The Coptic Theme in Egyptian novels

The case of *Bayt al-Qibṭiyya* (“The house of the Copt woman”) by ʼAšraf al-ʻAšmāwī

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This article discusses *Bayt al-Qibṭiyya* (“The house of the Copt woman”), a novel by ʼAšraf al-ʻAšmāwī; published in 2019, the novel is a recent iteration of the Coptic theme in Egyptian fiction.

The Copts are an integral component of Egyptian society. They form part of Egypt’s social fabric and today constitute some 8% to 9% per cent of the population. Their presence has been evident in the Egyptian novel since its birth. In the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, they were at the forefront of the renaissance that led the country towards a cultural and economic resurgence.

Discrimination against Copts in Egypt increased markedly in the second half of the twentieth century, notably since the Revolution of 1952 and in the context of the Islamic revival following the Arab-Israeli war of 1967. This trend gained strength during the Sadat era and erupted in numerous episodes of religious violence during the 1970s. The violence continued during the Mubarak era and escalated in the wake of the Arab Spring in 2011.

This contentious issue is reflected in modern Egyptian literature. In his novel, al-ʻAšmāwī addresses the tensions between Muslims and Coptic Christians in Upper Egypt through the story of Huda Habīb, the Coptic heroine. In order to contextualize his treatment of the theme and afford a broader perspective on its development in Egyptian literature, this article also outlines its representation in other Egyptian novels at different points in history.

Keywords: Egyptian novels, New sensibility, Copts, Coptic theme, miniority discourse, Ašraf al-ʻAšmāwī

1. Introduction

According to Hafez (1994), Abu al-Deeb (2000), Meyer (2001), and in particular Christiana Phillips (2019), the political and cultural crisis in the late 1960s had an aesthetically positive impact on Egyptian and Arabic literature, ushering in a period of experimentation, cultural and imaginative enrichment in which a host of innovative narrative strategies such as polyphony, intertextuality and fragmentation were deployed. The break with the conventional narrative structures and traditional values, including the use of the first person to create inter-subjectivities, the incorporation with dream, legend and

poetry and the rejection of linear time, was termed *al-ḥassāsiyya al-ǧadīda*[1] ("the new sensibility") by the Egyptian writer Idward al-Ḫarrāṭ. Abu al-Deeb, quoted in Phillips (2019), speaks of the second decade of the aesthetic revolution and the wider Arab context in terms of the collapse of totalising discourse and the emergence of minority voices. Against this backdrop, Coptic Christianity provides opportuinties to represent and explore miniority discourse and marginalised identity.

The Copts[2] are an integral component of Egyptian society. They form part of Egypt's social fabric and today constitute some 8% to 9% per cent of the population.[3] Their presence has been evident in the Egyptian novel since its birth. In the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, they were at the forefront of the renaissance that led the country towards a cultural and economic resurgence (Hasan 2003). However, their influence decreased notably from 1952 to 1970 and Copts began to suffer from discrimination. In the executive and the parliament, for example, Copts represented less than one per cent and the ministries that they represented during this period were marginal.[4] There is broad agreement among scholars (Wakin 1963; Cannuyer 2001; Hasan 2003; Osman

[1]According to the Egyptian writer, the trends of the new literary sensibility, inaugurated through the literary journal *Gallery 68* (of which he was one of the editors), are: 1. the *objectifying* current (*tayyār al-tašayyi')*; 2. the interior current (*al-tayyār al-dāḫilī*); 3. the revival of the literary heritage (*istīḥāu al-turāṯ);* 4. magical realism (*al-tayyār* al-*wāq'ī al- saḥrī*); 5. the new realism (*al-Wāq'iya al-ǧadīda;* al-Ḫarrāṭ 1993: 19-20).

[2] The terms *Copt* and *Coptic* are variously used to denote either the members of the Coptic Orthodox Church, the largest Christian body in Egypt, or as generic terms for Egyptian Christians: https://www.britannica.com/topic/Copt, While the Arabic word *al-qibṭ* (which in modern use leads to the singular *qibṭī* "Copt" and the plural *al-aqbāṭ*) is derived from the Greek aegyptos and originally meant "Egyptians.

[3] Reliable numbers are hard to find out but estimates suggest they make up somewhere between 8% and 9% of the population. Alessia Melcangi and Paolo Maggiolini argue that the census figures of 2006, released by the official statistical agency of Egypt, the Central Agency for Mobilization and Statistics, suggest that the population, including those living abroad, is estimated to have reached 76.5 million. A study published in 2011 by the Pew Research Centre's Forum on Religion and Public Life states that the Christian population represents 5.3 % of the Egyptian one (Pew Research Centre 2011), as opposed to the widely used media figure of 10%. Researchers arrived at the number from Egypt's 2006 census data underlining that "for decades the Christian population in Egypt has been less than 10% of the population." According to this research "the highest share reported in the past century was in 1927, when the census found that 8.3% of Egyptians were Christian; in each of the eight subsequent censuses, the Christian share of the population gradually shrank" (Harrington 2011). In spite of these new data, others estimate that the number of Copts oscillates between 5 and 6 million, or 8% to 9% of the entire population (Maggiolini and Melcangi 2020). See also Pennington (1982).

[4] In the conflict between Nasser and the Muslim Brotherhood, Nasser issued two decrees: In 1957, he enforced religion as a basic subject in the school curricula, whereas previously, as established by the Wafid in 1937, religion was a complementary subject in schools to increase religious consciousness. He reformed the al-Azhar University to meet contemporary demands, but confined it to Muslim students, excluding Copts completely. The second feeling was of equality on the economic level. Nationalization in July 1961 did not differentiate between Muslims and Copts. The Nationalization process however affected Copts more than Muslims because it abolished many of the skilled jobs which Copts excelled in. In general, Copts lost 75% of their work and property. In the executive and in parliament, Copts represented less than one percent. The ministries which

2013; Tadros 2013; Melcangi 2017) who assert that uneven changes for Copts in Egypt have created community tensions and raised contentious issues since the 1952 Revolution, particularly against the backdrop of the Islamic revival that followed the Arab-Israeli war 1967 and during the Sadat era. The communal strife[5] of the 1970s continued during the Mubarak era and escalated in the wake of the Arab Spring of 2011; it is not only reflected in news headlines but also represented in literary works.

The presence of the Coptic theme in Egyptian novels has received a relatively little attention. In this study, We take into account the studies by Siddiq (2007), Philips (2019) and Youssef (2019). The last-named argues that the presence of minorities in Egyptian novels is a new trend and deals with the representation of marginalized communities (Nubian, Christian Coptic, Bedouins and Jewish populations). She refers to this new trend in contemporary Egyptian novels as a "new consciousness novel."

This article aims to discuss the novel *Bayt al-Qibṭiyya* ("The House of the Copt Woman;" 2019) by the Egyptian writer Ašraf al-ʻAšmāwī as a recent model of the Coptic theme in post-2011 Egyptian narrative. In his novel, al-ʻAšmāwī addresses the tensions between Muslims and Copt Christians in Upper Egypt through the story of Huda Habib, the Coptic heroine. Although it is not the first one that deals with the Coptic theme in Egypt,[6] it differs from the others, due to its new sensibility in dealing with this delicate issue especially in Upper-Egypt and its focus on the discrimination of Copt women.

Copts represented from 1952-70 were marginal, and no Copts were given important ministries throughout that period (Ibrahim 1996).

[5]Sectarian violence in Republican Egypt went through different stages: 1. a periodof relative calm throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s; 2. a period from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s in which violence was mainly provoked and exercised by Islamist extremists; 3. the contemporary period, in which sectarian violence took a more spontaneous and diffuse character and was often triggered by petty, everyday conflicts. A common feature was that sectarian violence mostly took place in the towns and villages of Upper Egypt, its hotbed being the provinces of Asyūṭ, Suhāğ, and Qinā, but also in other parts of provincial Egypt: a considerable communal strife starting from attacks in Ḫānka (Cairo governorate) in 1972 and in al Zāwiya al-Ḥamara (Cairo governorate) in June 1981. During Mubarak's (Mubārak) rule, the sectarian strife got far worse with multiple killings in Manfalout (Asyūṭ governorate) (1990), Imbāba (Cairo governorate) 1991, Manšiya (Asyūṭ governorate) 1992, Al-Qawṣiyya (Asyūṭ governorate) 1994, Abū Qurqāṣ (Minyā governorate) 1997, Al-Kušḥ (Sūhāğ governatorate) 1998 Alexandria 2005. The last decade of Mubarak's era witnessed repeated outbreaks of sectarian violence between Muslims and Copts, which culminated in particularly violent attacks on Coptic Churchgoers in Nag' Hammādī (Qinā Governorate) 2010 and the bombing of the Church in Alexandria 2011. Even after 2011 there have been suicide bombs in Imbāba in 2011 and in Alexandria and Ṭanṭā with many victims on april 2017 (Elsasser 2014).

[6] In the last two decades, several novels have dealt overtly with the issues of Coptic-Christians and the marginalization of Copts: *Waṣāyā al-lawḥ al-maksūr* ("Commandments of the broken tablet;" 2000) by Ġabriyāl Zaki (b. 1945), *Mazāğ al-Tamāsīh* ("Crocodile Mood;" 2000) by Ra'ūf Mus'ad (b. 1938), *ʻAzāzīl* ("Azazeel;" 2008) by Yūsuf Zaydān (b.1958), *Ḫātim Sulaymān* ("King Solomon's Ring;" 20008) by Šarīf Malīka (b. 1958), *al-Bārmān* ("Barman;" 2014) by Ašraf al-ʻAšmāwī, *al -Marḥūm* ("The Deceased;" 2014) by Ḥassan Kamāl (b. 1974) *Nisā'al-qāhirah-Dubay* ("Women from Cairo and Dubai," 2014) by Nāsir ʻIrāq (b. 1961) and *Ibn al-Qibṭiyya* ("The son of the Copt woman;" 2016) by Walīd ʻalā' al-Dīn (b. 1973).

The literary analysis of the novel is based on a close textual analysis, albeit focusing on its portrayal of a Coptic theme and the new sensibility in dealing with religious minority issues. We will examine other significant writing techniques of the author.

This article is not intended to be exhaustive or comprehensive on the Coptic theme in the Egyptian novel. It focuses on the portrayal of the Coptic theme and religious strife in al-ʿAšmāwī's novel.

In order to contextualize his treatment of the theme and afford a broader perspective on its development in Egyptian literature, this article also outlines its representation in other Egyptian novels at different relevant points in modern Egyptian history. Several scholars (Hafez 1976; al-Badawi 1992; Hafez 1993; Mehrez 1994; Hafez 1994; Siddiq 2007; Jacquemond 2008; Avino 2011; El Desouky 2014) generally accept the close correlation between historical context, State, socio-cultural milieu and literary production in Egypt. Aganist this backdrop, in dealing with the Egyptian novel, we have to take into account to some extent the social, political and cultural facets of Egypt. We can assert along with Hafez (1994) the vital interraction between the novel and its socio-cultural milieu.

To trace back the changes in the Coptic theme and the reverberations of some historical events in portraying characters and the treatment of themes belonging to the Coptic religion, we have adopted the division suggested by Jacquemond (2008), who divides Egyptian intellectual history into generations related to historical periods:

> Finally, it was from this time onward that Egypt's intellectual history began to be divided up into a succession of generations, the emergence of each one of which was linked to a major event in national history. Thus, the 1919 generation, also called the generation of "men of letters," was succeeded by the 1952 generation, which took pride of place under Nasser, this generation being succeeded in turn by the generation of the 1960s, which emerged following the 1967 disaster. Finally, there is the generation of the 1990s, which was also formed following a major historical trauma, this time the second Gulf War (1991) Jacquemond (2008: 8).

2. The depiction of the Coptic theme in the Egyptian Novel through historical transformations

2.1 Men of letters

We can find the first presence of the Coptic theme in the contemporary Egyptian novel in *al-Qiṣāṣ Ḥayāt* ("The equality in punishment is a life;" 1905) by ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd Ḫuḍīr al-Būqurqāṣī (al-Nassāǧ 1980). The author depicts, in a short novel (88 pages) the story of a Christian community in Upper Egypt. It is based on a true incident that took place in the town of Abū Qurqās in the Governorate of al-Minyā in

1903. The plot revolves round the rivalry of two young men for their cousin's love. As Matti Moosa asserts:

> The author treats a sensitive subject and offers a liberal idea. al-bū Qurqasi also touches upon the sensitive subject of love and defends the rights of a woman to marry the man she loves. This is a liberal idea supported by the writer, whose society never offered woman such freedom (Moosa 1997: 255).

Here, religion is not spotlighted. The whole story is used to criticise archaic traditions and backward customs in the Egyptian countryside. Nearly a decade later, Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal in his foundational Egyptian novel Zaynab[7] also addressed some of these archaic traditions, social and political issues regarding Egyptian villages and the peasantry. In this we find the reflection of the cultural milieu of those days which witnessed the emergence of liberal nationalist ideologies. The prominent figure for the emergence of National Ideology was Aḥmad Luṭfī al-Sayyid (1872-1963) who espoused a secular nationalism. The rise of the Novel as a literary genre was linked to those ideologies as al-Sayyid inspired the social and political thought of the following generation of writers and intellectuals associated with the influential journal *al-Siyāsah* ("Politics"),[8] the most prominent of whom was Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal (1888–1956), one of the main theorists of National Literature.

Therefore, the first writers of novels in Egypt were nationalists who used the novel to foster a national consciousness, which was secular at its core, as it appeared clearly in the first novels as in Maḥmūd Ṭāhir Ḥaqqī's *ʿAḏrāʾ Dinšawāy* ("The Maiden of Dinshaway;" 1906),[9] Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal's *Zaynab* (1914/1916) and *ʿAwdat ar-Rūḥ*[10] ("The Return of the Spirit;" 1933) by Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm.

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[7] The novel depicts life in the Egyptian countryside through the traditional romantic relationship between the two young protagonists Ḥāmid and Zaynab and he deals with the important social and political issues of the day regarding Egyptian villages and the peasantry: poverty, illiteracy, ignorance and the evils of colonial administration.

[8] *al-Siyāsa* was launched by *Ḥizb al-aḥrār al-dustūriyyīn* ("The Liberal Constitutional Party") on 1922. Al-Sayyid later founded the weekly cultural supplement *al-Siyāsa al-Usbūʿiyya* ("The Weekly Politics") in 1926.

[9] The novel dramatizes the events that took place in the Delta village of Dinšawāy in 1906. A party of British officers out pigeon hunting near the village were attacked by a group of peasants to whom the pigeons belonged. In the confrontation that followed, an officer was severely wounded and subsequently died of sun-stroke. The British reprisal was swift and brutal. A military trial ended in the execution of four villagers. The novel was thus written as a direct political response to the ruthless interventions of colonialism.

[10] The novel is mostly set in Cairo where young Muḥsin lives with his three uncles and illiterate aunt Zannūba. It narrates of the life of young Muḥsin (fifteen years old) and the intense harmony he finds with his relatives. They share everything, the same circumstances, the same emotions and the same misfortunes. In a nationalistic connection, al-Ḥakīm refers to the family using *al-šaʿb* ("the people") and in two chapters he relates that Muḥsin and his uncles took part in the Egyptian revolution of 1919 and were arrested.

According to Siddiq (2007), in the first half of the twentieth century the Status of religious minorities in modern Egypt was from the outset entangled with the design of European occupation, colonization and hegemony.[11]

During the first half of the twentieth century, characters representing these non-Muslim communities stood for the European Cultural other. While this paradigm reigned, the indigenous Christian Copts were hardly visible in the fictional landscape (Siddiq 2007: 152).

In point of fact, the beginning of twentieth century, due to the policies established by Muḥammad Alī, and continued by his successors represented the perfect era of a complete integration of Copts and Jews[12] into the connective tissue of Egyptian society.

This complete integration was reinforced by the process of secularization of Egyptian society in the 1930s, as it appears in *al-Yawm wa al-Ġad* ("Today and Tomorrow;" 1928) by Salāma Mūsă (1887-1958). [13] In this essay, he asserts that religion is no longer the basis of the community, but a matter of individual 'private faith' (Suleiman (2003).

We find an explicit testimony of a secularized society in the novels of Ibrāhīm al-Māzinī (1890-1949).[14] In *Ibrāhim al-Kātib* (1931),[15] the chapters start with poetic quotations taken mainly from the Old Testament, in particular from the Songs of Solomon. In his work, Jews and Christians are represented

[11] During that period the British sensed the threat of a national revolution against them. They resorted to different mechanisms for quashing the National Movement, most notably by separating Copts and Muslims. Britain sought to carry out its plans of segregation in the following manner: first, to deal with Copts on an ethnic basis; second, to isolate Copts from the national movement that fought against them; and third, to break up local Coptic religious institutions. See also Ibrahim (1996).

[12] Muḥammad ʻAlī (1769-1849) converted Egypt into a heterogeneous country that created a space for Jews, Copts and foreigners on the model of European countries. Then, thanks to the law of 1858, which allowed many foreigners to buy agricultural lands like the Egyptians, many Jews, and Christian foreigners came to invest and work in Egypt and a large part of them obtained Egyptian citizenship. They played a strong role in the industrial and economic development in Egypt that became a cosmopolitan country (cf. Fahmy 1992: 17).

[13] Egyptian journalist, encyclopaedist, socialist, political campaigner, enthusiastic moderniser and "westerniser". Born *ca.* 1887 to a well-to-do Coptic family near Zaqāzīq, he died on 5 August 1958.

[14] One of the chief literary figures of the generation of Ṭaha Husayn and ʻAbbās al-ʻAqqād. al-Māzanī had already distinguished himself as a poet, critic and essayist before he became known as a novelist and short story writer. In 1921 he collaborated with al-ʻAqqād in publishing the two iconoclastic volumes of literary criticism known as al-Diwan, in which they mercilessly attacked the literary establishment of the time. al-Māzinī was also an accomplished translator from English. al-Māzinī wrote five novels in all, the first being *Ibrāhim al-Katib* ("Ibrahim the Writer").

[15] Written in 1925-1926 and published in 1931, the novel presents the title character's romantic adventures with three different women. In a 1939 article addressed to al-Hakīm, the author admits that the novel contains pages from his life. Cf. Mossa 1997:328-332). This represents one of the most discussed cases of literary borrowing in the history of the modern Arabic novel (Paniconi 2019).

in an ordinary way without any negatives features or stereotypes, reflecting the liberal Egyptian national identity without any religious distinction.

2.2. Nağīb Maḥfūẓ and the 1952 generation

The Liberal nationalism started to change in 1930s and the situation of Copts changed categorically in the aftermath of the Second World War due to the ideology of Muslim Brotherhood.[16] This new status of Copts and the attempt by the Muslim Brothers to reify the nation as a religious community of Muslim created a counter-discourse in Egyptian narrative and the presence of Copts became more continuous and emphasized by the principle of Engagement . In this period of the 1940s and early 1950s, literary commitment became a crucial issue for many writers and intellectuals in Egypt and the Arab world. The translation of Jean-Paul Sartre's famous article "Qu'est-ce que la littérature?" in this highly politicized period had aroused a lot of debates between intellectuals and writers. "Engagement" was first translated by Ṭaha Ḥusayn as *iltizām*.[17]

According to Siddiq (2007), in Maḥfūẓ' "Cairene Trilogy" this counter-discourse takes the form of a discursive assertion by Kamāl about Riyāḍ Qaldas' quintessential Egyptian physiognomy. In the novel's economy of representation, pharaonic features assign historical precedence and this, in turn, proffers entitlement. It is hard to imagine a greater affiliation with Egypt than that inscribed in the flesh.

In fact, Nağīb Maḥfūẓ (1911-2006) is one of the first authors who overtly deals with the discrimination of Copts. In *al-Sukkariyya* ("Sugar Street"), the third part of his Trilogy (1956-1957),[18] a

[16] During the severe worldwide economic downturn, when the Wafd Party failed to keep their promises and Egypt's economy suffered from foreign exploitation; in those years the Muslim Brotherhood emerged with a program of Islamic reform, promoting Islam as the solution to society's problems. They called the Copts *'Ahl al-ḏimma* and claimed the Caliphate. Their emotive rhetoric led to the desecration of churches and the sabotage of Christian funerals and weddings. The Muslim Brotherhood was banned in 1948.

[17] Ṭaha Ḥusayn spoke about *engagement* in the literary magazine *al-Kātib al-Miṣrī* in three articles: *al-adab bayn al-itiṣāl wa al-infiṣāl* ("The literature between connection and separation;" no.11 of August 1946), *Mulāḥẓāt* ("Remarks;" no.21 di August 1947), *Fi al-adab al-Farinsī* ("About French Literature;" no.26 November 1947) the term gained immense prominence, and thus the idea of the politically and socially engaged author as a spokesperson of nations, political parties or ideologies became the all-embracing concept in the discourse of Arabic literary criticism in the mid-twentieth century and was expressed in the editorial note of the Lebanese periodical *al-adab* when it published its inaugural manifesto on literary commitment (*al-adab al- multazim*) Cf. https://al-adab.com/sites/default/files/aladab_1953_v01_01_0001_0002.pdf

[18] It is set in Cairo during British colonial rule and reveals the obscurities of a seemingly traditional society falling into rupture and moral decay. It portrays a middle-class merchant and corrupt husband named Sayyid ʿAbd al-Ğawād who lives a double life: a conservative, tyrannical one with his family and a hidden, an immoral one with his mistresses. The events of The Sugar

new sensibility for the Copts is displayed as we perceive in the dialogue between Kamāl ʿabd al-Ğawād and his Coptic friend Riyāḍ Qaldīs. For the first time, the critical question about the status of Copts in modern Egypt as a minority is raised:

> How can a minority live in the midst of a majority that oppresses it (Maḥfūz 1992: 1131).

and how this discrimination could be a projection of the lack of freedom in the Egyptian nation:

> Today the Copt's problem is the people's problem. We are oppressed when everyone else is. When people are free, we are free (Mahfūẓ 2011: 1131).

In al-Sukkariyya, as well, Maḥfūz forecast the interreligious conflict in Egypt by representing the totalizing view of Islam adopted by Kamāl's nephew ʿAbd al-Munʿim:

> Let's prepare ourselves for a prolonged struggle. Our mission is not confined to Egypt but is intended for all Muslims on earth. (Maḥfūz 2011: 295).

As affirmed by Siddiq:

> Subsequent historical developments fully bear out the novel's apocalyptic forecast of interreligious conflict in Egypt (Siddiq 2007:143).

In *al-Marāya* ("Mirrors;" 1971), whose characters are defined by Roger Allen (1973) as "mirrors of contemporary Egyptian society and its values," Maḥfūẓ highlights the status of Copts that do not have the same opportunities as their Muslim counterparts in public employment and careers. In a scene of this novel, a Muslim intellectual, ʿAbd al-Wahāb Ismāʿīl refuses to give a job opportunity in his magazine to a young writer because he is a Copt (Maḥfūẓ 1971: 215).

We find the Coptic theme in other writers of Maḥfūẓ's generation such as in ʾIḥsān ʿAbd al-Quddūs (1919-1991), who used this theme in creating a romantic story of impossible love between a Copt man and a Muslim girl as in his short stories; *ʾAnā wa al- samāʾ* ("I and the Sky;" 1948)[19] and *Allah Maḥbbah*

Road take place between 1935, when the Wafd conference was held (at the time it was Muṣṭafā an-Naḥḥās who was the leader of the Wafd), and 1944, which saw the mass arrest of the Muslim Brotherhood.

[19] The fulfilment of their love is hindered by their different religions. In spite of the young man's conversion to Islam, the girl's brother refused their marriage. The two lovers commit suicide in the hope that God would bless their love in the afterlife

("God is Love; 1955)[20]. In his works he tried to break the taboos of what can be mentioned in literature, albeit he did not treat the status of Copts as a persecuted group.

We find other examples of a realistic and spontaneous incorporation of Coptic figures in novels by Yaḥiya Ḥaqqī (1905-1992) and Yusūf Idrīs (1927-1991). In Ḥaqqī's *al-Būsṭaǧī* ("The Postman in Blood and Mud"),[21] he presents the figure of Master Salāma and although he is called a "blue bone" by the other habitants of the village,[22] they feel no hatred towards him because he and his wife are very similar to them in manners and customs. We find another realistic representation in *al-Ḥarām* ("Sinners;" 1959) by Yūsuf Idrīs and the representation of the Coptic family of Missīḥa Effendi.[23] Missīḥa Effendi, the chief's clerk, is portrayed in a humane and spontaneous way. He even forgave her daughter after she ran away from home to marry a Muslim man.

2.3. ʻAbd al-Hakīm Qāsim (the Sixties Generation)

Three decades after the Maḥfūẓ Trilogy, a short novel (60 pages) entitled *al-Mahdī*[24] ("The Rightly Guided One;" 1977)[25] by ʻAbd al-Hakīm Qāsi[26] (1934-1990), witnesses the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and its influences on Copts' status in Egypt especially in the countryside. Qāsim belonged to the *Ǧīl al-Sattīnāt* (the Sixties' Generation),[27] the generation that supported Nasser in 1952 and gradually became disillusioned with the increasing authoritarian face of the regime. Qāsim, in *al-Mahdī*, explores the

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[20] To overcome their families' refusal for their marriage the two lovers decide to marry twice as Muslims and as Copts

[21] The short novel deals with the traditions and the concept of honour in Upper Egypt and how it does not differ between Muslim and Copts through the story of Ǧamīla, the Copt girl who got pregnant after her relationship with Ḫalīl, the young Protestant man who could not marry her because of the difference of religions.

[22] "Blue bone" is a term of abuse used in Egypt against Copt Christians and refers to the bruises so many bore on their bodies in the course of history.

[23] The novel is about the difficult position in which poor migrant land-tillers find themselves as strangers in a village to which they are imported by contractors and land owners. They were treated badly by everyone especially after the discovery of a dead new born baby who is a son of one of them.

[24] *Mahdī* ("guided one") in Islamic eschatology, a messianic deliverer who will fill earth with justice and equity, restore true religion, and usher in a short golden age lasting seven, eight, or nine years before the end of the world.

[25] The novel was written in Berlin in 1977 and published later in Beirut in 1984.

[26] ʻAbd al-Hakīm Qāsim, a prominent member of the generation of writers who made their debut in the 1960s. In January 1974 he was invited to Berlin by the Evangelical Academy and the Institute of Islamic Studies of the Free University to take part in a seminar on Egyptian literature. He stayed in Berlin until 1982. After his return to Cairo, he worked as a freelance journalist.

[27] The term of *Ǧīl sittīnāt* is used to designate a group associated with literary innovation; most of these authors began writing in the 1960s. Prominent writers include Idward al-Kharrat (Idwārd al-Ḫarrāṭ), Ǧamāl al-Ǧīṭānī, Muḥammad al-Bisāṭī, ʿAbd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim, Bahā' Ṭāhir, Yaḥiya Ṭāhir ʿAbdullah, Ibrāhīm 'Aṣlān, Raḍwa ʿAšūr and others. See Kendall (2006).

dangerous potential of Islamic fundamentalism and appropriately casts a Copt as its most unfortunate victim. This short novel mirrors the decade of 1970 when the Muslim Brotherhood reinforced their religious tone. The novel takes place in a Delta village and shows how some Brotherhood members forced a poor Copt, an umbrella maker, named ʻAwad Allah, to convert to Islam. But on the same day of his conversion, he died in front of the Mosque, so the umbrella maker was sanctified as *al-Maḥdī.*

This short novel is described by Meḥrez (1995) as a unique gem in contemporary Arabic literature. In a poignant scene, Qāsim describes the appearance of a group of 'Muslim Brotherhood' members in ʻAwad-Allah's life and he emphasizes the power of the Muslim Brotherhood who dominated entire villages in Egypt in the 1970s. They give him a house and some books to convince him to change his religion, using a language register that deliberately recreates religious tones:

> Here is God's Book... I hope that you will accept it happily. Talaat holds out a printed book "Qur'an," and Awadallah held out his hands and accepted the Book. Talaat pointed to a marker in the book. We hope you read this part first [...] Awadallah standing where he was, holding the book in his hands, then exhausted, fell on to the bench behind him. [...] Let's leave Awadallah, Fula whispered, let's get out of here, as he is, and the Qur'an was spread over the palm of his palms. She whispered: Let's go, master, let's get out of here
> It is too late, Fula, He said ... It is too late (Qāsim 1995: 32/33).

Qāsim's novel provides a good summary of the political and social scene in the 1970s, marked by the Muslim Brotherhood's full control and the rise of religious fervour in the countryside.

According to Siddiq (2007), the more exclusionary discourse of political Islam on the identity of the nation and the place of non-Muslims in the third part of twentieth century, creates a crucial development in the debate on the role of religion in the identity of the nation. While Maḥfūẓ's treatment of both religion and the status of non-Muslims in Egypt is largely discursive and often polemical in nature, in the writers of the post-Maḥfūẓ's generation it takes a primary form.

In the literary production of this period, the Coptic theme is present in another three key figures of *Ǧīl al-sittīnāt* ("the Sixties Generation"): Bahā' Ṭāhir (b. 1935), Idwārd El-Ḫarāṭ (1926-2015) and Ibrāhīm ʻAbd al-Magīd (b. 1946). Their works depict a special friendship between Copts and Muslims. Bahā' Ṭāhir treated harmonious coexistence between Coptic-Christian and Muslims in Egypt in his famous novel *Ḫālatī Ṣafiyya wa al-Dayr*[28]("Aunt Safya and the Monastery;" 1991). Good relations between

[28] It is set in a village outside Luxor, narrated in the first person by a boy who is involved in the events but only passively and he narrates a dramatic and horrifying story about Safiyya, his aunt. She was in love with Ḥarbī, a handsome and agreeable young relative but she married Ḥarbī's uncle, the rich bey. When she became pregnant, the bey then developed a paranoid belief

Muslims and Copts and tolerance theme are also at issue in *Turābuha Zaʿfarān* ("City of Saffron;" 1986)[29] by Idwārd El-Ḫarāṭ, and Ibrāhīm ʿAbd al-Maǧīd's *Lā ʾAḥad yanām fī al-Iskandariyya*[30] ("Nobody sleeps in Alexandria;" 1996).

2.4. The generation of the 1990s

The assassination of President Sadat on 6 October 1981 underlined the fundamentalist threat in Egypt. Therefore, the first goal carried out by Mubarak after he took power, was to fight the radical Islamic movement. Although during 1990s, state intelligence and police forces fought the *al-Ǧamāʻah al-Islāmīyah* (Islamic group), they did not succeed in stopping its violent attacks against Copts, regime officials and tourists. During that fight, the national attention was more focused on the threat that the Islamic groups represented to state security[31] rather than addressing the issue of the Copts in particular. In these years Copts were the target of unprecedented attacks, because as Fahmī Huwaydī (Huwaydī 2000) notes, at that the end of the twentieth century sectarian strife was far worse in Egypt that it had been at its beginning, especially in Upper Egypt.

According to Maggiolini and Meclangi (2020), during the Mubarak era, the government took two main strategies: denial and repression. The denial, expressed in an insensitive way, became rejection of the existence of tensions. The President tried to cement the President's image as a protector of Muslims and Christians with the "national unity" campaign of the early 1990s, but the claims of the Christians went unheeded.

According to Hafez (2010) and Philipps (2019), the arena of Egyptian literature of the last decade of the twentieth century took a further turn, as the 90s' generation distanced themselves from collective concerns and focused more on private and isolated experiences and begin to dabble in digital culture.

that Ḥarbī would kidnap and harm the infant. He brought hired thugs to the village to torture Ḥarbī appallingly, but Harbī found refuge in the small monastery of the village.

[29] The novel portrays the interactions between the protagonist's Coptic family and their Muslim neighbours and gives a portrait of positive inter-religious exchanges. Also depicts an alliance between Copts and Muslims in their resistance to British occupation.

[30] The first during the Second World War, the second during the 1950s. A primary concern of both novels is to chronicle the devastating effects of external wars and internal strife on the delicate fabric of Alexandria's cosmopolitan, multi-ethnic, and multi religious society.

[31] Cf. Maggiolini and Meclangi (2020)

In the portrayal of Copts and Coptic issues it has been a notable development. Novelists start to speak more overtly of sectarianism, which used to be a taboo in Egyptian public culture. From the 2000s on, the frantic reaffirmation of the values of national unity and peaceful coexistence got weaker and they started to focus on the Coptic issue in a realistic way.

Starting from the 2nd millennium, there has been an increase in the quantity of novels that have the theme of Coptic-Christian life, as we mentioned in the introduction. Two of them, in our opinion, deserve to be quoted: *ʿAzāzīl* (2008) by Yūsuf Zaydān (b. 1958) and *Waṣāyā al-Lawḥ al-Maksūr* ("Commandments of the broken tablet;" 2000)[32] by Ġabriyāl Zakī (b. 1945). Both underline Coptic experiences in different historical periods in Egypt. *ʿAzāzīl* is set in the fifth century, when Coptic Christianity was new, yet the prevailing religion among the masses. Zaydān discusses the Coptic understanding of Christ and Hypatia's murder at Alexandria. The novel has been vehemently denounced by several members of the Coptic clergy and by Copts in general. Some personalities in the Coptic Orthodox Church accused Zaydān of *izdirāʾ al-dīn al-masīḥī* ("defaming the Christian religion" — a crime in Egyptian law — and fomenting sectarian strife between Muslims and Copts. The second novel is the first one of Ġabriyāl Zakī (b. 1945) and deals with the alienation of the intellectual Copt and his social disintegration in both communities, Copt and Muslim alike.

3. 2011 aftermath

The Revolution 25th January represents a crucial moment in Egyptian history. The Taḥrīr Square demonstrations were a model of sectarian amity, with Muslim and Copts demonstrators protecting each other from the violence of the police and the regime's thugs. Muslims and Copts fought for a liberal and civil cause, showing that they claimed the idea of Egyptian nationality while not refusing their religious identity. Copts finally believed with their Muslim brethren that this Revolution would put an end to the past discrimination between Copts and Muslims and social inequalities. Unfortunately this feeling did not last long and the parliamentary elections of winter 2011–2012 produced a parliament dominated by Islamists with only a few Copt deputies elected. Later on, the election victory of Muhammad Mursī plunged the Coptic community into despair and they started to feel threatened. The promising political initiatives of the transition period vanished and the newly elected president's government was dominated by Muslim brothers and Islamic politicians. Therefore

[32] Paul is a married, happy employee, and has a son. His only problem is that he, as a secular member of the Coptic minority, feels alone and defenceless in the Egyptian society.

the anti-Mursī movement, one year after his election as a president, gained steam. Millions of Muslims and Copts were calling for his removal and for new elections.

According to the novelist Ibrāhīmʿ Abdal-Mağīd,[33] it is still too early to identify the Revolution's features in Egyptian literature. Albeit he underlines that some influences of the 2011 aftermath can be seen in treating taboo themes and the emergence of raw details in depicting real issues.

Youssef (2019) observes, by examining some novels of post-2011,[34] that they have in common a sense of popular anguish and uncertainty, or even sheer despair at the older power relations persistently finding their way back into Egyptian political and social patterns. They demonstrate forms of unruly politics and continuous popular protest in their innovative aesthetics with a clear focus on complex minority experiences in Egypt, at the intersections of race, ethno-religion, and gender.

Nevertheless, the bitterness and the disillusionment following 25th January, foster themes that address religious discrimination and social inequalities. We can note more courage in showing characters' perspectives and dealing overtly with implicit inter-religious prejudices. We can find an example of this in Ḥassan Kamāl's novel *al -Marḥūm*[35] ("The Deceased;" 2014). In a shocking scene, he expresses the contemptuous reaction of ʻAbbās, the chief worker in a morgue when he discovered that the food brought by Mīlād, the Coptic worker, has been cooked by his mother and does not come from a restaurant:

> She was my mother, what do you think Uncle Abbas? She can be a professional cook. Abbas with a disgusted face, spat out the morsel and screamed:
>
> You made us eat Christians' food, Mīlād, you are a dog, may God disgust you and disgrace your mother. Of course she prayed over it and put the priest's oil, the communion water and the urine of the monk into it (Kamāl 2014: 96).

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[33] See the article on https://www.albayan.ae/books/library-visit/2014-04-04-1.2094655

[34] The novels are *Ğirāfīt* (Graffit) by Hišām al-Ḫašin (2014), *al-Ṭābūr* ("The Queue;" 2013) by Basma abd al-ʻAzīz, and *ʻOṭārd* ("Mercury;" 2015) by Muḥmmad Rabīʻ.

[35] In *al-Marḥūm* ("The deceased"), a medical student who writes novels is constantly on the lookout for unusual characters for his novels. One day he meets, the morgue worker. The sympathetic young doctor, coming into contact with the disorderly life of the worker, finds himself part of events that lead him to a cruel world where the living are in a permanent struggle, conflicts of religion, power, corruption, politics, poverty and disease.

Other writers demonstrate a peculiar sensibility for the Copts' status and reveal awareness of their situation as in al-ʻAšmawāī's Bārmān[36] through Maryam, the protagonist (Munīr)'s daughter, who remained Christian despite the conversion of her father into Islam in order to marry a Muslim lady. Maryam, who had to hide her religion, seems to symbolize the persecution of a Coptic minority (al-ʻAšmāwī 2014: 17).

4. *Bayt al-Qibṭiyya*

Ašraf al-ʻAšmāwī (born 1966) is a judge at the Court of Appeal. He debuted in 2010, with the novel *Sarqāt Mašrwʻah* (Legitimate Thefts),[37] followed by nine novels[38] in a period of less than ten years. The themes treated in his novels reveal the attention he pays to the marginalized classes in Egyptian society. al-ʻAšmāwī deals with the problem of Nubians living in Cairo, after their displacement in *Taḏkirat Qitār Waḥīda*[39] (No return train ticket). He discusses the problem of Copts in the novel the *Bārmān* ("Barman"). In the novel *Sayyidat al-Zamālik* ("The lady of Zamalek"),[40] he sheds light on a Jewish family of Italian origin by disrupting the stereotyped image of Jews.

Bayt al-Qibṭiyya ("The house of the Copt woman;" 2019) is his second attempt to approach the problem of Copts and sectarian strife.

4.1. Spatio-temporal settings and plot

The events of the novel take place in an isolated village in Upper Egypt. At the end of the novel, al-ʻAšmāwī specifies the exact time of writing, that is on 9 September 2019. From textual evidence we understand that the time of actions is roughly the decade of the 2000s. So between the two times there

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[36] The novel narrates of Munīr, the barman who changes his religion to marry a Muslim woman. Through his work in a pub in the Zamalek district he comes into contact with influential political and business figures and talks about the period of corruption during the last years of Mubarak's rule.

[37] Speaks of unknown pages in the history of the theft, pillage and smuggling of Egyptian antiquities over the past two centuries. deals with the emergence of the legal system in Egypt for the protection of antiquities in the light of the personal experience of the author who collaborated with the Council of Antiquities.

[38] *Zamān al-ḍabā'* ("Era of Hyenas;" 2011), *Toyah* (2012), *al-Muršid* ("The Guide;" 2013), *al-Bārmān* (2014), *Kilāb al-Rāʻī* ("Dogs' pastor;" 2015), *Taḏkirat Qitār Wāḥida* ("One train ticket;" 2016), *Sayyidat al-Zamālek* ("Zamalek's Lady;" 2018).

[39] The novel narrates the story of ʻAǧībah, the nubian who leaves his country in 1940s in search of decent work in Cairo and deals with the displacement of Nubians from their land during 1960s.

[40] Inspired by the killing of Salomon Cicurel, a Jewish businessman of Italian origin in 1927; from this it takes the cue to talk about the life of Jews and foreigners in Egypt during this period.

lies the period of the last decade of President Mubarak, his deposition and the aftermath of the 2011 Revolution. The principal plot is unravelled by two main characters: Nāder, a young Prosecutor transferred to work in a remote village, who narrates the first chapter and conveys the essential information about him and the place, and Huda, a Copt woman who lives in another village, who narrates in the second chapter her tragic story in a retrospective narration. So we know that her father died when she was young, her mother remarried a Muslim man who was ten years younger, who became attracted by Huda. This attraction was materialized in a rape. The girl's tragedy developed into marriage with a Muslim (a man she despised) only to cover up her shame. At a certain moment the retrospective narration is interrupted with the appearance of her husband. Later on, Huda, in a quarrel hit her husband. Seeing him unconscious on the ground, she thought he had died. From this climax, the events move inexorably forward, and through the two voices we know that Huda escaped from the village and found shelter in Ṭāy‘a, the village where Nāder works. There, she started a new life with the possibility of openly showing her religion and married a good Copt. However, the ghost of the past returned, and with a plot twist, we discover that Huda's Muslim husband is still alive, and she is accused of adultery. Hence she went from a good Christian to an ostracized outcast from her church. On the other hand, through Nāder's narration, the reader is introduced into his mind and then subsidiary plots are unraveled like his story with the Cairene fiancé. The novel ends with Hud's tragic death during a childbirth.

The main theme is Huda's tragedy as a victim, on the one hand, of rural society in which patriarchy operates through religious socialization to justify the masculine ill-treatment of women and on the other hand, her status as a Copt, so an outcast of the outcast. Huda epitomises the woman whose life is conditioned by religious sectarianism and her story leads us to another significant theme of the novel: the religious clashes in upper Egypt. The writer introduces other themes like the inadequacy of law, political and moral corruption but without going into them in any depth. The following analysis demonstrates how the author deals with the main themes with an unrelenting commitment to social and political reality, which can be observed by readers who are familiar with the social particularities of upper Egypt and the real political issues in the last two decades in Egypt.

4.2. Narrative strategies

The novel is divided into twenty-five sections, and the events are related through the perspectives of two main voices in the first person: Nāder narrates fourteen sections while Huda narrates eleven. Nāder is also the narrator who inaugurates and concludes the novel. It is worth noting that this is the

second work[41] in which al-ʿAšmāwī experiments the multi-voice technique; his other novels were written through either the omniscient third person narrator or in the first person of the protagonist.

This strategy of "democratization of narration" or polyphony is considered by the American critic Stefan Meyer as one of the innovative modernist strategies introduced into the Arabic novel in the 1960s. In his book The experimental Arabic novel (2001), Meyer argues that a number of key Arab writers have been influenced by the translation of William Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury, published in Arabic language in 1963 by Jabrā Ibrāhīm Jabrā [42] and that causing them to break with the traditional realist technique and to substitute multiple narration.

Also Fabio Caini (2007) argues relying on Meyer's study that not all narrative structures with more than one perspective fulfil all the Bakhtinian criteria for genuine polyphony. He states:

> If the method of multiple narration is simply limited to giving the reader different perspectives, it is not enough to fulfil the true tasks of polyphony in Bakhtinian terms. These consist in: (1) a fair and equal representation of the characters' voices; (2) dialogism (as opposed to the monologism of the traditional novel), which, according to Bakhtin, is the only way to achieve this (Caini 2007: 53).

If we apply Meyer and Caini's approach, we find Nāder's voice emerges as the dominant one. Huda's voice seems to highlight Nāder's ideas. We do not notice any alteration of linguistic registers. Hence Huda the simple naïve girl has the same linguistic registers of the cultivated prosecutor and also the other characters as we will see in the second point. For example, Huda in an interior monologue expresses her misfortunes and miserable conditions:

> لم أعد استطيع العيش في الظل، حياتي كلها على هامش السعادة والإستقرار، هاربة دائما من أشباح كثيرة ، فقر وظلم وقهر واضطهاد وهي لاتتوانى عن مطاردتي وتلحق بي دوما،[...] هل لو انقلبت حجرا صلدا بلا مشاعر لكان حالي افضل ولنعمت بالأستقرار؟
>
> I can no longer live on the edge of life, my whole life on the edge of happiness and stability, always on the run from so many ghosts, poverty, injustice, oppression and persecution, which always follow me [...] I would like to be a hard stone without feelings, Would I have been better and enjoyed the stability?[43] (al-ʿAšmāwī 2019: 223).

[41] He starts to use this technique in *Sayyidat al-Zamālik* ("Zamalek's Lady;" 2018).

[42] Translated as *al-ṣaḫab wa l-ʿunf*.

[43] All the translations of the quotations from the novel are by the author.

Nāder, in a similar interior monologue, expresses his feeling of frustrations and disillusionment with socio-political situation in his country and his failure to change nothing:

قهر واقعي احلامي وبخرها، دائما الواقع يغلب الحلم، يستعيد حقوقه منها ، لا يترك الأحلام تحجبه زمنا طويلا. أحيانا بعض الأمور تتجاوزني، تتعدى قدراتي ، لن يفيدني مقاومتها أكثر من طاقتي ، واحيانا يكون استمراري في المقاومة مؤديا للهلاك.

> life made my dreams vanish. Reality always defeats the dream. It does not accept being overcome by dreams. Sometimes I feel powerless in front of the facts of reality, resisting them will not benefit me and they overcome my energy, and other times my continuing resistance will lead to perdition (al-ʻAšmāwī 2019: 231).

There are various characters in the background like the two guardians of the guesthouse and Huda's two husbands. These are only sketched briefly and mainly serve to either highlight the thoughts of the main characters or as a general contribution to the atmosphere. They are introduced in the novel without almost no language varieties in their speech. One in particular (al-Nabawī), though mentioned with few appearances, deserves our attention: through a few words, without any details, we understand that he changed his religion from Muslim to Christian to escape from the ṯaā'r (vengeance). Yet he failed to escape for a long time and he was shot dead by his enemies. The passage that describes his murder is quite poignant:

> نبوي الذي ينزف من صدره وفمه وساقه، لايزال ممسكا ببندقيته ، باليد ذاتها التي تحمل صليبا مدقوقا على رسغها[...] مال رأسه على كتفه، واغمض عينيه [...] بعدما نطق الشهادتين بصعوبة
>
> al-Nabawī was bleeding from his chest, mouth, and leg, still holding his rifle with the same hand that bore a cross tattoo on his wrist[...] He tilted his head on the shoulder and closed his eyes,[...] after that he recited the *al-šahāda*[44] with a lot of effort (al-ʻAšmāwī 2019: 188).

[44] In the religious use of the word. *s̲hahāda* is the Muslim profession of faith: "there is no god but God; Muḥammad is the Prophet of God."

Another writer's strategy is intertextuality, as we can see from the first pages of the novel, al-ʻAšmāwī reminds us of two famous works of Tawfīq al-Hakīm:*Yawmiyyāt nā'ib fī al-aryāf* ("Maze of Justice: Diary of a Deputy Prosecutor in the Country;" 1937)[45] and *ʻAdāla wa Fann* ("Justice and Art;" 1953).[46]

> بالكاد لمحت كتابين مختلفين ، محشورين وسط الكتب الضخمة، سمكهما لا يشي بانتمائهما للقانون [..] الكتابان لتوفيق الحكيم روايته الشهيرة"يوميات نائب في الأرياف"، وثانيهما كتابه الذي لم يلفت إليه كثيرون وقت صدوره.."عدالة وفن" .
>
> I hardly notice two different books hidden by other huge books, their thickness does not indicate that they are law books [...]The two books are by Tawfīq al-Hakīm, his famous novel *Yawmīyyāt nā'ib fī al-aryāf,* and the second is his book, to which many readers paid no attention at the time of its publication *ʻAdāla wa Fann* (al-ʻAšmāwī 2019: 10).

In another passage he makes another reference to al-Ḥakīm:

> لكني لمحت رجلا غريبا واقفا قرب الأستراحة، بدينا وطويلا في آن واحد، يرتدي معطفا داكنا فوق جلبابه، يحمل على كتفه بندقية كبيرة، اللافت فيه طربوشه الأحمرالذي يخفي غالبية ملامحه من فرط كبسه على جبهته كأنه خرج لتوه من صفحات رواية توفيق الحكيم.
>
> I noticed a strange man standing near the house. He was obese and tall at the same time, wearing a dark coat over his robes, carrying a large rifle on his shoulder, the striking way in which his red fez hides most of his features from his excessive clenching of his forehead as if he had just emerged from the pages of Tawfiq al-Hakim's novel (al-ʻAšmāwī 2019: 50).

Gerard (1982: 2) refers to Riffaterre's definition of intertextuality as:

> It is the perception of the reader of the relationship between a work and others that have either preceded or followed it.

Or:

> the corpus of texts the reader may legitimately connect with the one before his eyes, that is, the texts brought to mind by what he is reading (Riffaterre 1980a: 626).

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[45] First translation in English published in 1947. It is a partially autobiographic short novel. The narrator is a cynical, overworked district Prosecutor assigned to a small Egyptian village. He spends his days investigating the petty crimes committed by the locals, listlessly attending innumerable and interminable court sessions and shuffling through endless legal dossiers while his solitary evenings are spent with his sole companion and refuge – his journal. The novel takes the form of his journal entries. Eleven entries frame the time of the novel, narrating eleven consecutive days of his life, which focus on the mysterious circumstances surrounding the murder of a local peasant (cf. Selim 2004).

[46] Collection of short stories mainly about Egyptian courts.

Taking into account this definition, we can notice the similarity of al-ʻAšmāwī's novel and al-Ḥakīm's masterpiece. *Yawmiyyyāt* describes al-Ḥakīm's experience as a Prosecutor in a remote village between 1929 and 1934 and portrays the positive and negative aspects of the Egyptian judicial system. The work offers an accurate portrait of the *fallāḥīn*'s ("peasants'") miserable life. The same experience appears in al-Ašmāwī's work. The two novels have a rural settings, both heroes are young Prosecutors who have been transferred to work in a remote village and both have to deal with crimes without finding the culprits. al-Ašmāwī has several topics in common with *Yawmiyyāt* al-Ḥakīm such as the manipulation of law by corrupt and inefficient bureaucratic hierarchy, the falsification of electoral results by police commissioner, and the application of legal articles to the dead letter upon an illiterate community. More than one scene is borrowed in al-Ašmāwī's work. One scene that is almost identical in both novels is the detailed autopsy of a gunshot victim, as we find in al-ʻAšmāwī (2019: 98) and al-Ḥakīm (1937: 121). In an interview published in al-ʻAyn[47] magazine, al-ʻAšmāwī said that he mentioned al-Ḥakīm and his books in order to honour this great Egyptian writer. He felt that they were sharing the same experience of work and he wanted to shed light on the fact that the battle against corruption, inefficiency, and diseases of the Egyptian judicial system just as al-Hakīm had done in his *Yawmiyyāt*, as nothing had changed almost one hundred years later. So we can say that al-Ašmāwī reworks concepts and literary tropes from al-Ḥakīm to shape his new text.

Comparing the linguistic registers used by the two writers, we find al-Ḥakīm's protagonists were introduced to the readers in their unadulterated voices. According to Selim (2004), this introduction of 'realistic' peasant voices creates a discursive challenge to the canonical languages of authority and produces a rupture in the text dominated by the monologue voice of the subject. Their language forms a clear juxtaposition for the precise cultured language of the hero. The case in al-ʻAšmāwī is different.

The Novel is written in standard Arabic with few spoken idioms in dialogues. It is remarkable that there is not very great distinction between narration and dialogues. al-ʼAšmāwī does not make any attempt to liven up the dialogues with specific words of upper Egypt's vernacular.[48] He even uses the Cairene vernacular in dialogues instead of the protagonists' natural one.[49]

As we notice in the dialogue between Ramsīs Isakndar and Huda:

انا رمسيس اسكندر حاجب استراحة المحكمة .. اسمك ايه وجاية منين يا بنتي؟
ابوس ايدك ابات عندك للصبح ، انا غريبة والناس في الجامع طردوني

[47] https://al-ain.com/article/ashraf-al-ashmawy-interview

[48] It is a Southern variety of Egyptian Arabic spoken by the inhabitants of Nile Valley. Cf. Khalafallah (1969).

[49] Cf. Taymūr (2002).

> “I am Ramsīs Iskandar, guardian of the court’s guesthouse, what is your name, where are you from, girl?”
> “Please, I beg you to let me spend the night here, I am a stranger and the people in the mosque kicked me out” (al-‘Ašmāwī 2019: 42).

Nor is there any distinction between illiterate or semi-illiterate and educated protagonists in their speaking register as we can see in the expressions of Rizq, the semi-illiterate electrician who uses register of *‘āmmiyat al-muṯaqqafīn* (“well-educated people”):

> عادي أكيد الخبر اتسرب
> “Absolutely normal, the news has been disclosed” (al-‘Ašmāwī 2019: 82).

In the novel there are various passages in which the linguistic level is not adequate for the literacy of the interlocutor as we find in the sentence of Nabawī the guardian who supposed to be illiterate but he speaks with *‘āmmiyat al-muṯaqqafīn* (well-educated people)

> الزيارات الشخصية ممنوعة هنا بأمر من نادر بيه وكيل النيابة
> “Personal visits are prohibited here as per order by Nader Bey, the prosecutor”
> (al-‘Ašmāwī 2019: 152).

In another passage the Copt woman uses an expression from the Qur’ān *maṭl‘a al- Fağr* (97: 5):

> سرت على اطراف أصابعي كي لا أوقظه بعدما سهرنا ننهل من عسل بعضنا حتى مطلع الفجر
> “I walked on the tips of my fingers so as not to wake him up after we stayed up late, drinking each other's love until the break of dawn” (al-‘Ašmāwī 2019: 87).

4.3. The oppression of the Copt women and religious sectarianism

In the twentieth-century Arab literary tradition, the woman as a historical metaphor is most commonly represented through the allegory of mother/earth/country. Against this backdrop, Egyptian novelists such as Haykal, al-Ḥakīm, Maḥfūẓ used to construct woman as a metaphor of the nation. We find the same thing in al-‘Ašmāwī’s protagonist. Huda is a symbol of the difficult present of Egypt under the domain of fundamentalism and her situation mirrors Egypt’s religious and legal conflicts, especially in the Egyptian Coptic community. In some of the novel’s passages we can perceive an implicit causal relationship between Huda’s tragedy and the Islamic law in Egypt. Applying the *Sharī‘a* when she asked for a divorce from her husband sealed off all her chances to free herself of a cruel man. She found

herself in a trap because she had married a Muslim without embracing his religion and her rights were not admitted either by Islamic or Coptic law:

> أصر وقتها القاضي بعد عام كامل من نظر القضية على بقائي مع خضر، حذرني في آخر جلسة من مغبة الطلاق[...] يصر على تطبيق شريعة خضر كما امره القانون المكتوب وهو يعلم أنني قبطية [...] نطق الحكم باستمرار موتي.. بوأد أنوثتي..باغتيال إنسانيتي ..رفض دعوى التطليق.
>
> That time, the judge handed down the sentence, after a full year of hearing, which forced me to remain Ḫader's wife. In the last session he had warned me of the consequences of the divorce,[...] he insisted on applying Ḫader's law as required by law even though he knew full well that I was a Copt [...] He issued my death sentence, a burial of my femininty and the assassination of my humanity. He refused my request for divorce (al-ʻAšmāwī 2019: 122)

In the following passage, we cannot fail to hear the echoes of the heated debate over the amendment of article two of the Egyptian Constitution:[50]

> تبقى السؤال عالقاً في ذاكرتي، إذا كان الله ترك لنا حرية العقيدة، فلماذا يلزمنا بها البشر في الزواج والطلاق؟!
>
> the question is, if God has left us freedom of belief, then why should human beings involve religion in divorce and marriage?(al-ʻAšmāwī 2019: 123)

The writer demonstrates the domestic violence that Huda underwent and how her first husband was beating her without mercy:

> لحقني قرب الفرن قبل أن أدور حوله، جذبني من طرحتي، طرحني بسهولة، تمكن مني مثل دمية صغيرة، انهال علي صفعا ركلني في بطني [...]فالمكواة الحديد ستكون في يديه بعد برهة، يحميها ليكوي جسدي.
>
> he had joined me near the oven before turning me round, he pulled me from the head dress, he threw me on the ground like a puppet, he started hitting my face [...] and kicking me in the belly [...] then he will heat the iron to burn my body (al-ʻAšmāwī 2019: 16).

The novel links religious fundamentalism and the oppression of women. al-ʻAšmāwī suggests that the religious practices of fundamentalists sanction the mistreatment of women especially in the case of

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[50] Sadat initiated a constitutional change in 1971 that stipulated that Islamic Sharīʻa should be "a principal source of legislation" (*maṣdar raʾīs li-t-tašrīʿ*). In 1980, Article Two of the Constitution was changed again to declare Sharia "the main source of legislation" (*al-maṣdar ar-raʾīsī li-t-tašrīʿ*). Soon after the 25th Revolution it has been a referendum on the abolition of this article but due to Islamic domain it didn't pass.

Coptic women. As in the dialogue between the servant of the mosque, where Huda planned to spend the night when she escaped, and his colleague, when the former was planning to rape her:

> ما هو ليل ونهار يقول لنا النصارى كفرة ونسوانهم حلال وحرام نعيد عليهم
>
> But he is telling us day and night that Christians are infidels, and their women are permissible and he forbade us from giving them any greetings (al-ʻAšmāwī 2019: 31).

The author gives us a clear portrayal of his perceptions of the Coptic frustration in Egypt in the story of Huda: the men who victimized her and treated her as an object of sex and a tool for reproduction are both Muslims: the stepfather raped her, to quench his sexual desires that his wife was no longer able to match, and the brutal cruel husband who used to project his frustration and complex of inferiority on to her. Huda accepts her destiny and did not rebel until the moment he was about to kill her. The author, through a juxtaposition, illustrates the difference between Huda's Muslim ex-husband and the new Coptic one (Rizq) who is an affectionate and good person:

> خضر شوه روحى، أطلق رصاصات الأسى صوبها بلا هوادة بعدما أضرم فيها نيران الإهانة.. بدد أحلي سنوات عمري. .. بعثر أحلامي، [...] أحرق حبي لنفسي، وخنق مشاعري[...] لكن رزق احتواني رغم مخاوفي منه كرجل في البداية ، تمنعت وتيبست أطرافي كلما أقترب مني، بكيت ..ارتعشت..فطمأنني بوقوفه على مسافة آمنة مني، ابتعدت متذكرة زوج أمي وخضر من بعده..فربت رزق رأسي وقبل يدي، ثم منحني نفحة من روحه لأحيا بها وعليها
>
> Ḫaḍr distorted my soul, shot the bullets of pain incessantly after setting them on fire, destroying the sweetest years of my life. .. dispersing my dreams,[..] he killed my self-love, stifling my feelings [...] But Rizq gave me tenderness, despite my fears of him in the beginning. I avoided him every time he came closer, I cried ... trembled ... but he reassured me from a safe distance. I stood far away because, I remembered my stepfather and Ḫaḍr. Rizq touched my head gently, he kissed my hand, then he gave me a breath of his soul to live again and again (al-ʻAšmāwī 2019: 75).

The author points out that the concept of honour in Upper Egypt does not differ between Muslim and Copts. And how the inviolability of religious commandments are condemned from both communities, as it can be seen by describing the attitude of the villages' inhabitants towards Huda after discovering her true story:

> الكل بات كارها لها، وربما يقتلها أحدهم دفاعا عن الدين كما يظنون. صارت مثل الأجرب[...] لكنها أصبحت دجالة.. زانية والآن كافرة
>
> Now she is hated by everyone, maybe someone could kill her in defence of religion as they believe. She has become like a scabious woman [...] She became adulterous and infidel (al-ʻAšmāwī 2019: 216).

The penultimate chapter gives us a light of hope as the Judge condemned Huda with a light penalty for the accusation of adultery, but Huda's death happened in a tragic way because Muslim and Copt villagers refused to donate their blood to save her life. Her death highlights the cruelty of Egyptian society and the loss of hope to change reality:

البقية في حياتك ياباشا.. الست هدى تعيش أنت.

سمرتني كلماته في مكاني، ليسترسل بعينين دامعتين شارحا كيف ماتت بعد الولادة بالمستشفى، بعدما نزفت كثيرا ولم يجدوا من يتبرع لها بالدم من المسلمين او المسيحيين.

> Condolences sir....Mrs. Huda has passed away. His words nailed my feet to the ground, while crying, he explained how she died after giving birth in the hospital, after having heavy bleeding and no blood donor could be found (al-ʻAšmāwī 2019: 230).

The tragedy of Huda continues after her death with her two babies claimed both by Muslims and Copts:

> جابت ولدين توم يا باشا .. ووصتني أسميهم "نادر" و"كمال". لكن المستشفى رفضت تسجيل اسم الأب لأن خضر رافع قضية عليها وبيقول إن العيال عياله.
>
> She gave birth to twin boys and asked me to give them the names of Nāder and Kamāl but the hospital refused to register the father's name in the population registry because Ḫaḍer says they are his children (al-ʻAšmāwī 2019: 231).

That open ending makes Huda's tragedy a personification of continuity. Nothing is able to stop oppression of women or discrimination of Copts.

4.4. Upper Egypt and clashes between Muslims and Copts

The author's choice of that remote village in upper Egypt to contextualise the clashes between Muslims and Copts is not an accident. Clashes between Muslims and Copts have grown increasingly common in recent years, especially in Upper Egypt, where there is a large Christian population and a strong culture of vendetta killings. From the first pages, al-ʻAšmāwī puts his finger on the beginning of tensions between Copts and the State, explaining how Nasser's land reform hit Copts very hard; due to the President's nationalism policy, a large portion of Coptic land was confiscated and redistributed to Muslims[51]. Copts expressed their disdain sarcastically by altering the village's name in order to give it a negative meaning on purpose:

[51] Cf. Girgis (2018).

> وكيف سميت القرية بالطايعة نسبة إلى محمد طايع عمدتها آنذاك لكنهم من وقتها يصرون علي يبدو أنها نكاية في عائلة العمدة محمد طايع الذي يروي عنه تأييده للثورة التي نكلت بالأهالي "التايهة" نطقها الأقباط من أصحاب الفدادين الكثيرة.
>
> The village was called *Ṭāy'a* "obedience," following the name of Muḥammad Ṭāy', its Mayor at that time, but the villagers, out of spite, insist on pronouncing it *Ḍāy'a* "(Lost)."[52] They do that because the Mayor Muḥammad Ṭāy' had given his support to the Revolution that deprived the Coptic people of many acres of land (al-'Ašmāwī 2019: 19).

These historical facts, unprecedentedly overtly treated, give a contextual flavour to the novel and keep it close to the political and social reality of the time.

The author suggests that there are other important ingredients to sectarian violence more than the machination of Islamic groups, especially in Upper Egypt. We can perceive how religious violence sometimes disguised economic struggles from a conversation between Nāder and Radwān, a Muslim landlord in conflict with a Coptic family:

> عاوز حقي وحق ناسي.. عاوز أحمي أرضي وطيني، عاوز حقوقي من ولاد بيشوي
>
> I want my land and property and I must defend my possessions from the sons of Bīšwaī (al-'Ašmāwī 2019: 35)

In a song by Ramsīs, the guardian of the guesthouse, the writer sheds light on the situation of disintegration and integration of the Copts in Egypt. On the one hand they do not feel they have equal rights with their Muslim brethren, on the other hand they manifest their loyalty to the regime. Although Ramsīs was indignant about Nasser's land reform , he was singing a ditty celebrating Nasser:

> شجرة محمد علي كبرت ..قطعها جمال
> رقبتي كانت سمسمة.. رفعها جمال
>
> the tall tree of Moḥammad 'Alī was cut down by Gamāl
> Gamāl has restored my dignity(al-'Ašmāwī 2019: 22).

That could allude to the so-called "Millet Partnership"[53] between Nāsser and Patriarch Kīrollos VI, elected in 1959 which established mutual collaboration between regime and Church.

The temporal setting of the story is not specified but some events like the elections with the participation of the Muslim Brotherhood, lead us to conclude that the episodes took place in 2000s. In

[52] Replacing the letter ṭ with the letter ḍ to change the meaning of the word in the Egyptian dialect.

[53] Cf. Elsasser (2014: 80-81).

these elections, the main victor of the opposition parties was the Muslim Brotherhood movement, which introduced 88 representatives into the People's Assembly by the end of 2005, five times the number of its representatives in the outgoing Parliament (Yoram 2006):

> يتنافس على الأصوات بلجنتي مرشحان، أولهما تابع للحزب االوطني برمز الهلال والثاني مرشح جماعة الأخوان المسلمين لكنه لا يعلن ذلك صراحة، مكتفيا بصورته على اللافتات بلحية خفيفة وبدلة أنيقة[..] معتمدا على النجاح الذي حققه إخوانه بالمرحلة الأولى ببعض محافظات الدلتا، وما قاله بالمؤتمر الإنتخابي الذي عقد بساحة صغيرة أمام الكنيسة الكبيرة مؤكدا على دعمه للأقباط مثل المسلمين.
>
> Two candidates are competing for votes, the first is affiliated with the National Party with the symbol of the Crescent moon and the second is the candidate of the Muslim Brotherhood, but he does not explicitly declare this, contenting himself with his picture on the banners with a sparse beard and an elegant suit. Relying on the success achieved by his comrads in the first elections' phase in some Delta governatroates, and on his declarations during the conference held in the small square in front of the big church, he reitereted his support to both Copts and Muslims (al-ʻAšmāwī 2019: 112).

The narrator seizes the opportunity of the election to shed light on the Muslim Brotherhood's full social control in Egyptian villages which foreshadows their domination of the 2011 parliamentary election and victory in the 2012 presidential election:

> عندي ثلاثة أصوات فقط، صوتوا كلهم لمرشح الإخوان
>
> There are only three votes, they all voted for the Muslim Brotherhood's candidate (al-ʻAšmāwī 2019: 116).

al-ʻAšmāwī describes in lively scenes with the "camera's eye technique" the outbreak of clashes between Copts and Muslims, in the village's market (*sūq*) in an explicit reference to the al-Kušḥ massacre of December, 31, 1999-2000, which resulted in the destruction of homes, shops and the murder of twenty-one people (19 Copts and two Muslims) as indicated in the novel with "many Copts and two Muslims." In al-Kušḥ, riots broke out in the market after a discussion on buying a piece of fabric in very similar if not identical circumstances to the version narrated by Huda when she went to the market to buy a piece of fabric as a present for Rizq:

> فقررت الذهاب إلى السوق لأشتري له هدية[...] سأشتري قطعة قماش جديدة، افصلها جلبابا له
>
> I decided to go to the market to buy a gift for him[...] a piece of fabric and I'll make him a new *ǧalabiyya* (al-ʼ Ašmāwī 2019: 157).

Starting from the brawl in the village market, on several pages, he introduces the reader to the scene of a sort of guerrilla warfare using a sword, a symbol of terror and the Islamic State. He is telling the

story of these clashes in a manner which is detailed, precise "alive,"[54] so we are able to witness horrific events and feel the tension of life in the village:

> تحول السوق في أقل من دقيقة إلى ساحة معركة، رجال تهرول من الجانبين، آخرون يتضاربون بالعصى.
> In less than a minute, the market turned into a battlefield, men running from both sides, others clashing with cops [...] (al-ʻAšmāwī 2019: 89).

> لم نكن ندري أن في أحد منعطفاتها يكمن سياف متلحفا بالعتمة، فلم نلمح سوى نصل سيفه اللامع وهو يخترق جدار التوك توك الجلدي، لتصرخ فريال من الألم وهي تمسك بجنبها والدماء تندفع منه
> We did not know that in one of its corners there was a man wrapped in darkness. We only glimpsed the blade of his bright sword as it ripped the leather cover of a tuk-tuk. Faryal was screaming of pain, while she was holding her side and the blood was bursting from it (al-ʻAšmāwī 2019: 173).

The relentless amassing of brutal details, and depiction of horror, we witness here is intended to involve the reader more and more in the novel's actions:

> كانوا يهتفون ضدنا ويحرقون صلبانا خشبية، [...] علمنا من رمسيس أن أحدهم أضرم النار في المبنى الجديد الملاصق للكنيسة عن طريق إلقاء كرات النار من خارج السور.
> They screamed at us and burned wooden crosses. [...] We learned from Ramsīs that someone set fire to the new building adjacent to the church by throwing fireballs from outside the wall (al-ʻAšmāwī 2019: 84).

With these vivid scenes, the author is engaging the reader by focus on their emotional involvement. As Booth states:

> Every literary work of any power, whether or not it's author composed it with his audience in mind is in fact an elaborate system of controls over the readers involvement and detachment along various lines of interest. The author is limited only by the range of human interests (Booth 1982: 123).

In order to assert our perception, al-ʻAšmāwī relates through Nāder that the village's name has been changed to al-Salām (al-ʻAšmāwī 2019:234) exactly as happened in the case of al-Kušḥ.

In another poignant scene, al-ʻAšmāwī describes the murder of fourteen Copts in a sectarian riot in an another explicit reference to the massacre of Abū Qurqās 1990 in Minyā:

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[54] Phrase borrowed from Genette (1972: 164).

وصلنا منطقة الزراعات الشرقية، هبطنا من الطريق المرتفع لأحد الغيطان الذي شهد حرق أربعة عشر قبطيا دفعة واحدة ، افهمنا الطبيب الذي التقانا هناك أنهم قتلوا بالرصاص ثم نقلوا إلى هنا تمهيدا لمحرقة كبيرة فيما يبدو، ولولا أن الريح هادئة لتفحمت الجثث كها، وما أمكن التعرف عليهم أبدا.

we have reached the eastern parts of a cultivated land. We went down to a patch of land where we found fourteen Copts burned. The doctor we met there explained to us that they were first shot and then transferred to be burned. Thanks to the calm wind they were not completely burnt away and we were able to identify them (al-ʻAšmāwī 2019: 200).

The author depicts a sensitive topic, when he reveals the mutual resentment between Copts and Muslims in Upper Egypt expressed by some religious men, either explicitly as in the case of the Sheikh of the Mosque:

وددت كل جمعة أن اسد أذني فلا أسمع الدعاء على أهلي .. لكني فشلت، لايتركوننا في حالنا، هززت رأسي يأسا وتقبلا للأمر الواقع، فبعضنا أيضا يقول في كنائسنا عنهم مثل الذي يقولونه عنا، ولكننا لا نجرؤء على الجهر مثلهم.

Every Friday I would have liked to close my ears so as not to hear the gossip about my community, They won't leave us alone. I shake my head in despair and accept the status quo. Some of us even talk badly of them in our churches, but we don't dare to speak openly like them (al-ʻAšmāwī 2019: 61).

or implicitly when the priest almost prevents the Copts, after a violent eposide of clashing with a group of islamic fundamentalists, from telling about the help they received from some Muslims:

القبطي الذي أوى مسلما ومات معه، دفعت بعضنا لحكي قصصا مؤثرة عن مسلمين أنقذوهم لما علقوا بأسطح بيوتهم [..] لكن أبانا اسطفانوس لم يعطهم الفرصة ليسترسلوا في تلك الحكايات وقطم حديثهم

The story of the Copt who hosted a Muslim and died with him pushed some of us to tell touching stories about Muslims who saved Copts when they took shelter on the roofs of their homes. But father Isṭāfanus stopped their conversations. (al-ʻAšmāwī 2019: 178).

The Coptic issues dominate the novel, and although the present of Coptic expressions are rare, we can point out some oath expressions such as *wa-l-Masīḥ al-ḥaī* ("Christ-alive") or religious invocations like *waḥiyāt Satinā al-ʻAdrā* ("Blessing of Virgin Mary").[55] He doesn't mention even once expressions which usually specify Copts in rural areas like *bi-smi Ṣalīb* ("in the name of the Cross") or *bi-smi l-Masīḥ* ("in the name of Christ"), expressions that pious Copts would say in their daily life. The same goes for forms of greetings, Coptic rituals and festivities. For example, he mentions only once *al- ṣalawāt al-sabaʻ* ("seven prayers") but during the story time, that lasts for almost one year, he never speaks of any festivities. This lack of attention to religious formulae and traditions, give the image of an unnatural environment in the novel.

[55] According to the pronunciation in Egyptian Arabic.

The Cross could be the concrete reference of the Christian religion in the novel; he deals with the symbol of the Cross in two cases: as a symbol of identity and as a unifying factor as in case of the tattoo of the Cross:

> فتح لي رجل أشيب مندهش، ظل يحملق في وجهي دون أن ينطق، خيل لي أنني لمحت صليبا مدقوقا على رسغ يده التى يرفع بها المصباح، زفرت بعمق وابتسمت ابتسامة رضا
>
> A grizzled man opened the door, surprised. He glanced at me without uttering. It seemed to me that I had glimpsed a Cross on his wrist while he raised the lamp. I exhaled deeply and smiled with a smile of satisfaction (al-ʻAšmāwī 2019: 42).

The same symbol of the Cross is turned into a stigma when they used it to signal the Copts' houses:

> صحونا ذات يوم لنجد أحدهم قد رسم صليبا أسود كبيرا على باب داري، ربما ليميزها عن بيوت المسلمين التي قبلي
>
> We woke up one day to find someone who had drawn a large black Cross on the door of my house, perhaps to distinguish it from the houses of the Muslims beside mine (al-ʻAšmāwī 2019: 62).

We do see mutual cooperation between Muslims and Copts in very few episodes, but even in those examples the religious dichotomy is very clear and highlighted by the use of the pronouns 'we' and 'them.'

The author, through the narrator, leaves the reader with no doubt concerning his personal reaction to all this and represents the cultivated and alienated young Egyptian intellectual in an uneasy state of rebellion against a society:

> كرهت تساؤلاتي وهززت رأسي أسفا على حالنا، كل شيء هنا انفعالي.. مؤقت ..قصير الأجل، لاشيء يتراكم ويتعاظم عندنا على السطح إلا غبار الفتنة.
>
> I dismissed my questions and shook my head sadly at our condition: everything here is a temporary short-term emotion, nothing accumulates and grows on the surface except the dust of religious discrimination (al-ʻAšmāwī 2019: 234).

4. Final remarks

A brief comparison between al-ʻAšmāwī's novel and the other writers who deal with discrimination of Copts or clashes between Copts and Muslims, illustrates that their attention to these issues practically fades in comparison with *Bayt al-Qibṭṭiyya.* The oppression of Copts permeates almost all the novel and without doubt, this unprecedentedly overt treatment of religious strife riots in a novel deserves attention.

The Coptic theme and discriminations of the Coptic minority is in the foreground in the novel and the narrator utilizes historical facts and real incidents. Albeit, the near total absence of mirroring any linguistic particularity of *ṣaʿīdī* (upper Egypt) dialect and the weak representation of the daily experiences of ordinary Copts diminish the novel's authenticity and give the image of an unnatural environment for novel's actions.

It is important to note that al-ʿAšmāwī's novel is receiving a considerable attention from the public and critics, reaching its 11th edition in a few months. Recently it was shortlisted for the Sawiras Prize. It has also obtained 1238 reviews of "goodreads"[56] and several reviews via Youtube.

Best sellers in Egypt and in the Arab world in general are a recent phenomenon (Allen 2009: 10). Recently publishers have been trying to increase their commercial profiles and including on their staff a marketing manager to follow books after publication. Rooke (2011: 204-205) explains the secret behind the success of some books in the Arab World and their emergence as a bestseller and he considers three factors :

> What is the secret behind the accomplishment of these books? The answer, I would suggest, is to be found in a combination of literary factors intrinsic to the texts and external technical and social developments impacting on the conditions of Arabic fiction in general. I believe the following factors to be central: 1) controversiality, 2) accessibility and appeal, 3) physical availability and 4) globalization

If we apply these factors to Bayt al-Qibṭiyya, we will find evidence of the interaction of the reception of this novel and the socio-cultural context in Egyptian society after the political failure of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt in 2013.

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[56] https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/53139508

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