Women’s Fictional Writing and Social Morality: a Reading of Qalb al-raǧul (Man’s Heart, 1904) by Labibah Hášim

Maria Elena Paniconi
University of Macerata
panconi77@hotmail.com

Abstract

Labībah Hášim (1880–1947), a Lebanese-born intellectual and writer, moved to Egypt at the very beginning of the twentieth century and took part in the literary life of Cairene circles, frequenting prominent intellectuals such as the lexicographer Ibrāhīm al-Yāziǧī (1847–1906). She is generally quoted as the founder of the periodical Fatāt al-šarq (Eastern Young Woman, 1906), and subsequently of the first Arab periodical in Latin America (Šarq wa-Ġarb, East and West) during her four-year experience in Chile. Her juvenile novel Qalb al-raǧul (Man’s Heart), published in 1904, is set during and after the social events that shook Lebanon in 1860. The story initially is based on the traditional topos of a contrasted, romantic love and then evolves into an original narrative, characterised by the acute observation of social reality. I highlight here how Hášim’s narrative embodies a formal and substantial shifting from a romantic and pastoral narrative to a more realistic model. In particular, issues as love, friendship and the quest for self-realisation are vividly discussed throughout the novel, through dialogic and realistic scenes from the daily life of the merchant class.

Keywords

Labibah Hášim – Qalb al-raǧul – Egyptian Nahḍah – Lebanese authors in modern Egypt – women's modern Arabic fiction
Introduction

The literary work by Labībah Hāšīm has been recently rediscovered, after the publication of her juvenile novel *Qalb al-raǧul* by two different Arab publishers.¹ This author needs to be contextualised in a double socio-cultural frame. First, she took part in the emerging feminist discourse, which constituted a crucial aspect of the Arab cultural renaissance between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. As is mentioned in the anthology *Opening the Gates* edited by Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke, Hāšīm was the founder of the women’s periodical *Fatāt al-šarq* (Young Eastern Woman, 1906) and secretary to Hudā Šaʿarāwī, founder and director of the Egyptian Feminist Union (1923). In her monography focused on *Fatāt al-šarq*, Ali Assir describes the impact of this periodical on collective intellectual activity, playing an important role in advocacy for reform and sustenance of women’s rights. In her project, Hāšīm would involve a large number of young women in the editorial work and would share an innovative vision of education throughout her editorials.² Secondly, Hāšīm’s activities as a writer and journalist need to be positioned within the intellectual circle revolving around the journal *al-Ḍiyāʾ* (1898–1906), where Hāšīm published a number of short stories and articles.³ This periodical was directed by the celebrated lexicographer — author of a renowned translation of the Bible —, Ibrāhīm al-Yāziǧī (1847–1906) who was also Hāšīm’s private preceptor.⁴ As largely shown by scholarly research,⁵ Syrians and Levantine intellectuals who relocated in Cairo as a reaction to the Ottoman suppression in the late Nineteenth century were key figures in the Arab Nahḍah. The propagation of the Arab Press, the renovation of literary genres and the linguistic innovation were enormously encouraged by authors such as Ǧurǧī Zaydān (1861–1914), Yaʿqūb Ṣarrūf (1852–1927) and Faraḥ Anṭūn (1874–1935) among others.

The novel that I analyse represents a significant contribution by a Lebanese intellectual, a woman and a Levantine migrant in Egypt, to the rise of the

¹ The edition used for this article is Hāšīm 2012, with an introduction by Sayyid al-Baḥrāwī. The translations from Arabic are mine. A previous edition, Hāšīm 1994 [1904], was introduced by Yumnà al-ʿĪd. I will refer to the first of these recent editions as the GEBO edition (2012), and to the second as the Dār al-Madā edition (1994).
³ Ibid.: 17.
⁴ Ibid.: 38.
riwāyah, or the Arab novel, a genre with which the story of the Nahḍah is closely entwined.6

A major point of interest of Qalb al-raġul is the content that the novel seeks to present to the educated, urban Cairene élite. The fictional story narrated by Hāšim is prompted by the traumatic events that occurred in Lebanon in 1860, only five decades before the year of publication of the novel. Some critics have wondered what the reasons were that led Hāšim to write a fictional story containing a reference to the violent clashes between religious communities in Lebanon. Badr, for instance, suggests that one reason was the desire to defame the Druze and to praise Lebanese Christians.7 Such a hypothesis, which is not even grounded on textual evidence (the novel, as I have already mentioned, was prompted by these events, although it is not only focused on this) shows us to what extent literary critics have overlooked the effective content of the novel.

Hāšim, as a pioneering woman in the intellectual life in multicultural Cairo in the early twentieth century, did not choose this theme to represent her own past, or to praise the community she belonged to, on the contrary, she constructed a fictional work inspired — initially — by the recent history of sectarianism, to talk to a modernised, urban and mercantile society and to address a social environment often damaged by hostility and acrimony between intellectuals of different political affiliation. As Baron notices in her book on gender politics and visual gender representation in Egypt, although the cultural scene allowed encounters in “neutral” contexts, the Egyptian nationalists on the one side and the Syrian supporters of Arab Nationalism, who opposed Ottoman rule, on the other, were not often on good terms.8

But what literary models and narrative strategies were available to the author to recount a fictional story set in a traumatic and recent past? If we exclude the historical novel, that was being produced at the time by authors such as Ġurği Zaydân, and which usually referred to a remote past,9 the two models from which inspiration could be taken were traditional Arab storytelling on the one hand, and the foreign form of novel, largely available at that time in ta‘rīb

6 The denomination of riwāyah at the origin means “a narrated story”, and was referred to the novel, the novella, the short story and drama (Hafez 1993: 110). The emerging of riwāyah as a genre in the Arab literary arena is a process intertwined with harsh debates about identity, language, and the need of social reform. See Selim (2004); Elsadda (2013): 38–58, Shalan (2002); Casini, Paniconi and Sorbera (2013): 33–241.
(Arabisation) or translation into the Egyptian context on the other hand. I will demonstrate how in her experimental intermingling of traditional *topoi* and new literary techniques and motifs, Hāšim, in many respects, anticipated the particular type of novel which emerged almost a decade after the publication of *Qalb al-raḡul*, the type Badr identified as *riwāyah fanniyyah* (artistic novel). As largely demonstrated by critics such as Samah Selim, Jeff Shalan and Hoda Elsadda, this kind of novel sought to portray local stories, characters and settings in a realistic style, where ‘realistic’ refers to the ideological adaptation of the novelistic narrative to ideas of national originality and national verisimilitude. In other words, the established, nation-oriented novel is a *subgenre* which arose at the intersection of a double discourse: an aesthetic search for realism, and the political project of a nation state. The contexts of marginality determined by both and her gender and status as an *émigrée*, in which Hāšim operated, determined the marginalisation of her work by Arab feminist critics and by the broader circles of literary criticism *tout-court*. As Yumnà al-ʿĪd stated in her introduction to the 1994 Dār al-Madā edition of the novel: “[Hāšim’s work] was not representative of the interests and ideas of the dominant intellectual *élite* that led the Nahḍah and imagined it in their own image, hence her marginalisation in the canon”.

In this perspective, the issue of “the first Arab novel written by a woman”, which has often concerned this novel and which in itself may seem superfluous, acquires its legitimacy: this primacy has been bestowed on different writers, from the Lebanese Zaynab Fawwāz (1860–1914) and to her novel published in 1899 *Ḥusn al-ʿawākib* and to Widād Sakākinī (1913–1991) and her *Arwà bint al-ḫuṭūb* published in 1949. These attempts to re-discover the “first” Arab women novelist are legitimate attempts to go outside the national, territorial paradigm and to reconsider the Arab novelistic tradition beyond the squarely ideological orthodoxy of certain texts. However, the aim of this article is not to determine whether *Qalb al-raḡul* can be labelled as the “first ‘modern’ novel written by a woman” in the Arab region. The aim of this article is to shed light on Hāšim’s contribution to the creation of the modern narrative form of the *riwāyah*. What kind of narratives has the writer employed to describe her trans-national and mercantile world and her own development? What are the elements in which she foresees an emerging taste for a realistic novel? And, on

13 Shalan (2002).
the other hand, how did she escape from the dominant normative modernism that started to discipline gender roles in the middle of the nineteenth century, maybe determining her own marginality within the context of an emerging, modern and national canon? In attempting to answer these questions I will trace a biography of the author and retrace, in the following paragraphs, the major themes of the novel with a focus on the dynamic portrayal of young characters, on gender identities and on the literary representation of gendered social roles, in the context of the cultural debate that animated the first part of twentieth century Egypt.

**The Novel and Author: a Changing Reception**

Critical recognition of the author over the past forty years has been varied and contradictory. On the one hand, there are handbooks and encyclopaedic works about Arabic literature that do not include an entry for Labībah Hāšim. On the other, her narrative capacity is praised by Brugman (who mention her as “the first author in Egypt to have published short stories with literary pretensions”) and by Moosa (“her narrative is natural and free of unnecessary moral instruction”) among others. In a previous work, Booth also highlights the original contribution offered by Hāšim to the Arab, and particularly Egyptian, modern narrative in prose, suggesting that *Al-inqilāb al-ʿUṯmānī* (The Ottoman coup d’etat, 1911) by Ġurğī Zaydān was inspired by Hāšim’s subsequent novel *Širīn* (1907), because both novels deal with an Armenian heroine and are set in the historical Sassanid Palace. As I have already mentioned, the recent double re-edition of Hāšim’s novel has shed new light on this forgotten author, who, in her fictional work, courageously introduced characters, ideas and values that where at the core of the debates about individual identity in colonial Arab modernity. The insightful analysis offered by Hoda Elsadda in the critical reference guide *Arab Women Writers* and Marilyn Booth in the *Oxford Handbook of Arab Novelistic Traditions* is a sign of a changing attitude, by critics and scholars, towards this Arab author, and it will hopefully guarantee visibility to a novel which, almost ten years before the famous rural novel *Zaynab*, by Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal (1913),

---

16 See for instance Meisami and Starkey (2010).
“crafts material and social betterment as hinged on emotional honesty” and encapsulates in its own structure the process of selection and transition which was internal to the genre.

Hāšim was an activist, a translator, a narrator and an intellectual interested in education, and she was fully aware of women’s aspirations and potentialities. She was born as Labībah Nāṣīf Māḍī in 1880, in the village of Kafr Šīmà. In her youth she moved to Cairo with her family, and studied Arabic literature with private tutors, mainly Ibrāhīm al-Yāziği, the son of Nāṣīf al-Yāziği. Labībah was friend of Ward al-Yāziği, Nāṣīf’s daughter, who was also a well-known pioneer of women’s literature. She married ‘Abduh Hāšim and took his family name. The year when she moved to Cairo is not certain: some sources indicate 1900, although we are sure that her collaboration with the Egyptian press had already started in 1896. She joined Cairo salons and met Arab intellectuals of different backgrounds, empowering herself in history, poetry, and literature and with a knowledge of French and English. She actively participated in the public cultural debate by writing for al-Hilāl (The Crescent) and al-Ṯurāyyā (The Pleiades) and in particular, she joined the important milieu of al-Ǧarīdah, the journal founded by Aḥmad Luṭfī al-Sayyid which saw the participation of Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal and Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, among others. In this journal Labībah published her poetry, while she also published short stories, such as Hasanāt al-ḥubb (The Good Aspects of Love) in which she appears to be sensitive to new global trends in literature and she shows originality in portraying gender roles.

In 1906, she established her own magazine in Cairo called Fatāt al-šarq (Girl of the East), a literary journal which continued to be published until 1939, when there was a temporary suspension in the years when Hāšim lived in Chile. Her journal was devoted to social criticism, to speculation about customs and traditions and to a variety of women’s rights. Hāšim was not only committed to animating public debates, she also adopted a policy of cooperation with other women who could be considered as highly innovative for the times. She involved girls as freelancers, editors, and typesetters in her office in Cairo. She would distribute the magazine free of charge to schools in Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon to encourage girls to read and write poetry, articles, and editorials.

22 For a discussion about Hāšim’s translations see Booth (2017): 140.
Hāšim’s magazine became popular among women left behind in their homes during World War I, when the region’s men were conscripted into the Ottoman Army. She wrote against the war and encouraged the widows of dead soldiers, and the wives and daughters of men serving in the Ottoman Army, to work and provide for their own livelihood.28

In 1911 she was invited to deliver some lectures at the Egyptian University in Cairo, being the first woman to do so. In October 1918, the emir Fayṣal appointed her school inspector for the Ministry of Education. Consequently, she had the rare opportunity of working with the minister and scholar Sāṭīʿ al-Ḥuṣarī (1882–1968), an important Syrian author, as well as an Arab nationalist and modern educator. In 1921, one year after the French occupied Syria, Labībah Hāšim moved to Latin America where she founded another newspaper, Šarq wa-Ǧarb (East and West), in Chile. Unfortunately, biographical details of her life in Chile have not become available until now.

Among her social commentary articles, the issue of Arab identity comes to the fore, along with the East-West confrontation. Apart from being the title of her periodical, the East-West dialectic is also evoked, for instance, in an article by Bāḥiṯat al-Bādiyah that Hāšim includes in an issue of Fatāt al-šarq29 that have been collected into a book entitled Kitāb fi l-tarbīyah (The Book on Education). The topics she deals with include: the education of parents (chap. 1), the importance of breastfeeding (chap. 3), the importance of a good diet for children, the importance of a literary education (chap. 4) in the creation of personal taste, and the importance of reading in the apprenticeship process (chap. 9).30 In these texts Labībah Hāšim expresses herself as a well-informed woman who was open to the new approaches of childcare from early infancy. Recent studies have been devoted to her fictional short stories,31 which have never been collected and are still scattered in periodicals. Her novels include Qalb al-raǧul, which was serialised into Fatāt al-šarq, and eventually published in 1904, and Šīrīn (1907).

30 The edition of Kitāb fi l-tarbīyah that was consulted for this article is Hāšim 2012 [1904].
31 Hayek (2013).
The Plot of *Qalb al-raġul*

The novel revolves around a group of characters: the two young friends Marie and Rose, their respective fathers Ḥabīb Naṣr Allāh and Yūsuf Rafā‘īl, Marie's brother Farīd and ʿAzīz, who is the central character of the narrative, and who at the end of the story turns out to be the lost son of Ḥabīb. As two generation of Lebanese migrants are involved, the story spans at least a quarter of century. At the core of the novel there is the unhappy romance between Rose and ʿAzīz and, subsequently, the unveiling of ʿAzīz's true origins and the revelation of the true nature of his relationship with Marie. The novel opens with the love story between Ḥabīb (Marie's father) and his first wife Fātinah, a Druze girl who disappears tragically in a sectarian strife, soon after her marriage with Ḥabīb. The context is carefully evoked at the beginning of the novel, and at the same time the author chooses to address her readership using the rhetorical technique of preterition, as if they are already aware of these events:

> We might not add to the reader’s knowledge of the sectarian strife that occurred in Mount Lebanon in 1860, or of the ghastly massacres and the shedding of innocent blood that forced most Christians to flee from this world and disperse to the ends of the earth.33

It is interesting to note that this rhetorical technique, which consists of mentioning something by claiming to omit it, is typical of historical novels and has the precise purpose of setting the plot in its chronological context (the events occur after 1860), and in this case to talk about the fate of the displaced people involved in the sectarian conflict in the areas of Dayr al-Qamar and Bayt al-Dīn. The plot unfolds between Beirut, Egypt and France (Marseille). The novel can be divided up into four main parts: the first traces the story of the encounter and love between Ḥabīb and Fātinah, set against the historical background of the massacres of 1860. Fātinah is Christian, but she is adopted and treated like a daughter by the Druze Junblat family. She is portrayed as a free girl who meets Ḥabīb, a Christian merchant apprentice, during a horse ride.34 Ḥabīb falls in love with her and he is explicitly portrayed as Mağnūn, referring to the “Laylā and Mağnūn” legend, until he is imprisoned by the armies

---

32 All the names are reported in transliteration with the exception of “Rose” and “Marie”, to prevent misunderstanding of a transliteration as, for instance, the name “Rūzh” (Rose) by non-arabophone readers.


34  Ibid.: 21–23.
of Fātinah’s father. Displaying a mettle that clearly evokes both the heroines of the Arab popular sūrah and those of a western feuilleton, Fātinah succeeds in releasing him from prison. The two youths marry in secret, but they are separated in an armed attack, Fātinah is kidnapped and Ḥabīb believes that she has been killed. Only at the end of the story does the reader discover, along with Ḥabīb, that she survived and that she has given birth to Ḥabīb’s son, ‘Azīz. Ḥabīb mourns the loss of his wife for many months, until he meets Salmà, the daughter of a friend, and with her conceives Marie and Farid.

The second part focuses on the friendship between Ḥabīb’s daughter Marie and her sophisticated comrade Rose. The story moves on to describe the encounter and the relationship between ‘Azīz and Rose, with whom he makes acquaintance in a journey, and in a context largely related to business meetings between merchants who go to France and England to buy goods and to invest.35 After this encounter, ‘Azīz — who in the end abandons his project and ventures into trade — becomes Rose’s father Rafā’il’s helper and right-hand man. Eager to become a merchant himself and to possess his own capital, ‘Azīz betrays his benefactor, by taking money from him, with the intention of investing it and returning it later.36 Once his crime appears in the newspapers, ‘Azīz confesses to his misdeed and begs Rafā’il to kill him, to save him from scandal.37 Rafā’il writes a letter of dismissal to him, while Rose, in shock, tries to justify him and to take the blame, trying to convince her father (“he wanted to become like you and to enter the family by marrying me”). She even goes so far as to imagine a future in a convent, to expiate her faults in order to protect him.38

The third part is focused on the relationship between ‘Azīz and Ḥabīb (the character at the “origin” of the story) and his daughter Marie. Ḥabīb treats ‘Azīz generously, and the youth takes on an official engagement with Marie,39 while Farid (the son of Ḥabīb) declares his love to Rose, in a scene full of tension and psychological detail.40

The last part includes the two chapters entitled “kašf al-ġiṭā’” (the fall of the curtain)41 and “ẓuhūr al-ḥaqīqah” (the revelation of the truth),42 where the reader discovers, along with the characters, that ‘Azīz is actually the lost

---

37 Ibid.: 90.
38 Ibid.: 96.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.: 139.
42 Ibid.: 147.
son that Ḥabīb had with Fātinah.43 One night, ʿAzīz is attacked and wounded under his friend's — the merchant Ḥabīb — house, where he goes every day. ʿAzīz is rescued by his friend, the merchant Ḥabīb, and his servants. While lying unconscious, his rescuers find a chain around his neck with a small locket containing a portrait of a young man. Ḥabīb, who owns the same chain — a gift from Fātinah — recognizes the portrait, which is of him.

He is therefore able to recognize ʿAzīz as his lost son, and he also discovers the truth about his first Druze wife, who survived the kidnapping and only died later as a result of a disease. Here, Hāšim employs the mechanism of theatrical recognition,44 when a character discovers the reality of his situation and when the appearance of the world reveals its nature of ġiṭāʾ (curtain), as in the title of the chapter. During his unconscious convalescence ʿAzīz is often heard repeating Rose's name, as a symptom of his deep and unforgotten love for her. After the recognition, the young man's position changes again; he enters Ḥabīb's family as a legitimate son, becomes Marie's brother, while his beloved Rose is entrusted by her dying father to Fārid, on his deathbed.45 As was the case with ʿAzīz's betrayal, his recognition works, as I will show later, on both emotional and socio-economic levels.

From Pastoral Tune to Mercantile Context

Several critics have highlighted how Hāšim's juvenile novel had a sound impact on readership and on the circulation of literary models.46 The novel can be read as the embodiment of a changing attitude in the technique of prose composition, and its un-homogeneous structure mirrors the shift from a narrative and pastoral mode to a more introspective and urban-based narrative.

As al-Baḥrāwī states in his introduction to the GEBO (2012) edition: “the narration tends to condense long periods of time in few passages, the chronicle of the events prevails over the descriptions while at the same time there is an approach to the realistic style of the novel with full psychological details of the

43  The girl announced her pregnancy to her husband earlier in the story (Ibid.: 39).
44  This narrative and theatrical device takes its origin from ancient theatre and becomes common in romances or in adventure novels. The mechanism of recognition, however, which is preannounced in the title of the chapter, evokes a range of models, such as Shakespeare, while authors like Dumas are present in the scenes portraying the imprisonment of Ḥabīb by Fātinah's Druze step-father.
characters”.47 Al-Bahrwī’s consideration picks up on some key elements of this experimental novel: in Qalb al-raǧul where some devices from Arab traditional storytelling, such as manipulation of the time-line, suspense and authorial intrusions are intermingled with a more “realistic” narrative, in other words the set of aesthetic criteria employed for the formation of a nation-centered type of novel. In particular, a narrative that is more influenced by storytelling prevails in the first five chapters, dedicated to the romance between Ḥabīb and Fātinah, while the rest of the novel displays the narrative techniques which are typical of the sensation novel, with a love plot structured around a group of characters between whom relations of friendship and love intersect. The encounter between Ḥabīb and Fātinah is set in a premodern and rural land, traversed by violence, where conflicts and kidnappings are happening in the light of the day and where the only shelter is offered by nature or ancient monastic buildings.

The setting also changes dramatically after the fifth chapter. The reader is projected into a cosmopolitan, mercantile context, where trains and steamboats are the setting for meetings and juvenile experiences. In parallel with this shift, the narrative techniques the author adopts also change, and start to structure their own narrative on the idea of mimesis. Therefore, it is the crafting of the setting (interiors, means of locomotion, places of public entertainment), characters and plot to be entrusted to reproduce reality “as it is”.

On the other hand, the acceptance of the new social function of the very act of telling a story is taking place: authorial intrusions are limited and dialogues are extended, giving “psychological depth and realistic portrayal”48 to the protagonists. Developing Lucáks’s interpretation of novel writing, Bernstein presents the act of writing novels as a “rule-governed activity; the constitutive rules of that practice are what give the novel its specificity as a genre.”49 Hāšim’s “tuning” her writing to a new model of narrative — the western love story and the sensation fiction — starting from the fifth chapter (when the story of the second generation starts) stands out as an example of this Lucàksian dimension of novel writing as a “rule-governed” activity. The author makes a self-conscious passage from one genre to another, and therefore accepting new social rules that replace the old ones.

Here, by offering textual examples, I will analyse the two principle characters of the four young people underpinning Hashim’s narrative: Rose

and ʿAzīz, highlighting how both share two elements that ten years later would become the trademark of the standard, nation-centred riwāyah fanniyyah (artistic novel), as defined by Muḥṣin Ṭāhā Badr. The “form” of a youth’s life, would both represent and inform the development of the standard Egyptian novel: the experiences of a young character would be the privileged territory of exploration for a genre which was claiming for itself the social function of national grand narrative. In the interaction between Rose and ʿAzīz there is not only a mimetic representation, but also an original mise en forme of the ongoing discussion about gender roles in society, with explicit reference to women, but with an often-implicit assumption of a standard and normalising masculinity. In other words, Hāšīn’s narrative shows itself not only to be a prototype of modern subjectivities, but also articulates two examples of gendered subjectivities in mutual redefinition, whose interaction allegorises the struggle with traditional values on the one hand, and with normative model of urbanised and westernised modernity on the other.

Physical and Social Mobility

Rose and ʿAzīz meet in a train compartment, during a business trip. Rose is travelling with her father Rafāʿīl. As noted by the Italian comparatist Remo Ceserani, a full range of characters, interactions and novelistic situations has been created by western authors by exploiting the fictional space of a moving train compartment, where a temporally determined and forced cohabitation by strangers allows the author to exploit a narrative situation at its best. Authors such as Maupassant, for instance, became famous for inventing a novelistic sub-genre based on encounters and situations on a train journey.

For Hāšīn, as for Maupassant, the train compartments represent an insular space, where gender relationships and mutual redefinition can develop outside the realm of social observation and pressure. The author portrays a young, urbanised woman who talks freely with a man, giving him advice on his future. The entire dialogue is from a clear feminine perspective:

---

51 As Jacob explains, a vast range of elements were indeed involved in the public construction of modern masculinity in Egypt, from the institutional level, to dress code, and to the communicative and discursive level. See Jacob (2014).
[...] I had the fortune to encounter a trader who was working with France and England and I worked with him for a while, but it is now better for me to seek other employment for the future.

I hope that you will meet him in Egypt where trade is developing and where purchasing habits in government circles open doors precisely to people like you.

That is exactly what I mean. I read in one journal that there is an agreement regarding the need for translators to accompany Gordon Pasha’s military expedition to Sudan. I thus quit my employment and I am going to Egypt to try to obtain the position.

Are you not afraid of embarking upon this path?

The hope of succeeding quashes my fear and if my destiny is death, that could well happen for many reasons. It would be disgraceful to live like a pauper, while the path of success and progress is open for me.54

ʿAzīz and Rose reveal two different positions in term of politics and identity: faced with the imperial dream wished by the man, underpinned by a sense of honour and political prestige, the woman expresses a liberal and non-militaristic choice. Bearing in mind the opinions expressed by the author in Fatāt al-šarq55 against war or any form of military aggression, I assume that, in this dialogue, Rose’s attitude mirrors that of the author herself.

Besides his travelling by steamboat, ʿAzīz’s mobility is largely expressed in his regular visits to Rafāʿīl’s house.56 ʿAzīz’s physical mobility allegorises his quest for a position amidst the social, political and economic system of colonial modernity in Egypt, the country where he maybe still perceives himself as a foreigner. His anxiety about the necessity to obtain capital to enter this dimension and gain economic independence is often evoked in his relationships with both Rose and Marie (who he eventually discovers to be his sisters):

At the table, Yūsuf, ʿAzīz and Rose sit in silence. Everyone thinks about his own affairs: Yūsuf thinks about his profits, ʿAzīz secretly seeks a way to increase his money, and Rose tries to understand the causes that have produced some changes in ʿAzīz’s behaviour. Silence reigns over them and nothing but the sound of cutlery could be heard.57

54 Hāšim (2012 [1904]): 62.
57 Hāšim (2012 [1904]): 79.
This scene evokes a similar passage in *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* by Goethe, which was published in 1809 and translated in English 1810 and in French in 1854. Hāšim may have known the French or the English translations of this novel, as she was well versed in both. While the work of al-Zayyāt (the translator of *Werthers Leiden* by Goethe) has been analysed in terms of linguistic and aesthetic impact on the Arab literary scene, the influence exercised by the sensibility for romantic love and the emphasis on human emotions — perceived as predominant in human life and death — which characterises Goethe's novels have needs further discussion in literary criticism. al-Zayyāt's introductory note to his celebrated Arabisation (*ta’rīb*) from the French of the *Werters Leiden* (1929) addresses to Egyptian youth and explains how the revolutions of the emotions (*tawrat al-qulūb*) represented in the Goethian text is as a prefiguration of the people's revolution (*tawrat al-šuʿūb*). It is noteworthy to see that in *qalb al-raǧul*, a text written twenty-five years before the Goethian Arabisation, the scenes of dialogue seem to be inspired by such a romantic aesthetics, and to discover that emotional reactions of Rose evoke several female characters in the European novel.

The “change” in ‘Azīz’s behaviour captured by Rose is a sign which indicates the double nature of ‘Azīz’s love, which, in romantic terms, is both a search and an attraction for the woman, but also a search for self-identification as a businessman. Once ‘Aziz betrays his master’s trust, all possibility of continuing this love vanishes. In the architecture of the text, ‘Azīz’s crime, and even more Rose’s illness which follows the crime, function as a spy for the illegitimate nature of this love. As Wen Chin Ouyang convincingly argues in her study on the trope of love in Arabic literary tradition, love is primarily linked to the legitimacy of power, both in pre-modern and modern Arabic literature. Love stories and gendered desire have underpinned classical poetry and narrative in prose as well. Love is often featured as mediation for resetting the mechanism of power and socio-political legitimacy: for this reason, the “infamous” crime committed by ‘Azīz of appropriating the capital — necessary to start a business — from Rafā‘īl, who had welcomed ‘Azīz as a son (the real link of kinship that binds them is unknown to both and is only discovered by chance at the end) has a double scope, according to both the traditional and the modern literary codes. It is not only a betrayal of the mentor, but also a moral

betrayal that undermines the relationship of love. The moral “punishment” (al-Baḥrāwī speaks of ʿiqāb al-qadarī, a punishment of destiny)\(^{62}\) of character is symbolically entrusted to Rose’s emotional reaction to ʿAzīz’s disloyalty: when she sees the name of her beloved printed in clear letters in the daily news and accused of theft, she cannot bear the reality and she falls unconscious.

### Psychological Portraits and Gender Definition

Among the four protagonists, Rose and ʿAzīz are the characters who are subjected to the most sophisticated psychological analysis and they are two realistically portrayed personas, according to the emerging aesthetic of realistic literature.\(^{63}\) Although not squarely part of a national framework, the geographical, social and psychological mobility of ʿAzīz anticipates the young characters whose dynamic presence underpins several national narratives: from Zaynab (2013) by Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal to Qindīl Umm Hāšim by Yaḥyā Ḥaqqī.

As for Rose, she is portrayed as “modern Arab woman” who, in terms of social abilities and aesthetics, perfectly corresponds to the idea of modernized femininity that underpins the redefinition of identity, in terms of gender roles and politics.\(^{64}\) Rose is an emotional character who enjoys the freedom of travelling with her father, entertaining conversation about the family business, participating in social life and playing the piano while singing to entertain her father’s hosts. As is apparent in the dialogue quoted above, it is Rose who “leads” the young man into the realm of mercantile life: firstly, by dissuading him from the ideal of becoming embedded in a colonial mission, and by introducing him to the guidance of her father Rafāʿīl.

As for the character of ʿAzīz, the colonial and military trope here allegorises ʿAzīz’s desire to belong to a collective project: the theme of Gordon’s Pasha’s campaign in Sudan indeed unites the quest for social legitimation with the desire to put himself to the test, as a sort of ostentation of masculinity. At the same time, ʿAzīz is extremely self-aware of his subaltern position toward Rose (“you are too high up for me to look at you”).\(^{65}\) In both the relationships, with Rose before and with Marie later, ʿAzīz appears more motivated by a thirst for


\(^{63}\) Paniconi (2013).

\(^{64}\) Elsadda (2012): 9–37. In the last section of the 1st chapter, Elsadda discusses also the impact that the novel Qalb al-raḡul played on the ongoing debate about gender roles (36–37).

\(^{65}\) Hāšim (2012 [1904]): 70.
social legitimacy than by love in itself, and in this he embodies a model that is opposed to Ḥabīb (who eventually turns out to be his father), who was the hero of a romance set in a rural atmosphere.

ʿAzīz, having displayed ethically undignified conduct — by stealing money from Rafāʾīl who had treated him like a son, to obtain capital — will finally be served with a “punishment of destiny”, that of the renunciation of marriage. In other words, in the case of ʿAzīz, it is the final statement and the discovery of him being Ḥabīb’s son that brings him social recognition, but not marriage, whose legitimising effect ʿAzīz shows himself not to be worthy of.

Marriage and Social Morality

In 1899, Ḥāšim published “Ḥasanāt al-ḥubb” (The Good Aspects of Love), a short story inspired by the European “sensation fiction” trend which also portrays different kinds of heteronormative femininity. Here, the author plays with the change of dress-code and creatively appropriates the discourse on the veil, counselling society to be careful not to judge by appearances. Unlike the short story, the novel under discussion includes a realistic social reflection on the institution of marriage. The narrative tool that the author employs for this purpose is a series of dialogues between the protagonists, which are echoes of the current social debate about marriage. In particular, Rose’s father, Rafāʾīl, perorates about his deathbed marriage as a more secure basis for a family than love, before entrusting his daughter to the protection of Farīd (“Dear daughter, do not think that the happiness of marriage is completed only where there is love and passion”). In other words, true marital love can be built on the basis of respect and economic accord: Rafāʾīl’s words represent an accredited sector of popular opinion, and these opinions are echoed in some editorials by Ḥāšim herself.

In the next conversation ʿAzīz and Rose once again discuss joining Gordon Pasha’s expedition to Sudan. The setting is the luminous garden of Rafāʾīl’s (Rose’s father) villa, a sort of domesticated corner of nature where Rose plays her instruments, reads periodicals or has a free conversation with a friend, without being heard. The title of the chapter is: “Al-ḥubb ʿawl mā yakūn maǧǧānatan fa-iḏā tamakkana šāra šuğlan šāġilan” (When it starts, love is fun,

---

67 Ibid.: 261.
when it consolidates it entirely occupies our mind)\textsuperscript{70} and is inspired by a line of
the ʿAbbasid princess ʿUlayyah bint al-Mahdi (777–825). The dialogue between
Farīd and Rose, from which I quote only a short excerpt, is a rare example
of literary transposition of juvenile feelings in the early Arabic novel, and
reminds the reader a scene inspired by the Goethian aesthetics and translated
in a Cairene, yet transnational context:

– Welcome sir. Since our return we have not stopped talking about
your amiability. [...] Are you still determined to leave?
– Yes, my lady. I am sorry, I have no option but to make this choice,
happiness and wealth depend on this trip! After I left France, I hesitated,
and I was tempted to give it up. In the end, however, I decided to accept
whatever consequences it may bring.
– Surely you have foreseen all the dangers that this entails ...
– I am not afraid of danger and death if these are the price of progress
and an honourable life.
– And is there anything dearer to man than life itself?
– Life has no value without happiness and without the stars of hope
shining in the sky. [...] 
– Thank God you are young, beautiful and principled. What brings you
to such despair? [...] Please renounce the dangers of this expedition,
renounce this mission, which is nothing but a refuge for men with little to
offer, who see no progress in their condition and prefer to be subservient
rather than independent.\textsuperscript{71}

The dialogues act as a mirror to show a new idea of interaction between the
sexes: after expressing her words against verbal violence in marital relations,\textsuperscript{72}
she shows how women can express their feelings freely and have the ability
independently to start or interrupt and commitment. Once the romance
between Rose and ʿAzīz fails, and having understood his new infatuation for
Marie, Rose does not hesitate to write her own letter to him, containing only
the words: "you are free".\textsuperscript{73}

Hāšim’s women are, therefore, free minded and fully rounded characters,
whether they are inspired by popular literature, like Fātinah, or they are
inspired by European novels like Rose. I would also like to emphasise the
underground dialogue between the author’s activity as a journalist and fervent

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{70}] Hāšim (2012 [1904]): 136.
\item[\textsuperscript{71}] Ibid.: 67–68.
\item[\textsuperscript{72}] Ali (2010): 43–49.
\item[\textsuperscript{73}] Hāšim (2012 [1904]): 103.
\end{itemize}
advocate of modern education, and the ideas expressed in her novel by the fictional characters who call into play the ideas expressed in Fatât al-šarq on women, married life and social customs.

Just as Goethe’s Elective Affinities proposes a reflection on the feeling of love and on the institution of marriage on the basis of a “scientific” paradigm of laws, of reaction, composition and repulsion among the elements of nature, so Qalb al-rağul proposes a reflection on marriage in a “mercantile” society, where marriage also maintains the aura of a social and economic contract. Ḥābib and his sons on the one hand, Rafā’il and his daughter on the other, are not only family groups, but they also represent two family-run business. Among the characters, as I have shown, Ḥābib’s secret son, ‘Azīz, embodies the difficulties of social recognition. He not only expresses through his teleology the quest of an economic/social position in the world, but he also becomes the witness of a morality which needs to be pursued both in business and social relationships.

Qalb al-rağul non only portrays the discursive world of Cairene society at the turn of the new century, but it also constituted a subject of discussion amongst the cultural élite: the impact that this novel, in which Hāšim consciously assumes the trope of love as social legitimacy, indeed is still visible in the review that Hannà Afandī Sarkīs wrote about it. As a response to Hāšim’s novel, Sarkīs publicly encouraged men to write, about “a woman’s heart, and then we shall see which of the two hearts is more inconsistent”. The author goes on, affirming that “a man, even if it is in his character to be mean, will be dignified by his soul, which will elevate him beyond the depth of reproach. As for a woman, she does not have the same morality of the soul, but is swayed by the factors of contempt and revenge”. It is curious to note that such a comment was formulated about a novel featuring the loyalty of a girl towards a man and the full betrayal (from personal, emotive and economic points of view) of ‘Azīz. According to Sarkīs, however, Rose is “only the exception that confirms the rule”.

Conclusions

In this article I have explored the novel Qalb al-rağul by Labibah Hāšim in its aspect of congruity and difference vis-à-vis the emerging “realistic” approach. In its eclectic approach to narrative models, this piece of literary work represents a fertile ground to reconstruct the cultural debate and literary models circulating during the late transnational Arab nahḍah in Egypt. It also

---

gives the reader the opportunity to explore more closely the process of crafting a 'modern novel' imbued with social debates. In its dynamic representation of pre-marital friendship and love between young émigrés, the novel shows the pressures and the risks hidden in a society where economic position, social definition, and even personal recognition and evaluation may be susceptible to mercantile logic. Despite her marginalisation by both the nationalist literary canon and the feminist discourse (Egyptian), and although Hāšim’s narrative has even been defined as “limited” by her own historical time, the author represents a striking example of the adaptability and the porosity of the novel as a genre vis-à-vis the world, the institutions and the economic conditions of society.

Often defined as a romance, Qalb al-raǧul does not deal with the trope of love as an accessory ingredient, but as a tool to question the boundaries in society, from sectarian, social and gendered points of view. The institution of marriage is debated in a small number of powerful dialogical scenes, where a new set of social and economic roles is laid out and where economic recognition and self-realization may pass through feminine presence, just as in the premodern institution of marriage. By placing the “heart of a man” at the centre of its narrative and identifying this “man” in that future businessman (ʿAzīz) Hāšim, a first in the Arab novelistic history, this novel tries to encourage a discussion about the essence of gender identity, while in other canonical narrations the modern, male, westernised and dynamic effendi, is assumed to be the “neutral” backdrop to build a cultural and social modernity.

Bibliography

Primary Sources


76 Moreno (1964): 159.
Secondary Sources

Baron, Beth (2005). Egypt as a Woman. Nationalism, Gender and Politics. Cairo, American University in Cairo Press.


