

EGYPTIAN FICTION AND ARABIC LITERARY TRADITION*

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It is a truth generally acknowledged that the modern Arabic prose genres, novel, novella and short story, were borrowed from European literature. To support this view scholars have been able to establish affiliations between works of fiction in Arabic and European models, models which the authors concerned have sometimes explicitly mentioned as influencing them. A dissenting view, however, is put forward by a few Arab critics who maintain that earlier Arabic literature also contains novels, and that the real origins of modern Arabic fiction are to be found in the élite and popular literary heritage.¹

I do not believe that this dissenting view is tenable, if only because it ignores both the characteristics of what is understood to be a novel and the statements of so many writers about what has influenced them. But it has the merit of pointing to a one-sidedness in the study of Arabic fiction written before the mid-sixties, namely the implicit assumption that early Arab novelists and short story writers should have broken completely with their own literary traditions.

In this paper I shall look at the relationship between the indigenous literary heritage and Egyptian fiction. I have limited myself to Egypt because its literature is the one I know best. I hesitate to generalise from Egyptian literature to that of the Arab world at large, given that developments in different Arab countries do not follow an exactly

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¹ An example of this argument can be found in: Faṭḥī Salāma, *Tatawwur al-fikr al-iḡtimā'ī fī r-riwāya al-'arabiyya*, Cairo 1980, pp. 21-47, where the ambiguity of the term "riwāya" is exploited. Cf. the discussion in: Roger Allen, *The Arabic Novel. An historical and critical introduction*, Manchester 1982, pp. 15-18.

parallel course; my remarks may be valid for fiction in other parts of the Arab world, but only detailed studies can show if this is the case.

When speaking of the Arabic literary tradition I mean the language itself and the inherited body of forms, conventions, themes and devices available to a writer using the language. The issue is complicated here in two respects. First, there are in fact two traditions, one élite and literary in the strict sense, i.e. produced in a literate culture, for literates, and the other an oral folk tradition.² The élite tradition of literature has been studied far more intensively than the oral tradition, and it may well be that I have underestimated the importance of the oral tradition because of my own ignorance of it. In the second place, literary tradition is not static, but is continuously being added to by each new generation of writers. It is now possible to discern an indigenous Egyptian tradition in fiction, with a history of some hundred years behind it, and I have therefore devoted the second part of this paper to this recent phenomenon and its relation to specific novels.

Although it would be fruitful to consider earlier Egyptian novels in the light of the Arabic literary tradition, for reasons of space I start with *Zaynab* (1913). This novel has rightly been regarded as dealing with crucial issues of contemporary Egyptian culture and society, and its author's debt to French and English literature, and especially to Rousseau's novels, has already been noted. Yet I believe that it also reveals a twofold debt to the Arabic heritage. In the first place, the meetings between the landowner's son Hāmid, who is the hero, and his cousin 'Azīza, whom he played with as a child and believes he is in love with, take the reader back a thousand years to the world of courtly *gāzal*, as we know it from 'Abbās b. al-Aḥnaf's poetry. This is the world of the *raqīb*, the vigilant watcher, of secrets which even a glance could betray, of the torment of being in the beloved's presence yet

² Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word*, London and New York repr. 1985, pp. 10-15. But in the absence of English equivalents for the terms "Dichtung" and "Wortkunst", which are free from associations with writing, it seems impossible entirely to dispense with the expression "oral literature".

unable to speak to her, of the *ḥayāl*, the beloved's image which visits the lover at night.³ Given that the conventions which govern the relation between Ḥāmid and his cousin have not moved with the times it is appropriate that Haykal should have drawn on an age-old literary register in this part of his novel.

Haykal's second debt to the literary heritage is in the area of plot. It has recently been established that Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse* and *Émile* exerted a marked influence on the writing of *Zaynab*,⁴ but as far as *Zaynab* the *fallāḥa*'s plot is concerned the efforts to establish a derivation from Rousseau overlook some basic differences. The real parallel *Zaynab*'s plot offers is to the traditional Arabic stories of 'Uḍrī lovers, slightly altered in detail to fit into Egyptian village life. *Zaynab*, the peasant girl, has fallen in love with Ibrāhīm, the overseer, but she is married off to another man, the wealthy farmer's son Ḥasan. *Zaynab* and Ibrāhīm continue to see each other, but their relationship remains unshakeably chaste. *Zaynab* is torn between her love and her duty, and when Ibrāhīm is called up for military service she goes into a decline and dies. The modification which Haykal has introduced here is to tell an 'Uḍrī plot with an eye to the heroine's experiences rather than the hero's, but it is still an 'Uḍrī plot, as is indicated by the almost asexual⁵ nature of the couple's love. Called upon to weave a plot round a *fallāḥa*, Haykal not surprisingly turned to the Arabic heritage. And interestingly the combination of traditional and modern plots which *Zaynab* offers has been identified as a hallmark of a period of literary transition.⁶

³ Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal, *Zaynab*, repr. Cairo 1963, pp. 99-101, 191, 194.

⁴ Ali B. Jad, *Form and Technique in the Egyptian novel 1912-1971*, London 1983, pp. 58-63.

⁵ The term is Jad's, *op. cit.* p. 60.

⁶ René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 3rd ed., repr. Harmondsworth, Middlesex 1973, p. 217.

Another example of recourse to the classical Arabic tradition is, I believe, to be found in al-Māzinī's *Ibrāhīm al-kātib* (1931). Here it is a matter of a probably unconscious attitude. The three love affairs in which the main character, Ibrāhīm, becomes involved all end with him breaking off the relationship, or else with the girl breaking it off in a way which proves her unworthiness of him. To the reader expecting a modicum of psychological realism this cannot but appear unconvincing, and he will probably be left with the final unsatisfactory impression of a book in which the author, who is in this case his hero's *alter ego*, is seeking to make up for his disappointments in real life by projecting a series of self-gratifying scenes of success with women. But supposing al-Māzinī's attitude were akin to that of the classical poet out to glorify his own achievements and vaunt his prowess? In other words, should this book not be regarded as, amongst other things, a unique example of a novel of *fahṛ*?

As well as these few examples of borrowings in plot, motifs and attitude there are numerous cases of stylistic echoes, sometimes even including rhymed prose, in early Egyptian novels and short stories. In this pioneer period the recourse to the élite literary heritage may well have been an unconscious reflex on the part of writers whose early reading must to a considerable extent have consisted of classical Arabic texts.⁷

The conscious exploitation of the Arabic heritage in the writing of novels or short stories (apart from historical novels) seems to start with that independent and original artist, Yaḥyā Ḥaqqī. Ḥaqqī appreciated the value of the oral tradition and realised its possibilities for enriching the developing genre of Egyptian fiction. In his story *Qissa fī s-siġn* (1931), in which a young peasant falls passionately in love with a gypsy

⁷ The Taymūr brothers and Yaḥyā Ḥaqqī grew up in families with a love of classical Arabic literature. Al-Māzinī studied at Dār al-ʿUlūm, where teachers of Arabic for state schools were trained. Ḥaqqī's contemporary, Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm, however, whose family had no particular literary interests, preferred to read adventure stories as a boy. (Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm, *Siġn al-umr*, Cairo n.d., p. 106) In this he resembles later writers such as Maḥfūz.

girl, only to discover that his conventional nature and her lawlessness are incompatible, it is a verse of a *mawwāl* which puts the girl's dissatisfaction into words and sparks off her flight back to her people, and another *mawwāl*, quoted by a listener, which concludes the story.⁸ A later story, *Umm al-ʿawāğiz* (1947), is more essentially indebted to the oral tradition, since its mode of narration apparently reflects that of the story-teller. This story starts with a first-person narrator invoking God and then explaining what his story will be about.⁹ The narrator frequently uses emotive expressions and dramatises important moments in the story, and he goes so far as to relate scenes which he could not possibly have witnessed in his role as a minor actor or been told of by any other character. His presence and his attitude are pervasive; the reader is confronted here with a narrative situation very different from that usually to be found in contemporary Western literature. It is not unreasonable to assume that Ḥaqqī is employing throughout the story the conventions of the oral narrator which explicitly set the tone at the beginning; until more research is done into narrative techniques in the oral tradition this must, however, remain a hypothesis.

Yūsuf Idrīs, an author of the next generation, admits an explicit debt to the Egyptian oral narrative, both the story proper, the *ḥaddūta*, and the joke; the *nukta*, and in his early stories and his novel *al-Ḥarām* their influence can sometimes be felt in choice of theme and technique.¹⁰ But it is his contemporary ʿAbdarrahmān aš-Šarqāwī whose novel *al-Ard* (1954) exhibits the greatest concentration of features

⁸ Yahyā Ḥaqqī, *Dimā' wa-tīn* (*Mu'allafāt Yahyā Ḥaqqī: al-qiṣaṣ* 3), Cairo 1979, pp. 93, 99.

⁹ Idem, *Umm al-ʿawāğiz* (*Mu'allafāt Yahyā Ḥaqqī: al-qiṣaṣ* 4), Cairo 1984, 6. Cf. the examples of openings of oral narrative performances in: Bridget Connelly, *Arab Folk Epic and Identity*, Berkeley, Los Angeles & London 1986, pp. 88-101.

¹⁰ In interviews and lectures he has repeatedly spoken of his efforts to create an authentically Egyptian variety of fiction (and drama). How difficult it can be to discover exactly what he means by this is discussed in: Albert Jan van Hoek, *al-ḥarām: Drie Verkenningen*, unpublished *doctoraal-scriptie* (= M.A. thesis), Nijmegen 1988, pp. 83-84.

associated with oral tradition. Instability of the text,¹¹ concentration on external events with a high proportion of conflictual situations,¹² episodic structure,¹³ repetitions: all these characteristics of oral narratives are to be found in this novel, which has generally attracted unfavourable critical comment for weaknesses of plot and inconsistencies of characterisation as well as for its ideological *parti pris*. This last certainly detracts from the effect of the work, but the other offences against the canons of novel-writing are by no means faults in a context of oral narrative. The fact that *al-Ard* achieved an immediate and immense popularity¹⁴ may have been due not only to its theme, the peasants' struggle against injustice, its celebration of Egyptian village life and its faithful rendering of the colourful and violent idiom of the fellahin but also to its manifold links with the folk epic tradition.

From the 1950's on the Egyptian tradition of oral narrative is one of the recognised sources available to short story writers and novelists. In Yahyā at-Tāhir 'Abdallāh's novel *at-Tawq wa-l-aswira* (1975), a far more sophisticated book than *al-Ard*, the loss of Palestine and establishment of the state of Israel are presented in fairy-tale form with stock characters, while the Upper Egyptian village in which most of the action is set is frequently visited by miraculous happenings. Certain stylistic traits, such as the repetition of formulaic phrases to mark the passage of time, are clearly borrowed from oral tradition.

¹¹ Between the first (1954) and third (1968) "editions" (*ṭabʿa*) *al-Ard* has evidently undergone a thoroughgoing stylistic revision, and one of its chapters has been divided to two. There is nothing in the third edition to indicate that it differs from the first one, and is thus more than a simple reprint, and a comparison of all the impressions would be needed to show how many versions of the text are extant. In such cases the ambiguity of the term *ṭabʿa* ("impression", "reprint", "edition") becomes evident.

¹² Ong, *op. cit.*, pp. 43-45.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 143-144. Cf. the example in Connelly, *op. cit.*, pp. 75-79.

¹⁴ It was reprinted the year of its appearance in book form (Naguib Baladī in *MIDEO*, 2 (1955), p. 307) and also frequently in subsequent years (V. N. Kirpichenko, *Sovremennaya egipetskaya proza 60-70e gody*, Moscow 1986, p. 58). What the publisher (or perhaps the author) meant by "*at-ṭabʿa at-ṭalīta*: 1968" is not certain. See note (11) above.

The classical literary tradition took longer to prove itself as a source of inspiration for modern fiction. The first writer to appreciate its potential was, I believe, Ġamāl al-Ġīṭānī, whose collection of short stories, *Awrāq šabb 'ās mundu alf 'amm* (1969), immediately attracted attention for treating issues of political oppression and brutality in periods apparently remote from the present. Two of the stories are set in late Mamlouk Cairo and borrow the style of Ibn Iyās, while one of them includes a quotation from the lexicographer Ibn Sīda on the roots ḥā', bā', sīn and sīn, ġīm, nūn to illustrate the divorce, in a sadistic prison governor's mind, between words and what they signify.¹⁵

Al-Ġīṭānī's resort to the past here and in his novel *az-Zaynī Barakāt* (1974) has been more than a ploy to avoid censorship; it enables the reader to distance himself from the present situation and consider it in a different perspective, while the drawing of parallels between the later years of Nasser's regime and the end of the Mamlouk period adds a further dimension to his interpretation of Egypt's current predicament. Furthermore the Mamlouk setting puts at the author's disposal a number of different styles: the formal, measured and authoritative wording used in the Sultan's proclamations, the concise, rhythmic, formulaic announcements of the street criers, the smooth expository prose of technical reports, the more abrupt, nervous narrating of events and the characters' reflections on them. Although al-Ġīṭānī owes a debt to Ibn Iyās and al-Maqrīzī, he has modified the style of these mediaeval historians to enable it to reflect the inner world of individuals, a typical preoccupation of the modern writer; likewise, he exploits the different levels of diction available to him to point up the contrasts between those in authority and the private citizen, the state apparatus and the isolated individual.

Al-Ġīṭānī has not been the only writer to draw on the classical heritage in recent years. An example of a different kind of borrowing is provided by Ibrāhīm Aṣlān's novel *Mālik al-ḥazīn* (1983), the title of which alludes to a character in one of the fables sometimes included in

¹⁵ Ġamāl al-Ġīṭānī, *Awrāq šabb 'ās mundu alf 'amm*, 3rd. ed., Cairo n.d., p. 92.

Kalīla wa-Dimna.¹⁶ The heron in the fable can warn others of danger but is powerless to escape when it threatens himself, and the allusion to this fabulous bird underlines the tragic situation of the central figure, Yūsuf an-Nağğār, a passive character who realises full well that his world and that of his friends is collapsing but cannot do anything to prevent it.

It is also worth noting that one development in the modern novel, the custom of incorporating into the narrative different kinds of texts which is exemplified in *az-Zaynī Barakāt*, brings the genre closer to mediaeval Arabic *adab*, where works are so often constructed out of a variety of texts from a variety of provenances. For the Arab novelist to be modern, at least in this respect, means to follow tradition.

Egyptian writers today do not only look for inspiration in models from abroad, their own oral folk tradition or the classical literary heritage. They are also influenced by their immediate predecessors, as they often indicate in general terms, though they seldom point to specific works.¹⁷ The Egyptian novel of literary merit, if it is dated from the publication of *Zaynab*, has been with us for the last three-quarters of a century, and that is a period long enough for certain themes, certain types of interest, certain settings to have emerged as characteristic for this particular branch of the world-wide phenomenon of the 20th century novel. It is now possible, therefore, to study Egyptian novels not only in isolation, in relation to Western examples of the genre and in relation to the Arabic literary and oral heritage but also to look at them within what can now be called the local Egyptian tradition.

¹⁶ The fable in question, *al-Ḥamāma wa-t-ta'lab wa-mālik al-ḥazīn*, is not in the edition of *Kalīla wa-Dimna* by Ṭāhā Ḥusayn and 'Abd al-Wahhāb 'Azzām, but André Miquel included it in the appendix to his translation, *Le livre de Kalīla et Dimna*, Paris 1957, pp. 309-310.

¹⁷ It would be well worth trying to establish which novels of, for instance, Nağīb Maḥfūz have played an important part in the formation of subsequent generations of novelists, or whether the novels of a writer more famous for his works in another genre, such as Yūsuf Idrīs, have had any influence on them.

Identifying the salient features of this tradition is a task still waiting to be performed. There are, for example, recurrent types of novel. One of these is what I will refer to as the "street novel"; centred on a street or neighbourhood, it usually has a central character but also includes several prominent subsidiary characters who have their own plots. Unity of place is an important element in the structuring of such works, in which the characters' concerns and activities may vary widely. The interplay between the characters, who are relatives or neighbours of each other, ensures that these novels are full of drama, while the interest they reflect in social intercourse clearly relates to the nature of Egyptian society with its communal inclinations. The forerunner of this type is Tawfiq al-Hakim's *'Awdat ar-rūh* (1933). Generally regarded as a celebration of Egyptian nationalism, although this theme takes up very little space in the book, it also has elements of the *Bildungsroman*. But much of its attraction is due to the gently humorous depiction of life in a lower middle-class household, three members of which fall in love with the attractive daughter of the neighbours across the street while a fourth, the spinster housekeeper, pines for the personable batchelor in the flat above.

The street proper makes its appearance with Maḥfūz's *Zuqāq al-midaqq* (1947)¹⁸ the first depiction of a neighbourhood community with its varied, even grotesque, types, its social centre, the café, even its resident moral authority. With all its violence and frustrations the alley is depicted as a safe and predictable world, in contrast to the economic and moral chaos of wartime Cairo. Ṣāliḥ Mursī's *Zuqāq as-Sayyid al-Bulṭi* (1963), whose title echoes that of Maḥfūz's novel, widens the scope of the street novel. It is set in an Alexandrian fishing community, which lives in an alley named after the founder of the original family, who has achieved mythical status. The main interest here is less in the details of

¹⁸ As Fāṭima Mūsā observes, (*Fī r-riwāya al-ʿarabiyya al-muʿāšira*, Cairo 1972, p. 68) *Ḥān al-Ḥalīlī* can be regarded as a sketch for *Zuqāq al-midaqq* in some respects. But the focus of interest in the earlier novel is on one family, and the street mainly provides a colourful decor.

social interaction than in the community's struggle to preserve its way of life, threatened by modern large-scale fishing methods, and its need to free itself from the weight of the myth of the founding father which paralyses individual initiative.

The street novel takes a further trip with Maḥmūd Diyāb's *Aḥzān madīna* (1971), which relates in the first person a boy's growing up in the Arab quarter of Ismailiya in the period before and during the second World War. Despite the nostalgic evocation of the city, at the time of the novel's publication destroyed by bombardment during and after 1967, this novel is much less successful than its predecessors, chiefly because the street's inhabitants, who are always described from a young boy's perspective, are normal, reasonably happy families who do not start to quarrel until towards the end of the book. The single point of view, the lack of differentiation of characters and the harmonious atmosphere are major blunders in this type of novel.

With Ḡamāl al-Ġīṭānī's *Waqā'ī ḥārat az-Zaḥarānī* (1976) it is again an alley in Old Cairo which is the setting. Despite its debt to *Zuqāq al-midaqq* al-Ġīṭānī's is a greater novel. This is partly thanks to the author's sophisticated use of interior monologue and changing point of view, and his richer style. It is also due to his humane vision; none of the inhabitants of the alley of any significance are simply presented from the outside as grotesque, but the reader is enabled to share in their inner world. The only character whose thoughts remain a closed book is the sinister shaykh who sets out to exploit the epidemic of impotence among the alley's menfolk in order to establish his domination over everyone. And the interaction between the alley's inhabitants is splendidly intense, even culminating in epic quarrels between some of the women. But this celebration of the variety of human existence in a confined space is also a study of how, through the manipulations of people's fears and the exploitation of their weaknesses, an unscrupulous individual can isolate them from one another and reduce them to obedient pawns.

A more recent example of the street novel is Ibrāhīm Aṣlān's *Mālik al-ḥazīn*, mentioned above, which traces the last day in the life of

‘Awadallāh’s café, centre of the streets round the Kit-Kat square in Embāba. Although its concentrated form does not allow for the same detailed evocation of the quarter as in al-Ġītānī’s work, this book comes alive through the consciousness of a few key characters and the assumption, underlying the writing, that the reader is no stranger to Embāba and so it is not necessary to explain everything to him; he is told just enough to make him feel one of the crowd. The closure of the café in this book and its supplanting by a butcher’s shop represent the perhaps only temporary dislocation of a community whose roots go back several generations, the destruction of a dense tissue of human relationships and the victory of a ruthless, killing materialism.

In all these novels the street or neighbourhood can be seen as a microcosm of Egyptian society, even when on another level it represents a part of society leading a life at variance with that adopted by the community at large. This restricted setting is an ideal laboratory for the examination of issues of contemporary Egyptian culture, issues which change according to historical developments and the perceptions of the individual writers. At the same time these novels bear witness to their authors’ interest, even delight, in observing man as a social animal with all his oddities, his virtues and failings.

Just as it can be helpful to look at *Waqā’iḥ ḥārat az-Zāfarānī* as a representative of a particular type, the street novel, so the achievement of a writer such as ‘Abdalḥakīm Qāsim can be better understood when his work is discussed within the framework of the Egyptian novelistic tradition. *Ayyām al-insān al-sab’a* (1969), his contribution to that type of *Bildungsroman* in which the hero, as he grows up, moves from the countryside to the city, is a distant descendant of *Zaynab* and, thanks to the course the hero’s intellectual development takes, has some affiliations with Maḥfūz’s Trilogy; it shares a consciousness of the peasants’ poverty and harsh life with aš-Šarqāwī’s *al-Ard*. But thanks to his poetic style and above all to his ability to make the narrative point of view keep pace with and reflect the hero’s psychological and intellectual development Qāsim has produced a novel which is the classic statement of the country-born Egyptian’s growing away from his

roots in a society built on religious certitudes, into the city and the modern world of metaphysical doubt.

Muḥārwa li-l-ḥurūġ (1980) reinterprets the well-worn motif of the love-affair between an Egyptian and a European woman,¹⁹ for not only is the heroine Swiss, and thus free from the stereotypes of the former colonisers, but the meeting takes place on Egyptian soil. As the hero shows her round Cairo and takes her to his village his feelings towards her develop from simple physical attraction, the intensity of which is partly due to the sexual frustration commonly experienced by young Egyptians, to a profound attachment both emotional and intellectual. At the same time he gains progressively more insight into his own society, as he learns to see what has always been familiar with an outsider's eyes. Yet despite the revelation of the deprivation in which so many Egyptians including himself live, he cannot in the end bring himself to abandon his country and accompany Elsbeth to Europe. It is evident that Qāsim is here proposing a radically new treatment of the relationship between Egypt and Europe, a treatment dictated more by his consciousness of the actual predicament of his fellow-countrymen in all its dimensions than by philosophical theories of culture.

Qāsim's third novel, *Qadar al-ġuraf al-muqbiḍa* (1982), which is a highly original approach to narrating a man's life through the rooms and flats he has lived in, does include a journey to Europe. But this journey is worlds apart from those of Muḥsin al-Hakīm's *ʿUṣfūr min aš-šarq* or Ismāʿīl in Ḥaqqī's *Qindīl Umm Hāsim*.²⁰ Qāsim's hero goes to West Berlin with his family, the West Berlin of the 1970's, and what he sees is its delapidated student housing, its insolent prosperity and its xenophobia; it has more in common with the Paris of some North African writers than with the Europe which offered earlier Egyptian novelists so much cultural enrichment. It is the last station of a journey marked throughout by economic, cultural and affective deprivation, and

¹⁹ For earlier treatments of this theme see Rotraud Wielandt, *Das Bild der Europäer in der modernen arabischen Erzähl- und Theaterliteratur*, Beirut 1980, pp. 489-553.

²⁰ See the discussion of these two works in *ibid.*, pp. 314-397.

whatever mitigation of this it provides is more than offset by the bleakness of exile.

It is clear that in all three novels Qāsim is indebted to his Egyptian predecessors, but his originality lies partly in the way he reshapes the material he has borrowed. Indeed, unless his works are placed in the context of Egyptian fiction their importance cannot be thoroughly appreciated.

What I have tried to show in this paper is that the relationship between Egyptian novels and short stories and Western literature is not the only one worth taking into consideration, and that looking at a novel against the background of the oral folk tradition or the classical Arabic heritage or relating it to writing by other Egyptians may help the researcher to understand it, and Egyptian literature, better. This approach also has the advantage of proposing an alternative to the method which consists simply of identifying the European models of Egyptian novels and judging the latter essentially according to their success in imitation. Processes of literary borrowing are, after all, much too subtle, and too interesting, to be reduced to such primitive paradigms²¹.

²¹ Some of the issues treated in this paper, which was written in 1988, were being discussed around the same time in studies which came to my attention later. See, for instance, Sāsūn Sūmīḥ, "al-'Alāqāt an-naṣṣiyya fī n-nizām al-adabī al-wāḥid", *Al-Karmil* 7 (1986), pp. 109-129; Samia Mehrez, "Al-Zayni Barakāt: Narrative as Strategy", *Arab Studies Quarterly* 8 (1986), pp. 120-142; Fedwa-Malti Douglas, *Blindness and Autobiography. "Al-Ayyām" of Tāhā Husayn*, Princeton 1988, pp. 144-170. Intertextuality is now regularly addressed in research into Egyptian and other Arab fiction, although the relation between oral literature and modern works of fiction, where one cannot properly speak of intertextuality, has still hardly been investigated.