues betraying his nationalistic ideals. His authority also consists in subjugating the only people in Egypt who, until that moment, had been able to defend their independence. In his journey to Siwa, Maḥmūd is accompanied by his Irish wife Catherine, whose main motivation is to search for the tomb of Alexander the Great, which she believes to be located in Siwa. During his presence in the Oasis, Maḥmūd is challenged by the local population but also by Waṣfī, a Turkish officer of his own army who conspires against him.

References to Alexander the Great's presence in Siwa and his relationship with the Ancient Egyptian civilization are scattered throughout the novel and tend to subvert the mythical and positive image of Pharaonic Egypt conveyed by earlier nationalist narratives. In a specific chapter dedicated exclusively to the Macedonian Emperor, the ghost of Alexander becomes the narrator of his own life, and presents his life-trajectory as having been determined by two contrasting cultural influences: that of classical Greece and that of Ancient Egypt. 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 led the population to believe under the effect of fear:

> The Gods of Greece accompany the believer to the peaks of the 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 the question whether it is more appropriate to govern people here in our world with mirth or fear (Taher 2006: 108–09).

In the account provided by Alexander, the Pharaonic civilization is also associated with the political use of religion at the service of an undisputed leader/God. The relationship between the Pharaohs/Gods of Ancient Egypt and the modern Egyptian leaders emphasized with positive connotations by Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm's celebrated national allegory *'Awdat al-rūḥ* is here radically reversed by Bahā' Ṭāhir. As Alexander himself explains, it was after he was recognized as the son of the Egyptian

God Amon in the temple of Siwa that he realized that 'fear and not wisdom is the basis of power' (Taher 2006: 120).

The chapter narrated by the Macedonian emperor is the novel's only section where criticism of Pharaonic Egypt is made exclusively through the direct statements of a character. In the rest of the work, the author resorts to more subtle means to criticize and subvert the mythical image of the Ancient Egyptian civilization forged by the nationalist discourse. The most significant of these means can be found in the attitude the different characters display towards Catherine's search for the tomb of Alexander the Great in the ancient temples of Siwa. Maḥmūd's indifference to her enthusiasm for this search leads Catherine closer to Waṣfī, the young aristocratic official of Turkish origin who is sympathetic to the British occupation. While in al-Ḥakīm's *'Awdat al-rūḥ* the 'discovery' of the Pharaonic heritage forms part of the hero's apprenticeship as a conscious member of the nation and takes place in opposition to his Turkish mother (Paniconi 2023), in *Wāḥat al-ghurūb* the advocate of Pharaonic Egypt turns out to be a corrupt Turkish official and the hero's antagonist.

The final chapters of *Wāḥat al-ghurūb*, are marked by the arrival of the character of Catherine's sister Fiona. She arrives at Siwa from Ireland with the hope that the dry climate of the Oasis may help her to recover from a severe illness that is threatening her life. While Catherine is attracted by the history of Ancient Egypt, Fiona is more interested in oral culture and is a skilful storyteller. In the narrative structure of the novel, Fiona embodies the trope of Shahrazād which spread in the Arabic novel in the late 1960s, epitomizing the subversive forces of popular oral culture and female imagination (al-Musaawi 2003). Unlike the trope of Isis, which was subsumed within the hegemonic nationalist imaginary, the Shahrazād trope transcends any form of territorial belonging and has been used by contemporary Arab male and female authors in their criticism of authoritative and patriarchal power (Casini 2008: 8-9 and Casini 2024: 99-104).

4. A new inclusive political community: *Nādī al-sayyārāt* ('The Automobile Club of Egypt')

In the history of the Arabic novel, relationships between Arab heroes and European heroines tend to end badly. In the novels published during the Liberal age, the separation between the two characters often anticipates the hero's critique of the selfish and materialist civilization that the heroine epitomizes. By contrast, in the context of Republican Egypt the reasons for the separation or the heroine's death are traced back to problems ingrained in Egyptian society, its political authoritarianism and the unsolvable inner contradictions of the hero. *Nādī al-sayyārāt* by 'Alā' al-Aswānī contrasts with this general trend. Among al-Aswānī's narrative production, *Nādī al-sayyārāt* stands out as a celebration of individual and collective rebellion (Dozio 2015) and conveys an original allegory of the Egyptian

political community which is now conceived outside the confines of rigid nationalist paradigms. The withdrawal of president Mubārak in February 2011, as a result of the uninterrupted protests of millions of Egyptian citizens, did not result only in the (temporal) opening of the political space. It also resulted in the transformation of historical time as experienced by millions of Egyptian citizens, namely the possibility of living the present in relationship to a desired future and a new fruitful relationship with the past. The 'horizons of expectation' (Koselleck 2006) which seemed definitively closed after the 1990s (Ḥāfiẓ 2001, Hafez 2010),[5] were suddenly re-opened, filling the lived experience with unexpected possibilities. *Nādī al-sayyārāt* condenses this revolutionary experience into an idea of *patrie* conceived as an open and elective community where membership does not depend on blood and descent. The love story between the Egyptian hero and the English heroine, which culminates with the celebration of their marriage, provides one of the main threads of the narrative. What follows focuses on the innovative functions of the European woman trope within the wider narrative structure of this novel.

The narrative structure of *Nādī al-sayyārāt* follows a distinctive pattern common to other works written by the author. Chapters narrated in the third person alternate with others narrated by specific characters which develop single threads of an intricated and multi-layered story. The plot, set in Cairo during the 1940s, revolves around the events that take place in the exclusive Automobile Club, which hosts a bar, a restaurant and a gambling salon. The Club, regularly frequented by the King, stands as a synecdoche of Egypt and is presented as a place where the workers suffer indiscriminate repression at the hands of the English director (Mr. Wright) and the mighty and merciless head-chamberlain of the King (known as *al-Kū*). Next to the Club, the other focus of the story is the household of the Hamām family, which consists of Kāmil (the hero), his parents, his sister and two brothers.

Kāmil is a law student who belongs to a prominent south Egyptian family that moved to Cairo after losing their fortunes. His father finds a job in the Automobile Club but dies after being brutally beaten by the men of al-Kū. In order to support his family, Kāmil takes his father's position in the Club as assistant warehouseman. Meanwhile, through his friends at the university, he joins a students' nationalist organization that opposes the monarchy and British control over the country. After becoming a militant of this organization, he is gradually drawn into a wider clandestine network led by a progressive member of the royal family. Kāmil and other infiltrated members of the network carry out a covert operation within the Club to discredit the King. They take a picture of the King gambling in the Club completely drunk and distribute it all over Egypt. However, the police succeed in

[5] The Egyptian scholar Sabry Hafez identifies the closure of 'the horizons of expectation' as one of the distinctive hallmarks of the aesthetics of the 'new Egyptian novel' during the 1990s.

dismantling the organization and arresting Kāmil. Despite this setback, the police are unable to prove the hero's involvement in the conspiracy against the monarchy and Kāmil's lawyer is confident that he will not remain in prison for a long time. Moreover, the workers of the Club, who had been publicly humiliated for rebelling against the violence and corruption of al-Kū, succeed in taking revenge and killing their oppressor.

Besides this political strand of the plot, several other strands related to the private life of specific characters can be seen. The most significant among them focuses on the love bond that develops between Kāmil and Mitsy, the daughter of Mr. Wright, the English director of the Club. Mitsy is a drama student at the American University who wishes to overcome the social and cultural barriers that separate her from the local population by studying Arabic. After Mr. Wright charges Kāmil with the task of teaching Arabic to his daughter, he begins to meet Mitsy on a regular basis. However, the King also lays eyes on Mitsy and her father pushes her to consent to have sexual intercourse with the monarch. Mitsy consents to meet the King at a party and when she remains alone with him, she tells him that she suffers from an infectious disease and that, for this reason, she cannot touch him. When Mr. Wright is informed of what happened, he gets angry at his daughter. Mitsy then runs away from her family home and is sheltered in the hero's family. The narrative describes in detail how Mitsy quickly integrates into the household and how she gains the trust of Kāmil's mother and of his sister Ṣāliḥa. In the final part of the novel, because of the young man's arrest, Kāmil and Mitsy celebrate their marriage inside prison.

The celebration of the marriage between Kāmil and Mitsy deserves further examination because of its relevance for the study of the European woman trope. The classical novels published before the mid-twentieth century defined the nation in contraposition to the European woman trope, which stood for a different civilization. In following decades, the character of the European heroine was humanized and gradually recognized as similar to the Self. Yet, the development of the heroine's love story with the Egyptian hero was prevented by the latter's tormented relationship with his own homeland. By contrast, the relationship between Kāmil and Mitsy is projected into the future and develops within the context of an organized attempt to overthrow the monarchy. Although Mitsy does not take an active part in the political action, she rebels boldly against both the King and her father. Her marriage with Kāmil seals symbolically her full inclusion within the new imagined political community.

5. Conclusions

Occidentalism in the Arabic novel is part of complex narrative strategies that can serve opposing ideological ends and does not necessarily mirror the authors' perceptions of a different civilization. In

the Egyptian novels published after the 1960s, European female characters were often deployed in the political critique of dominant nationalist imaginaries and ideologies. This was achieved through an intertextual dialogue with earlier representations of the European woman trope and a radical reconfiguration of the relationship between the Egyptian male hero and the European heroine. The formal reconfiguration of the trope was strictly related to the critique of authoritarianism and the production of a more inclusive political community.

This article focused on two key stages of this process, the turning point of the 1960s and the early 2000s. During the first stage, *al-Sayyida Fīyinnā* and *al-Sākhin wa al-bārid* innovated the earlier literary tradition in the characterization of the hero and in the outcome of his relationship with the European heroine. In these two novels the hero is no more a young university student as in the novels of the 1930s and 1940s but a middle age man on a business trip. He appears as a fragile subject with a complex relationship with his homeland. As a result of his love affair with the European heroine, the hero is led to question his preconceived imaginary of Europe but also his own personal and social identity. In the early 2000s this process of self-criticism transforms into an open critique of the hegemonic national imaginary (*Wāḥat al-ġurūb*) and in the allegory of an inclusive imagined community founded on the fighting for personal rights rather than blood and descent (*Nādī al-sayyārāt*).

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