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# Satiric Literature and Other “Popular” Literary Genres in Egypt Today

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## Abstract

This article starts by describing some characteristics of current Egyptian popular literature, based on field observation at the Cairo 2016 book fair and a survey of the Egyptian authors available on the social network Goodreads, and puts the stress on the spectacular rejuvenation this market experienced in the last ten years. It focuses then on one of this market's main genres, namely, satiric literature, and suggests through the analysis of various authors' trajectories and works that it reveals a tension between reformism and subversion, a tension similar to the one that characterises the predicament of the Egyptian intelligentsia in the post-2011 context.

*Keywords:* Egypt, readership, bestsellers, satire, youth, reformism, subversion

“In the beginning was the Joke”  
Yūsuf Idrīs, *A-kāna lā budda yā Lī-Lī an tuḏīrī 'l-nūr?*

Since my Ph.D. research on the Egyptian literary field, conducted in the 1990s, I have been fascinated with the question of the limits of the field, in other words, the question of the definition of legitimate literature. Who defines it? How? What gets into the canon and what does not? Egyptian writers often complain that they have a limited audience: “Egyptians don't read literature, they use to lament, implicitly equating between their own, restrictive, definition of literature, and their fellow citizens.” However, there is a much broader readership for literature in Egypt than the few thousand readers of the latest novel by Gamāl al-Ghīṭānī, Ṣun'allāh Ibrāhīm or Ibrāhīm Aṣlān. People did read, but they did not read the books these legitimate writers wanted them to read.<sup>1</sup>

Then came the *Yacoubian Building* phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> A novel by a previously unknown writer became in a few years a real bestseller, locally and then internationally, something unheard of in modern Arabic literature. This prompted heated debates within the Egyptian literary field, between those arguing that the novel added nothing to the Egyptian or Arab

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1 For a more detailed discussion of the question, see JACQUEMOND 2008, especially chapter 7.

2 AL-ASWĀNĪ 2002.

novel, and those (among them of course its author) who argued that the readers' acclaim was the best proof of its literary value. Yet, more interesting than this controversy, that was but a repetition of countless debates about the definition of legitimate literature, the success story of *The Yacoubian Building* revealed a general evolution of the Egyptian book market that took place during the last decade of Mubarak's rule, whose most visible characteristic was the emergence of the bestseller. Following the *Yacoubian Building* success, several books, all by newcomers, reached unprecedented levels of sales and audiences. This was made possible by several transformations: growing audiences (made possible by the general raise of enrolment in secondary and higher education, especially among girls—and girls in Egypt as elsewhere are more prone to reading than boys); the rapid growth of Internet access, which generated new reading practices but also new ways of promoting books (online book clubs, blogs, forums, illegal downloading) and a new form of relation between writers and their readers (through social networks); and finally a spectacular modernization of the retail market (notably the emergence of several actors who introduced new marketing techniques and developed a whole network of bookshops within a few years such as Dīwān, Shurūq, and more recently Alef Bookstores).<sup>3</sup>

The revolutionary turmoil of 2011-2013 badly affected this emerging market. The reading audience turned to newspapers and TV and computer screens at the expense of books and the publishing sector witnessed a general shrink. Things started to get better, if not on the political level, starting from 2014. I had the opportunity to assess this recovery while spending two weeks in Cairo during the 2016 book fair (27 January-10 February). I had not visited the book fair for five years and I was stunned by the sheer quantity of new publishers, new authors and new books. To start with a rough measure: Egyptian books must carry a legal deposit number, which consists of the year of publication followed by a serial number given by the National library according to the date of deposit. This means that one can assess how many books have been published during a given year by looking at the legal deposit number of the books published at the end of the year. This is also the period where the largest amount of books is published, in order to be available at the Book Fair by the end of January. This year, the highest 2015 serial numbers I found were over 25,000, a clearly unprecedented figure (by end of the 1990s the legal deposit number just reached 10,000).

The transformation of the book market was very visible in the way books are marketed. Publishers have developed new strategies to attract readers, the most visible one being to put in front what is presented as **bestsellers**.<sup>4</sup> Book covers enlarged in poster size, high piles of the same title, mention of the (always high) number of prints on the cover, etc. In my previous research,<sup>5</sup> I noted that while authors and retailers had done a lot to boost the book market, publishers were lagging behind. Now it seems that they are catching up with the movement. Looking at all these so-called bestsellers (of course, not all books presented

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3 JACQUEMOND 2013. See also ROOKE 2011.

4 [Editors' note: Here and in the following, terms emphasized in **bold** indicate artifacts, roles and activities that with all probability will be of particular relevance for the *In 2016* project's search for Gumbrecht'ian arrays, codes, and codes collapsed (cf. S. GUTH's Introduction to the present *Living 2016* dossier). The emphasis is the editor's.]

5 *Idem*.

as such actually are), I was amazed to find that most of their authors were **young newcomers**, just as were the crowds of readers (predominantly female) attracted by them. This bestseller market is definitely a “young” market in every meaning of the word. It is also a market dominated by three genres: **horror**, **satire**, and **romance**, each one having its own codes (cover illustration and title), which make it easily identifiable by the consumer.<sup>6</sup>

However, the Egyptian book market has not changed a lot during the last decades in one aspect: its opacity. Publishers never make public sales figures, and would they, it would not help a lot because of the massive amount of book diffusion that is taking place out of their control, either in the form of illegal prints or illegal downloading on the Internet. In my previous research on bestsellers, I built up a tentative chart of the most popular Egyptian authors by tracking the number of pdf versions of their books downloaded on <4share.com>. Back in 2010-2011, it was the downloading platform most widely used by Arab readers, and with every book available for download it indicated the number of previous downloads. While such a survey is no longer possible (<4share> no longer states the number of downloads, and it competes now with countless other downloading platforms), I have made an attempt at updating it through another means, which has proved very useful: the specialized social network **Goodreads**. Launched in the US in 2007, it has developed in a way so attractive for the book market that it has been bought in 2013 by Amazon, and it is used by many authors in the Anglo-Saxon world as a promotion tool for their books. It has become also quite popular in the Arab world. The network boasts some 50 million members worldwide, among them at least several hundreds of thousands Arab readers, if one judges by the number of ratings of the most popular Arab authors (close to 330,000 for Aḥmad Khālid Tawfiq).

### The Egyptian authors hit list according to Goodreads

Every book listed in Goodreads is presented with a complete bibliographical record, its average rating (on a scale from 1 to 5), number of ratings and number of reviews, all of which can be read below on the same thread. Goodreads is also a social network whose members can befriend each other, send messages, comment reviews, etc. One can make a research by book title or by author. Authors’ page usually include a short bio (often filled by the author her/himself) and aggregate the statistics of all his books (average rating, number of ratings, number of reviews, number of distinct works), plus a link to “similar authors” who are determined, one can suppose, by some algorithm.

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6 For example, the horror novel covers are illustrated with dark colours and resort to gore aesthetics (blood, monsters, tattoos, etc.), while romance novel covers will use pastel colours and often carry a woman’s picture (mostly veiled), and satiric literature covers will rather use plain, bright colours and drawings rather than photomontages. The cover designers will also choose Arabic fonts matching those different styles: large, coarse letters for horror, soft thin ones for romance, hand-written-looking letters (as in a comic book) for satiric literature, etc.

*Chart. Two tentative assessments of the most popular Egyptian authors*

**1. Number of 4share downloads (November 2011)<sup>7</sup>**

<i>Author</i>	<i>Downloads</i>	<i>Type of writing</i>
Muṣṭafā Maḥmūd (1921-2009)	> 500,000	polygraph, 'Islamic writer'
Anīs Maṣṣūr (1925-2011)	> 320,000	polygraph, light journalism
ʿAbbās M. al-ʿAqqād (1889-1964)	> 270,000	polygraph, mostly Islamic themes
Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm (1898-1987)	> 240,000	polygraph, playwright
Nagīb Maḥfūz (1911-2006)	> 200,000	novelist (Nobel price 1988)
Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (1917-1996)	> 200,000	Islamic preacher
Ṭāhā Ḥusayn (1889-1973)	> 180,000	polygraph
Muḥ. Ḥasanayn Haykal (1923-2016)	> 180,000	political journalist
Muḥ. M. al-Shaʿrāwī (1911-1998)	> 150,000	Islamic preacher
Yūsuf al-Sibāʿī (1917-1978)	> 120,000	novelist
Iḥsān ʿAbd al-Quddūs (1919-1990)	> 110,000	novelist
Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī (1926-)	> 90,000	Islamic preacher
Sayyid Quṭb (1906-1966)	> 80,000	Islamic thinker and militant
<i>Rajul al-mustaḥīl</i> (Nabīl Fārūq)	> 80,000	detective series for teenagers
Maḥmūd al-Saʿdanī (1928-2010)	> 75,000	satiric writer
ʿAlī Aḥmad Bākathīr (1910-1969)	> 57,000	novelist and playwright
Gamāl al-Ghītānī (1945-2015)	> 55,000	novelist
Nawāl al-Saʿdāwī (1931)	> 50,000	feminist writer and novelist
Aḥmad Khālīd Tawfīq (1962-)	> 45,000	novelist (esp. for teenagers)
ʿUmar Ṭāhir (1975-)	> 45,000	satiric writer and vernacular poet
Fārūq Guwayda (1945-)	> 40,000	poet and journalist
Yūsuf Zaydān (1958-)	> 34,000	novelist and academic (historian)
Ṣunʿallāh Ibrāhīm (1937-)	> 30,000	novelist
ʿAlāʾ al-Aswānī (1957-)	> 28,000	novelist
<i>Comparator: selected non-Egyptian Arab authors</i>		
Aḥlām Mustaghānimī (1953-)	> 250,000	novelist (Algeria-Lebanon)
Nizār Qabbānī (1923-1998)	> 150,000	poet (Syria)
Maḥmūd Darwīsh (1941-2008)	> 62,000	poet (Palestine)

<sup>7</sup> Reprinted from JACQUEMOND 2013: 147-148.

**2. Goodreads ratings (retrieved on October 22, 2016)**

<i>Author</i>	<i>Rank compared to previous chart ↓</i>	<i>Ratings</i>	<i>Type of writing</i>
Aḥmad Khālīd Tawfīq (1962)	+18	328,528	novelist (esp. for teenagers)
Muṣṭafā Maḥmūd (1921-2009)	-1	171,960	polygraph, ‘Islamic writer’
Aḥmad Murād (1978)	new	137,264	novelist (detective, thriller)
Nagīb Maḥfūz (1911-2006)	+1	136,445	novelist (Nobel prize 1988)
Nabīl Fārūq (1956)	+9	120,788	series for teenagers
Yūsuf Zaydān (1957)	+15	89,115	novelist and academic (historian)
Muḥammad Ṣādiq (1987)	new	59,786	novelist (romance)
Anīs Maṣṣūr (1925-2011)	-8	54,268	polygraph, light journalism
Raḍwā ‘Āshūr (1945-2014)	new	52,802	novelist
Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm (1898-1987)	-6	51,855	polygraph, playwright
‘Alā’ al-Aswānī (1957)	+13	50,510	novelist
Ḥasan al-Gindī (197?)	new	47,179	novelist (horror fiction)
‘Umar Ṭāhir (1975)	+7	44,262	satiric writer and vernacular poet
Bahā’ Ṭāhir (1935)	new	36,621	novelist
Yūsuf al-Sibā’ī (1917-1978)	-5	30,849	novelist
‘Abbās M. al-‘Aqqād (1889-1964)	-13	30,694	polygraph, mostly Islamic themes
Khawla Ḥamdī (1984)	new	30,683	novelist (romance)
Iḥsān ‘Abd al-Quddūs (1919-1990)	-7	30,053	novelist
Muḥ. al-Mansī Qandīl (1949)	new	28,072	novelist (historical novel)
Ashraf al-‘Ashmāwī (1966)	new	26,048	novelist
‘Iṣām Yūsuf (1965)	new	24,476	novelist
Muḥ. al-Ghazālī (1917-1996)	-16	24,285	Islamic preacher
Tāmir Ibrāhīm ( ?)	new	24,274	novelist (horror novel)
Bilāl Faḍl (1974)	new	23,707	satiric writer and journalist
Fārūq Guwayda (1945)	-4	23,325	poet and journalist
‘Izz al-Dīn Shukrī Fishīr (1966)	new	22,081	novelist
Ṭāhā Ḥusayn (1889-1973)	-20	21,190	polygraph
Sayyid Quṭb (1906-1966)	-15	20,521	Islamic thinker and militant
<i>Other writers tested on 4share in 2011</i>			
Nawāl al-Sa‘dāwī (1931)		14,857	feminist writer and novelist
Ṣun‘allāh Ibrāhīm (1937)		13,153	novelist
‘Alī Aḥmad Bākathīr (1910-1969)		10,789	novelist and playwright
M. Ḥasanayn Haykal (1923-2016)		10,285	political journalist

<i>Author</i>	<i>Ratings</i>	<i>Type of writing</i>
Maḥmūd al-Saʿdanī (1928-2010)	8,647	satiric writer
Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī (1926)	8,575	Islamic preacher
Gamāl al-Ghīṭānī (1945-2015)	7,625	novelist
Muḥ. M. al-Shaʿrāwī (1911-1998)	7,262	Islamic preacher
<i>Selected non-Egyptian Arab authors</i>		
Aḥlām Mustaghānimī (1953)	121,739	novelist (Algeria-Lebanon)
Athīr al-Nashmī (1984)	72,944	novelist & essayist (Saudi Arabia)
Ghāzī al-Quṣaybī (1940-2010)	46,107	novelist & essayist (Saudi Arabia)
Ghassān Kanafānī (1936-1972)	40,277	novelist (Palestine)
Saʿūd al-Sanʿūsī (1981)	38,424	novelist (Kuwait)
ʿĀʿid al-Qarnī (1970)	36,582	Islamic preacher (Saudi Arabia)
Maḥmūd Darwīsh (1941-2008)	33,581	poet (Palestine)
Nizār Qabbānī (1923-1998)	28,195	poet (Syria)

Goodreads seems to be especially popular among Egyptian readers, if one judges by the relatively lower number of ratings of the most popular non-Egyptian Arab authors compared to their Egyptian peers (the second larger audience of this social network being seemingly located in the Arabian peninsula, if one judges by the strong presence of authors coming from this area in the above list of non-Egyptian writers). Both charts have the same bias, namely, they measure the popularity of Egyptian authors not among Egyptian readers, but among the wider audience of Arab readers and Arabic-language users worldwide. If we make the plausible hypothesis that middlebrow authors tend to have a more local reputation than highbrow, canonical authors, who are prone to have a larger Arab audience, it means that both charts probably overstate the weight of the canonized, legitimate authors and understate that of the middlebrow authors within the Egyptian national market. Another bias is that both charts assess books, not authors: in other words, the more a given author has published books, the more downloads or ratings he will get, which explains the high ranking of such prolific authors as Aḥmad Khālīd Tawfīq, Muṣṭafā Maḥmūd or Nagīb Maḥfūz.

Conversely, the high ranking of Aḥmad Murād (n° 3) and Muḥammad Ṣādiq (n° 7) in the Goodreads chart (having respectively only five and four books published to date) is quite telling of their resounding success. Aḥmad Murād's *al-Fīl al-azraq* (The Blue Elephant, 2013) and Muḥammad Ṣādiq's *Hībtā* (Hepta, 2014) may have outreached *Yacoubian*, if not in terms of sales, surely in number of readers. Both have also, like *Yacoubian*, been quickly turned into movies as successful as the books (*Hībtā: al-Muḥāḍara al-akhīra* [Hepta: The Last Conference], released on April 20, 2016, has been one of the biggest hits

of the year 2016<sup>8</sup>). While their writings are quite different (Murād made his debut with two detective novels before moving to the psychological thriller *à la* Stephen King, then to the historical novel; Šādiq’s *Hepta* is a romance of sorts on the seven stages of love—hence its title), they market themselves in very similar ways. Other newcomers ranking high in this chart include Ḥasan al-Gindī, the most popular specialist of the Egyptian version of **horror fiction** (*adab al-ruʿb*), who has published some ten books since 2009 (and further down in the chart, his colleague Tāmir Ibrāhīm), and Khawla Ḥamdī (n° 17), a young Tunisian author of three romance novels published in Egypt and therefore having a mainly Egyptian audience, the reason why I included her in this chart.

Overall, the most interesting finding of this chart is the strong showing made by the new kings of the Egyptian bestseller. First come the elder ones, Aḥmad Khālīd Tawfīq (n° 1) and Nabīl Fārūq (n° 5), who gained fame in the 1990s with their immensely popular series for teenagers (they are by far the most prolific writers—almost 1,000 different titles between the two of them). While Fārūq remained stuck in those genres, Tawfīq has been able to conquer other age brackets, especially since *Yūtūbiyā* (Utopia, 2007), his biggest hit to date and a political thriller set in the near future, that can be seen as the pioneer of the wave of dystopian novels that appeared in the aftermath of the 2011 revolution. Among the bestselling authors who emerged in the first decade of the 2000s, Yūsuf Zaydān (n° 6), ‘Alā’ al-Aswānī (n° 11) and ‘Umar Ṭāhir (n° 13) appear to have also gained popularity in the last years, while sticking to the genres that made their initial success: historical novel (Zaydān), realistic, politically committed fiction (al-Aswānī), and satiric writing (Ṭāhir).

Among other interesting findings is the high ranking of elder writers belonging to the consecrated literary avant-garde of the generation of the sixties (Bahā’ Ṭāhir, n° 14) or seventies (Raḍwā ‘Āshūr, n° 9; Muḥammad al-Mansī Qandīl, n° 19), while other equally or more consecrated writers of these generations are much less popular than they looked in the previous chart (Gamāl al-Ghīṭānī, Ṣun‘allāh Ibrāhīm). This might be explained by the fact that, unlike Ghīṭānī and Ibrāhīm, the former have moved towards forms of writing more appealing to a larger audience, especially through the historical novel, a genre that connects middlebrow and highbrow literature and readers, in Egypt as elsewhere. It also indicates that the elder generations of writers benefit from the general improvement of the Egyptian book market. Among the eldest generations, that of the “pioneers” (al-‘Aqqād, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn) seem to have lost much of its appeal, while Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm (n° 10) and especially Nagīb Maḥfūz (n° 4) remain quite popular.<sup>9</sup> As regards the latter, it is noteworthy that his most rated novel on Goodreads is the controversial *Awlād ḥārit-nā*, which was not published in Egypt before 2006, a few months after his death.<sup>10</sup>

One of the most striking differences between the two charts is the sharp drop in interest for Islamic authors, whether the more conventional, religious figures (Ghazālī, Qaraḍāwī, Sha‘rāwī) or the more militant (Sayyid Quṭb). Only Muṣṭafā Maḥmūd maintains

8 According to the website elcinema.com, <<http://www.elcinema.com/boxoffice/2016/23>> (retrieved Oct. 21, 2016).

9 It must be noted that Maḥfūz’s total ratings include his numerous translated works. This is also true with ‘Alā’ al-ASWĀNĪ, the only other writer in this chart popular in translation.

10 MAḤFŪZ 1996 [1959].



a strong presence, but although he is commonly dubbed as an “Islamic writer” (*kātib islāmī*), he deals with religion rather from an existential or spiritual point of view, being thus read, especially by the youth, as a Muslim Paolo Coelho of sorts rather than as a *shaykh* or a *dā'iya* (preacher). In this sense, it is noteworthy that his most popular books are *Ḥiwār ma'a ṣadīqī al-mulhid* (Dialogue with My Atheist Friend) and *Riḥlatī min al-shakk ilā 'l-īmān* (My Journey from Doubt to Faith). Also, we remark that the second most popular book by Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm on Goodreads, after his classic *Yawmiyyāt nā'ib fī 'l-aryāf* (Diary of a Country Prosecutor), is *Ari-nī 'llāh* (Show me God), an essay on faith neglected by canonical literary history. In other words, it seems that the social groups active in Goodreads, predominantly young and female, remain strongly interested by religious matters, but in a way rather disconnected with Islamic dogma or with the quest for immediate, worldly guidance often associated with contemporary popular Muslim preachers. Should this shunning be linked with the fading popularity of the Muslim Brotherhood (and other political forces using Islam as a rallying symbol) in post-2013 Egypt? This is a tempting interpretation, but it is safer to leave the question open.

On the whole, this chart is a clear illustration of my starting point. Among the twenty top Egyptian writers of this chart, only five can be dubbed as consecrated by the literary establishment (N. Maḥfūz, R. 'Āshūr, T. al-Ḥakīm, B. Ṭāhir, 'A. al-'Aqqād), another five as being less consecrated but yet widely recognized as “proper” writers (Zaydān, al-Aswānī, al-Sibā'ī, 'Abd al-Quddūs, M. al-M. Qandīl), while the other ten rather represent various forms of middlebrow literature. The Egyptian reading audience exists, but it does not read necessarily what the literary establishment wants it to read—which is, after all, a very trivial observation that can be made in many modern contexts.

Finally, and since we are going to deal more specifically now with satiric literature, this genre does not seem to be as popular as one could have expected given the abundant production it gives rise to in nowadays Egypt. True, its two major exponents, 'Umar Ṭāhir and Bilāl Faḍl, are present in the chart (n° 13 and n° 24), but at a relatively low level. Among the three major genres of “popular” literature I identified at the beginning of this paper as the most thriving in 2016 Egypt—romance, horror, satire—the latter seems to be the less successful, at least with the Goodreads Arab audience.

### The case of satiric literature (*adab sākhir*)

Satire has a deep tradition in Egyptian culture that goes back to ancient times, and its prevalence throughout history has certainly to do with the national political culture, with its characteristic mix of deference and derision towards patriarchal authoritarianism, a mix that seems to have permeated for centuries the social fabric, from the nuclear family to the political system. *Fī 'l-bad' kānat al-nukta*, “In the beginning was the Joke”, writes Yūsuf Idrīs at the incipit of his famous short story *A-kāna lā budda yā Lī-Lī an tuḍī'ī 'l-nūr* (Did You Have to Turn on the Light, Lili?), pastiching the opening verse of the Gospel of John.<sup>11</sup> The oral *nukta*, satiric poetry, comedy as a main genre in both Egyptian cinematic and theatrical output, press caricature, are, along with *adab sākhir*, the main forms of ex-

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11 IDRIS 2009 [1971].

pression of this culture of derision the Egyptian people usually associate with the need for *tanfīs*, that is, to *vent* one’s anger or frustration. To this list, the revolutionary moment added a new genre: the satiric talk show invented by Bassem Youssef (**Bāsim Yūsuf**, b. 1974) with the success we know, which made of him the king of Egyptian satirists without contest for the short period during which he was allowed to exert his talents.<sup>12</sup>

During the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, several authors specialized in *adab sākhir*, and some of them such as Maḥmūd al-Sa‘danī (see charts above), Muḥammad ‘Afifī (1922–1981), Aḥmad Ragab (1928–2014)<sup>13</sup> or Galāl ‘Āmir (1952–2012), were very popular among readers. However, the decade before the 2011 revolution witnessed a renewal of the genre at the hands of a new generation of writers: Bilāl Faḍl (b. 1974), ‘Umar Ṭāhir (b. 1973), Ghāda ‘Abd al-‘Āl (b. 1978), Aḥmad al-‘Usaylī (b. 1976), Usāma Gharīb, etc. The wave of successful books by these and other authors on the eve of the 2011 revolution became so visible that it was commented both in the local and foreign press,<sup>14</sup> before becoming a topic of interest for a number of researchers in modern Arabic literature. Before dwelling further on the subject, a preliminary reflexion on the category of *adab sākhir* seems necessary.

In Western literary criticism, satire refers both to a specific literary genre, born in Latin poetry (*satura*, a versified medley) and revamped in European Renaissance and Enlightenment literatures, and to a discursive mode (*mode discursif*) that permeates all literary genres, from poetry to fiction, drama, and further.<sup>15</sup> While the latter sense seems more adapted to modern Western literatures, it is noteworthy that it is commonly described as a specific literary genre in modern Arabic culture, especially in Egypt. However, the ambiguity of satire, between a specific meaning and a broader one, is also palpable in the current Egyptian context: precisely because *adab sākhir* is recognised here as a specific genre, the limit between the written production characterised as such and other written works dwelling more or less on satire as a “discursive mode” is all but clear.

A good part of what is usually dubbed *adab sākhir* in current Egyptian written production is labelled as such either by its authors or by its publishers. Several publishers present it in series such as *Min al-adab al-sākhir* (al-Dār al-Miṣriyya al-Lubnāniyya), or

12 Bassem YOUSSEF, a cardiac surgeon, created his first satirical show on Youtube in March 2011. Its success lead major private channels to give him and his team the opportunity to turn it into a highly popular TV talk show, first with ONTV (2011–2012), then with CBC (2012–2013), during the short-lived rule of president Muḥammad Mursī and the Muslim Brotherhood, who became the main target of Bassem Youssef’s humour. After the July 2013 coup and the army’s clampdown on the media, his talk show was suspended, first temporarily (October 2013), then permanently (June 2014). Youssef left the country shortly afterwards.

13 In July 2011, Aḥmad RAGAB was awarded the highest state prize in literature, the Nile Prize (formerly the Mubarak Prize). Several commentators criticized this choice on the ground that it rewarded a satirist who practiced his art without ever being too harsh on the Mubarak regime (and, moreover, only a few months after the latter’s fall, hence the change in the name’s prize). But significantly, these same commentators stressed that this award was also a long overdue recognition, by the literary establishment, of satiric literature.

14 See Marcia Lynx QUALEY’s blog, “The Rise of Egyptian Satiric Literature: Good, Bad, Indifferent?”, *Arabic Literature (in English)*, October 14, 2010, <<https://arablit.org/2010/10/14/the-rise-of-egyptian-satiric-literature-good-bad-indifferent/>> (retrieved Oct. 23, 2016).

15 DUVAL & MARTINEZ 2000.

mention the term in the front cover or in the blurb of the book, such as ‘Umar Ṭāhir’s bestseller *Shaklā-hā bāzīt* (Looks Like it Messed up, 2006), subtitled *Albūm ijtimā’ī sākhir* (Satiric social album). Several writers also present themselves or are presented as *kātib sākhir* (satiric writer) in the press or in the Internet pages (Wikipedia, Goodreads, etc.) dedicated to them. In other instances, a book is not explicitly qualified as *adab sākhir* but readers will connect it with the genre through paratextual elements: title, subtitle, cover illustration, blurb. Unlike highbrow literature where originality is an essential criterion, middlebrow forms of writing imply serialisation, that is, the reproduction of a variety of codes that allow the reader/consumer to identify the book/product as belonging to a given line of products. As regards *adab sākhir*, the reader’s attention will be caught by a humorous title and/or subtitle, a cover illustration using the codes of press caricature, a well-chosen excerpt of the book as blurb, etc.<sup>16</sup> The author and/or publisher often put more care into these paratextual elements than in the text itself and the reader is disappointed by the actual content of the book, just as the filmgoer abused by a trailer that gathers in two of three minutes the best jokes and punch lines of a poor comedy.<sup>17</sup>

However, the success of *adab sākhir* in the pre-2011 years seems to have led to an extension of the genre in ways unknown before. Books labelled as *adab sākhir* either by authors and publishers, or by reviewers and readers, only share a common structure that can be characterized as serial. That is, they consist in a series of chapters usually based on the same structure and ending with a punch line of sorts. This serial form is visible whether these books are originally written as such or whether they consist of collections of pieces previously published as press articles or columns (satirists are often journalists) or blogs.<sup>18</sup> Within this serial form, the content of each unit of the series can be very diverse, from short essays pondering religious, moral or social matters<sup>19</sup> to fictional anecdotes very similar to short stories, and sometimes presented as such (for instance, several books by Bilāl Faḍl are presented as collections of *qiṣaṣ qaṣīra*<sup>20</sup>). Another characteristic of *adab sākhir* is its tendency to use ‘*ammiyya* rather than *fuṣḥā* Arabic, or a mix of both,<sup>21</sup> which is one of the major reasons of its appeal, but this is not a development specific to this genre – writing in colloquial Egyptian or mixing it with standard written Arabic, a growing trend

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16 See Guth’s discussion of some of these titles and other paratextual elements in GUTH \*2017 (forthcoming).

17 Goodreads members often vent this kind of disappointment in their reviews of *adab sākhir* books.

18 ‘ABD AL-‘ĀL 2008. – On blogs turned into books, cf., e.g., Teresa PEPE, “From the Blogosphere to the Bookshop: Publishing Literary Blogs in Egypt”, in: *Between Everyday Life and Political Revolution: The Social Web in the Middle East*, special issue of *Oriente Moderno*, Nuova Serie, 91/1 (2011).

19 Al-‘USAYLI 2009.

20 Cristina DOZIO, who currently writes a Ph.D. thesis on satiric literature, mentions to me (email exchange, October 25, 2016) that Bilāl Faḍl characterises some of his books (*Ḍaḥik majrūḥ* and *al-Sukkān al-aṣliyyūn li-Miṣr*) as collections of “satiric articles” (*maqālāt sākhira*) and others (*Mā fa‘alahu al-‘ayyān bi’l-mayyit*, *Banī Bajam*, *al-Shaykh al-‘ayyil*) as collections of “short stories” (*qiṣaṣ qaṣīra*), a distinction that readers and reviewers do not seem to make.

21 The changing “power relations” between the formal and informal varieties are the topic of a Ph.D. thesis by Eva Marie HÅLAND (Univ. of Oslo, supervised by G. MEJDELL), to be defended in summer 2017.

since the 1990s at least, seems to have gained momentum in the post-2011 context. For all these reasons, trying to assess the amount of books published since 2011 that one can file under the category of *adab sākhir* appears to be an impossible task, and it would be presumptuous, in the limited scope of this paper, to give an overall appreciation of their content, tendencies or social function. While the phenomenon has attracted the attention of researchers,<sup>22</sup> very few academic literature, if any, has been published to date on the subject of Egyptian current satiric literature. The one piece I have been acquainted with is the one Stephan Guth kindly extended to me before publication,<sup>23</sup> and I will use it as a starting point to my own take on the subject.

In this article where he deals with a cluster of young (*shabāb*) authors of *adab sākhir*, Guth suggests that “the most adequate rendering of [this term] is perhaps ‘carnavalesque literature’ or ‘subversive literature’”,<sup>24</sup> implicitly discarding its more common translation, that is, “satiric (or satirical) literature”. He contrasts their writings with those of their earlier (in the 1920s) counterparts of *al-madrassa al-ḥadītha*, ‘Isā ‘Ubayd and Maḥmūd Taymūr, who “still write in the modus of (social) criticism, driven by the wish to promote moral improvement (*tahdhīb*), which are the main modus and goal of an optimistic Enlightenment with its ‘yes, we can!’ social reformism”.<sup>25</sup> In the following pages, I would like to suggest a more nuanced reading of the current output of Egyptian *adab sākhir*, as oscillating between **reformism** and **subversion**. Actually, this ambivalence is embedded in the very notion of satire. In the *Dictionnaire du littéraire*, Claire Cazanave defines satire as “a genre that aims at denouncing the vices and insanities of men with a moral and didactic purpose”.<sup>26</sup> This definition applies perfectly to the first masterpiece of modern Egyptian satire (although it has never been classified as *adab sākhir*), Muḥammad al-Muwayliḥī’s *Ḥadīth ‘Isā ibn Hishām*, a reformist manifesto *par excellence*. At the other extreme of the spectrum, Yūsuf Idrīs’s short story *A-kāna lā budda yā Lī-Lī an tuḍīrī ‘l-nūr*, whose opening line I used as an epigraph for this piece, can be read as an epitome of the Egyptian carnivalesque where, as in Bakhtin’s reading of Rabelais, things are turned upside down for the sake of nothing but mocking and ridiculing. In this short story written as a long *nukta* of sorts, the imam is not mocked in the way “men of religion” (*rijāl al-dīn*) usually are in modern Arabic literature, that is, as venal hypocrites who do not act accordingly to their preaches. Rather, he is portrayed as a victim of Lī-Lī’s awakening of his desire, which leads him to overstep his religious duty at the most crucial moment, that is, in the midst of the prayer he leads from the *minbar*. Far from advocating for moral values (sincerity *vs* hypocrisy, restraint *vs* greed, etc.), *A-kāna lā budda...* reveals and magnifies the locus where moral values cease to exist, namely, the realm of the flesh.

22 Several communications on Egyptian *adab sākhir* were presented at the Euramal conferences in Madrid (2014) and Oslo (2016). At least two Ph.D. theses on this subject are under way (Cristina DOZIO, University of Milan; David EISENSCHITZ, University of Paris-Sorbonne). Cf. also the thesis mentioned in fn. 20.

23 GUTH \*2017 (forthcoming).

24 *Ibid.*

25 *Ibid.*

26 CAZANAVE 2002: 540 (my translation).

## Between reformism and subversion

I will argue that analysing the current Egyptian output of *adab sākhir* through this lens, that is, as a genre in tension between reformism and subversion, or between *ta'dīb* (disciplining) and *qillat adab* (impoliteness), to use Tarek El-Ariss' suggestive formulation,<sup>27</sup> provides us with a heuristic approach not only to this specific output but perhaps more broadly to the predicament of the Egyptian intelligentsia in the post-revolutionary context. I will test this tension first through a comparison between the contrasted post-2011 trajectories of the two most famous names in the generation of satirists who emerged in the years 2000, namely, Bilāl Faḍl and 'Umar Ṭāhir.

The same age (Faḍl is born in 1974, Ṭāhir in 1973), they both started their careers as journalists in the late 1990s (Ṭāhir in *Niṣf al-dunyā*, a weekly magazine published by al-Ahrām state-owned group, Faḍl in *al-Dustūr*, an independent newspaper that breathed new life in the Egyptian press as soon as it was launched in 1995). By 2011, they were well established enough as writers to become op-ed writers in the independent press that flourished at that time, notably in *al-Tahrīr*, a private daily launched in June 2011 by Ibrāhīm 'Isā (with whom Faḍl had worked in *al-Dustūr*). They also continued to publish books at an amazing pace (ten new titles by Bilāl Faḍl between 2011 and now—they probably include most of his press articles—, six by 'Umar Ṭāhir). Besides this, Faḍl was carrying on a successful career as a scriptwriter, and Ṭāhir as well as a *'ammīyya* poet, songwriter and scriptwriter.

After the Rābi'a massacre (August 2013), Bilāl Faḍl's voice was one of the rare, within the liberal camp, to condemn unambiguously the repression.<sup>28</sup> In the following months, he kept voicing his criticism at the new powers-to-be in the daily *al-Shurūq*, until the newspaper censored one of his columns.<sup>29</sup> A few months later, the producers of *Ahl Iskandariyya*, a TV series written by him, stopped the filming. This was clearly another act of indirect, unofficial censorship.<sup>30</sup> This led him to leave the country for the United States, with a grant to study drama in New York. He joined then *Al-'Arabī al-Jadīd*, a London-based Arab newspaper launched by the Qatari private company Fadaat Media in 2014 “as a counterweight to Al-Jazeera and its pro-Muslim Brotherhood influence”,<sup>31</sup> which soon sheltered a number of dissident Egyptian voices. Since October 2015, he hosts a cultural

27 Tarek EL-ARISS, “Leaking: Fiction and **Revelation** in the Arab Digital Age”, keynote lecture presented at the 12<sup>th</sup> Euramal Conference, *Upholding Humanity in a Post-human World? Arabic Writing After the “Arab Spring”*, Oslo, 30 May – 4 June 2016 (unpublished).

28 *Al-Shurūq*, August 28, 2013. Translated into French in *Courrier International*, <<http://www.courrierinternational.com/article/2013/08/29/une-armee-criminelle-et-ses-complices>> (retrieved May 27, 2016).

29 Published by *Madamasr* in Arabic and English translation: “Al-Mārīshāl al-siyāsī” (The Political Marshal of Egypt), February 02, 2014, <<http://www.madamasr.com/ar/opinion/politics/السياسي-الماريشال>> (retrieved May 27, 2016).

30 See details here: <<http://www.madamasr.com/news/belal-fadls-tv-drama-wont-be-screened-during-ramadan>> (retrieved May 27, 2016).

31 Wikipedia article “Al-Araby Al-Jadeed”, <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Araby\\_Al-Jadeed](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Araby_Al-Jadeed)> (retrieved Nov. 04, 2016).

program, *‘Aṣīr al-kutub* (Book’s essence) on Al Araby TV, the channel launched the same year by Fadaat Media. Although he maintains a strong presence on the book market, most of his books being published by Dār al-Shurūq, the biggest private publisher in Egypt, his self-imposed exile and his absence from the Egyptian media have clearly affected his audience.

Conversely, ‘Umar Ṭāhir kept a lower profile, continuing to contribute to *al-Ahrām* and *al-Akḥbār*, the main public, pro-government newspapers, as well as to *al-Taḥrīr*, which followed a pro-government line after the July 2013 coup, and, more recently (since May 2016) to *al-Maqāl*, the new opinion daily founded by Ibrāhīm ‘Īsā in February 2015. Maybe as a result of the current limits of his freedom of speech within the written press, Ṭāhir became much more active on the social media in the latest months, especially in Facebook where the number of his followers doubled (from 200,000 to 400,000) between May and October 2016.

In spite of their different political stances in the aftermath of 2013, Faḍl and Ṭāhir have followed a somewhat similar path, moving away from satiric writing and acting more and more, each one in his one way, as cultural mediators in a way typical of Egyptian intellectuals, that is, digging on the country’s modern political or cultural history and offering their readers more or less original insights on events and personalities that marked the history of modern Egypt, often with a “**lesson**” to draw for the present day. This is the explicit program of Bilāl Faḍl’s latest book, *Vītāmīnāt lil-dhākira* (Vitamins for Memory), published in January 2016. As for ‘Umar Ṭāhir, he has moved even further away from *adab sākhir*: his two latest books, *Athar al-nabī* (The Prophet’s trace, 2015) and *Idhā‘at al-aghānī* (Radio Hits, 2015), consist respectively of a series of pieces reflecting on various episodes in the life of Muḥammad, and a collection of accounts of the author’s intimate relationship with some popular Arabic songs.

The hypothesis of a tension between *ta’dīb* and *qillat adab*, or reformism and subversion, should be tested through a large panel of books coming under the category of *adab sākhir*. While I have not been able to do so in the limited scope of this research, I shall illustrate it with a few examples taken in the recent output in the genre. One of the most visible authors at the 2016 Cairo book fair, Ḥāb Mu‘awwad, had just published *Wāy men lav mozaz* (Why Men Love Chicks, Dār al-Karma, 2015), a pastiche of *Why Men Love Bitches* (Sherry Argov, 2000), and his previous book *al-Rijāl min Būlāq wa’l-nisā’ min Awwal Fayṣal*,<sup>32</sup> a pastiche of *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* (John Gray, 1992), was supposedly selling its 26<sup>th</sup> print.

Ḥāb Mu‘awwad, born in 1969 and trained as an interior designer, became a marriage counsellor and he provides his advices in *al-Yawm al-sābi‘*. *Al-Rijāl min Būlāq* starts with a long introduction consisting of fictional encounters of the narrator with stereotypical characters from the lower classes, “Ḥamīda” and “Mursī”, who live in *‘ashwā’iyyāt*<sup>33</sup> (slums), and “Madame Ṣāfīnāz”, representing the upper middle class. Men/women relations in both classes are presented as **beyond repair**: in the first case, because their

32 MU‘AWWAD 2012.

33 On living conditions in the informal settlements cf. also the contributions to the present *dossier special* by Mona ABAZA (see “Tale II”) and Stephan GUTH (cf., in particular, films nos. #1, #9, and #19).

family problems are caused by “**poverty and ignorance**”, and in the second, because “these people have to sow religion and restraint in their inner selves”. Which leaves us with “the middle class, which represents 70% of our society”<sup>34</sup>—a very broad definition, indeed, of the Egyptian middle class, but coherent with the authors’ purpose, which is to “know their [that is, those 70% of the society] problems and try to help them in solving these problems”.<sup>35</sup> Most chapters of the book follow the same pattern: a sketch, usually in dialogue form, presenting a dispute between **husband and wife**, followed by a “**commentary**” where the narrator stresses each side’s rights and wrongs and provides advice in order to enhance harmony within the couple. The whole book is written in Cairene **dialect** and the dialogues often sound like those of an Egyptian *musalsal* (TV series).<sup>36</sup> The characters and situations are quite stereotypical: the husband does not care about being attractive, forgets the wedding anniversary, neglects the household and his children, has an affair, wants to take a second wife; the wife gets jealous for no reason, cannot stand her mother-in-law, refuses to have sex with her husband, etc. Each conflicting situation is presented as if it always happened in the same direction: the stereotypical Egyptian wife cannot be neglectful of herself or of her household and children, she cannot have an affair (and obviously, she cannot dream of taking a second husband), whereas the stereotypical husband cannot be jealous, refuse to have sex with his wife or have problems with her mother, etc. The comments and advices provided by the narrator/author aim at preserving the matrimonial bond, and in order to do so, both parties must refrain from falling into the natural tendencies, so to speak, of their respective sex. Here is a typical example:

[As regards sexual needs], man is totally different from woman, because he is “positive”<sup>37</sup> and much less able than her to control his instincts. Of course, this does not mean that the woman is more virtuous or has a stronger will power: it is simply a gift our Lord bestowed on her so that she can protect herself in all situations. The clearest proof of this is that widows and divorced women can sometimes live without men, whereas it is very difficult for a widower or a divorced man to spend the rest of his life without a woman.

[...] As for the woman who refuses [to have sex with] her husband, ignores him or sleeps while knowing that he needs her [sexually], despite the fact that he treats her respectfully and tenderly, and justifies it by saying “It’s too hot, I’m fed up, I don’t feel like it, I can’t stand myself, I’m exhausted by the housekeeping and the children, I don’t feel like I need this from him, I’m too lazy to take a shower, I’m

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34 MU’AWWAD 2012: 24. All translations are my own.

35 *Ibid.*

36 On the growing use of the spoken vernacular in writing in the post-revolutionary contexts, see also Myriam ACHOUR KALLEL’s contribution in this special issue: “La Rolls et la Volkswagen: Écrire en tunisien sur Facebook en 2016”.

37 The author uses the adjective *mūgab*, which refers to the positive electric polarity, the woman being implicitly characterized as the negative (*salbī*) polarity.

afraid for my hairstyle”, she is being unfair to her husband and she must understand that by doing so, she becomes accomplice in any fault he might fall into [...].<sup>38</sup>

Like most satirists, Mu‘awwad is thus a moralist. He makes his reader laugh at his characters in order to reaffirm the matrimonial bond as a social norm. The last sentence of the book reads as follows:

This is the history of Hind and Hindāwī, the history of every household in our country, and how many histories there are inside the houses, but only the smart one understands that it is always the same old story, that he is not the only one to live it and enjoy it as it is, and that there is no harm in him trying to make it better. The only harm is to become desperate or run away and leave behind him a story he walked into by his own will and people who agreed to walk into it with him.<sup>39</sup>

In this respect, it is very much similar to Ghāda ‘Abd al-‘Āl’s introduction of *‘Āyza atgawwiz*, where she expresses her scepticism towards young women who pretend not to care about marriage or having other priorities:

It might be true that many girls have high ambitions in their studies or in their careers, but I challenge any one of them to tell me that her first and foremost ambition in life is not to become a wife, if only because it is the only way for her to become a mother.<sup>40</sup>

Here is another bestseller of *adab sākhir* where satirising marriage is a means not to mock the institution in itself, but to criticize its debasement in the current conditions prevailing in Egyptian society (or, as Īhāb Mu‘awwad would say, in the Egyptian middle class). Like Mu‘awwad, ‘Abd al-‘Āl is clearly on the reformist pole of *adab sākhir*.

Let us turn now to the other pole, the subversive one. Muṣṭafā Shuhayb (b. 1988) is a young writer and journalist with already five books published between 2010 and 2016. According to his Wikipedia Arabic page,<sup>41</sup> the most successful (14 prints) is *Rihlatī min il-shakk lil-shakk barḍuh*<sup>42</sup> (My Journey from Doubt to Doubt Again)—a pastiche of Muṣṭafā Maḥmūd’s bestseller *Rihlatī min al-shakk ilā ‘l-īmān* (My Journey from Doubt to Faith, 1970). The content is faithful to the title: unlike Īhāb Mu‘awwad, Muṣṭafā Shuhayb does not seek to provide **advice** or **guidance** through humour. His book is a candid and funny account of a young man’s **quest for himself** within a family and a society who provide him with unsatisfactory answers: the theme and style remind of ‘Umar Ṭāhir’s in *Shaklā-hā bāzīt*,<sup>43</sup> his first hit. The blurb, in pure ‘*āmmiyya*, is a faithful rendition of the book’s content, also written mostly in dialect:

38 MU‘AWWAD 2012: 131-132.

39 MU‘AWWAD 2012: 202.

40 ‘ABD AL-‘ĀL 2008: 5.

41 <[https://ar.wikipedia.org/wiki/شُهَيْب\\_مُصْطَفَى](https://ar.wikipedia.org/wiki/شُهَيْب_مُصْطَفَى)> (retrieved Dec. 06, 2016).

42 SHUHAYB 2015.

43 ṬĀHIR 2003.



This book is for you if:

You never were top of the class. You can't take a decision. Dogs frighten you and you like to bully cats. You hate the smell of hospitals. You killed a cockroach and you waited until you watched the ants gathering around it. You used to put a slash on the RIGHT sign to make it look WRONG too. You got an electric shock when a child. You pilfered the private lessons money and you cheated on the price of the schoolbooks. You don't know your ID number, you can't memorize your father's phone number, your mother's or your sisters'. You are afraid of carrying babies. You lose all your receipts. You use traffic as an excuse even when the streets are empty. You're the best when it comes to give advice but you are as helpless as a babe!<sup>44</sup>

*Rihlatī* is a succession of chapters where a first-person narrator who resembles the author, a young man in his twenties, makes fun of himself confiding to his reader stories about his family, his friends and more or less every kind of problem young men and women are confronted with in Egypt—except those having to do with sexuality. This silence about such a crucial matter for most Egyptian youth reveals the limits of the acceptable subversiveness in this kind of literature. As much striking is the absence of politics (no mention of what happened between 2011 and 2013 in the country in this book published in 2015) and religion: in other words, Muṣṭafā Shuhayb stays on the safe side from the famous “trinity of taboos” (*al-thālūth al-muḥarram*)<sup>45</sup>. In spite of these concessions to the unwritten rules imposed by both state and society, *Rihlatī* still deserves to be read as a form of subversive satire in the sense that it is faithful to its title: it takes us “from **doubt** to doubt again”, opening a Pandora's box of **questions** and leaving the reader with no answers to them. It ends with a chapter where the narrator finds himself dead, witnesses his own funeral and seems to finally come to terms with his **depression** and **insignificance**. A very pessimistic ending, quite **anticlimactic** for a supposedly humorous book, but also much telling of, or in tune with, the mood of the Egyptian youth in the post-2013 context.

This trend is taken to an extreme of sorts in *Hikāyāt sīkūbātiyya*<sup>46</sup> (Psychopathic Stories), the first book of Wagīh Ṣabrī, a young author who presents himself as follows on the blurb:

Wagīh Ṣabrī is a young man in his twenties who has grown up in Egypt and has been educated in its schools. This is why he has learnt zilch in the field in which he specialised and he has decided to do what he enjoys doing.<sup>47</sup>

The first “psychopathic story” is also reproduced in the blurb. It is a short, hilarious dialogue between a **psychiatrist** and a patient who complains from a weird addiction: he

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44 SHUHAYB 2015: back cover.

45 More precisely, “[t]he real taboos could instead be labelled obscenity, blasphemy and political opposition, the classical reasons for suppression of the freedom of expression since Antiquity” (STAGH 1993: 127).

46 ṢABRĪ 2015.

47 ṢABRĪ 2015: back cover.

loves to rape doctors, male and female as well. It ends with the so-called patient starting to undo his shirt’s buttons in preparation of his raping. This, added to the author’s self-presentation, leads us to categorize *Ḥikāyāt sīkūbātīyya* as *adab sākhīr*, even if the book title and front cover do not conform to the codes of the genre. The other stories are very much in line with that of the doctors’ rapist. Most of them consist of short (2-3 pages) dialogues taking place in daily social intercourses (job interviews, a woman buying sanitary towels in a pharmacy, an oral exam at the university, etc.). Yet dialogue becomes absurd when one of the parties, or both of them, is obviously mad, in a way that is nothing but an exaggeration of what is taking place in **ordinary life**.<sup>48</sup> Other stories aim at Egypt as a whole: a group of jihadists consider conquering Egypt, but when one of them describes it as a total mess, they renounce; aliens roam around Earth kidnapping people to enslave them in their planet, but when they discover that they have put aboard an Egyptian, they decide to send him back despite his supplications, because they “take everybody except Egyptians”, the “worst slackers on earth”.<sup>49</sup> The spaceship takes off and a few seconds later, “a creased fifty pounds note falls down”. The Egyptian “takes it, unfolds it, kisses it and puts it in his pocket”.<sup>50</sup>

One finds here neither moral aim guiding the social critique, nor post-adolescent revolted confessions. All we have is **black humour**, **absurd** and a **derision** that spares no one, or rather, seems to target all Egyptians. Wagīh Ṣabrī’s look at Egyptian society is hopeless. It reminds me of Aḥmad al-‘Ā’idī (Alaidy)’s cult novel *An takūn ‘Abbās al-‘Abd* (Being Abbas el Abd),<sup>51</sup> with the humour in addition. This subversive tone is also very much present in Ṣabrī’s very popular posts on Facebook,<sup>52</sup> where he engages sometimes in direct political commentary. For instance, at the beginning of the Tiran and Sanafir affair<sup>53</sup> he published a hilarious imaginary dialogue between King Salmān and marshal-president al-Sīsī, a dialogue that could have been written for a Bassem Youssef program.<sup>54</sup> A few days later, he had this one:

48 [Editors’ note: The importance of everyday life experience is mirrored both in the *In 2016* project’s focus on everyday lifeworlds as well as in the special attention given to related aspects by several contributors to the present *dossier spécial*; cf., in particular, Mona ABAZA’s and Ragnhild ZORGATI’s personal impressions (on everyday life in Egypt and Tunisia, respectively), as well as Elena CHITI’s study of the treatment of this experience as a “dark comedy”, Albrecht HOFHEINZ’s description of the situation of the youth, and Stephan GUTH’s coverage of a number of contemporary films (see, for instance, film nos. ##1-3, #9, ##11-12, ##17-19).]

49 Cf. the collapsed code “*waṭan = ghurba* (alienation)” in Elena CHITI’s contribution to this dossier.

50 ṢABRĪ 2015 (37-38).

51 ALAIDY 2006 [orig. 2003].

52 As of December 09, 2016, he has more than 242,000 followers on Facebook (compare to ‘Umar Ṭāhīr’s 417,000 and so followers, although Ṭāhīr’s fame and media visibility are much bigger).

53 In April 2016, during King Salmān bin ‘Abd al-‘Azīz’s visit to Egypt, president al-Sīsī announced that he had signed an agreement handing sovereignty of these two Red Sea islands to Saudi Arabia. The deal led to the largest protest movement since al-Sīsī’s election in 2014 and was then contested in court. On 16 January 2017, the Supreme Administrative Court issued a final verdict on the case, confirming Egypt’s sovereignty over the islands.

54 See his Facebook page, under the name Wageeh SABRY, <<https://www.facebook.com/wageeh.sabry?fref=ts>> (post published April 13, 2016).

- Sorry about that, *hagga*, your son has **hope**.
- Oh my! Why? How did he catch it? As if we didn't have enough on our hands!
- He might be born with it. Or he's one of those upright youth who took part in the revolution and painted the sidewalks. Let him take this suppository until he is cured and gets useless, characterless and unconcerned with life, with God's help.
- Let's pray to Him, Doctor!<sup>55</sup>

This is as close as one can get to the famous French aphorism: *L'humour est la politesse du désespoir* (Humour is the polite form of despair). It is tempting to make a parallel between this kind of black humour, which seems to be rather unheard of in the field of Egyptian satiric literature, and the several **dystopian** novels that appeared recently in Egypt.<sup>56</sup> Each one in its own way, they appear as the literary expression of the state of mind of large sections of the Egyptian youth in the current context. The brutal repression of political dissent that has followed the army's takeover in July 2013 and targeted the "revolutionary youth" as much as, if not more than the partisans of the "deposed president" Muḥammad Mursī, has led to a shrinkage of public space as spectacular as was its expansion between January 2011 and June 2013. It has also reached several of those writers, cartoonists and other artists such as Aḥmad Nāgī, Islām Gāwīsh, the Aṭfāl al-Shawāri' music band,<sup>57</sup> etc., who unknowingly transgressed the shrinking limits of what is deemed acceptable within artistic or literary expression by the powers-to-be. But as sweeping as the counter-revolution may be, it cannot erase the experience lived during those two years, an experience that has been especially decisive for the young generation whose political socialisation took place in this context. Whether in the conventional book form, as we examined here mostly, or through social networks, whether in written form, in caricature or in the current Youtube videos that prolong the Bassem Youssef talk-show, satire remains a privileged form of expression of the Egyptian youth's discontent with the current state of affairs as well as a way to cultivate the spirit of freedom they experienced during the years 2011-2013.

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55 Wageeh SABRY's Facebook page, post published May 25, 2016.

56 See ALTER 2016. – Elena CHITI's contribution in this *JAIS* issue explores more systematically the parallel between satire and dystopia in several recent Egyptian literary works.

57 On Islām Gāwīsh and ṭfāl al-Shawāri' cf. esp. Albrecht HOFHEINZ's article in the present *dossier special*.

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