

# Arabic Literature

## Postmodern Perspectives

*Edited by*

Angelika Neuwirth

Andreas Pflitsch

Barbara Winckler

**SAQI**

ISBN: 978-0-86356-694-3

First published as *Arabische Literatur, postmodern* by edition text + kritik, Munich

Copyright © edition text + kritik, 2004

This English edition published by Saqi, 2010

© Saqi, 2010

*All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.*

*This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.*

A full CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.

A full CIP record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Printed and bound by CPI Mackays, Chatham, ME5 8TD

**SAQI**

26 Westbourne Grove, London W2 5RH, UK

2398 Doswell Avenue, Saint Paul, Minnesota, 55108, US

Verdun, Beirut, Lebanon

[www.saqibooks.com](http://www.saqibooks.com)

# Contents

<b>PREFACE</b>	9
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	
Postmodernism	13
Facets of a Figure of Thought <i>Ines Kappert</i>	
The End of Illusions On Arab Postmodernism <i>Andreas Pflitsch</i>	25
<b>PART ONE: MEMORY</b>	
Introduction <i>Angelika Neuwirth</i>	41
The Divinity of the Profane Representations of the Divine in the Poetry of Adonis <i>Stefan Weidner</i>	65
Days of Amber, City of Saffron Edwar al-Kharrat Remembers and Writes an Unintended Autobiography <i>Andreas Pflitsch</i>	76
On the Necessity of Writing the Present Elias Khoury and the “Birth of the Novel” in Lebanon <i>Sonja Mejcher-Atassi</i>	87
Historical Memory in Times of Decline Saadallah Wannous and Rereading History <i>Friederike Pannewick</i>	97
Linguistic Temptations and Erotic Unveilings Rashid al-Daif on Language, Love, War, and Martyrdom <i>Angelika Neuwirth</i>	110
Memories for the Future: Abdelrahman Munif <i>Susanne Enderwitz</i>	134

Authenticity as Counter-Strategy: Fighting Sadat's "Open Door" Politics Gamal al-Ghitani and <i>The Epistle of Insights into the Destinies</i> <i>Stephan Guth</i>	146
"This reality is deplorable" The Egypt of Sonallah Ibrahim: Between Media Representation and Experienced Everyday Reality <i>Andrea Haist</i>	158
Hebrew Bible and Arabic Poetry Reclaiming Palestine as a Homeland Made of Words: Mahmoud Darwish <i>Angelika Neuwirth</i>	171
Traditions and Counter-Traditions in the Land of the Bible Emile Habibi's De-Mythologizing of History <i>Angelika Neuwirth</i>	197
The Poet of the Arabic Short Story: Zakariyya Tamir <i>Ulrike Stehli-Werbeck</i>	220
 <b>PART TWO: POLYGAMY OF PLACE</b> 	
Introduction <i>Andreas Pflitsch</i>	233
"From the Orient to the Occident it is just a reflection" The Mirror-Worlds of Habib Tengour <i>Regina Keil-Sagawe</i>	243
"I dream in no man's land": Anton Shammas <i>Christian Szyska</i>	259
Exile at Home Samir Naqqash – Prophecy as Poetics <i>Osman Hajjar</i>	272
Reading the Ruins Repressed Memory and Multiple Identity in the Work of Sélim Nassib <i>Christian Junge</i>	287
British-Lebanese Identity Fallacies Tony Hanania and a Malady Called Homesickness <i>Andreas Pflitsch</i>	302

The Forbidden Paradise	311
How Etel Adnan Learnt to Paint in Arabic	
<i>Sonja Mejcher-Atassi</i>	
“So we are called Lebanese”	321
Rabih Alameddine on the Unbearable Lightness of Being	
Nowhere at Home	
<i>Andreas Pflitsch</i>	
The Desert as Homeland and Metaphor	331
Reflections on the Novels of the Tuareg Writer Ibrahim al-Koni	
<i>Hartmut Fähndrich</i>	
A Surrealist Trip to Paradise and Back	342
The Iraqi Author Abdalqadir al-Janabi	
<i>Sibylla Krainick</i>	
<b>PART THREE: GENDER TRANSGRESSIONS</b>	
Introduction	361
<i>Barbara Winckler</i>	
Changing the Sexes between Utopia and Heterotopia	369
Tahar Ben Jelloun’s <i>The Sand Child</i> and <i>The Sacred Night</i>	
<i>Roland Spiller</i>	
Androgyny as Metaphor	382
Hoda Barakat and <i>The Stone of Laughter</i>	
<i>Barbara Winckler</i>	
Transgression as Program	397
On the Novels of Rachid Boudjedra	
<i>Doris Rube</i>	
An Egyptian Don Quixote?	410
Salah Abd al-Sabur’s Rethinking of the Majnun-Layla Paradigm	
<i>Angelika Neuwirth</i>	
On Writing in the “Language of the Enemy”	429
Assia Djébar and the Buried Voices of Algerian History	
<i>Barbara Winckler</i>	

I Write, Therefore I Am Metafiction as Self-Assertion in Mustafa Dhikri's <i>Much Ado About a Gothic Labyrinth</i> <i>Christian Junge</i>	444
Transgressions, or the Logic of the Body Mohamed Choukri's Work: A Fusing of Eros, Logos and Politics <i>Özkan Ezli</i>	461
A New Trojan War? Vénus Khoury-Ghata on Sexuality and War <i>Monika Moster-Eichberger</i>	471
Beyond Autobiography Under the Sign of Destruction: the First-Person Narrator in Alia Mamdouh's novel <i>Naphtalene</i> <i>Verena Klemm</i>	484
<b>CONTRIBUTORS</b>	497
<b>INDEX</b>	499

# I Write, Therefore I Am

## Metafiction as Self-Assertion in Mustafa Dhikri's *Much Ado About a Gothic Labyrinth*

Christian Junge

Life is an activity and passion in search of a narrative.

*Paul Ricœur*

### The "Generation of the 90s"

No fatherland, no brokenness, no glorious defeats. Just writing with all its formal playing. And if there have to be fatherlands, brokenness and defeats then there are fatherlands of the body, brokenness of the soul and defeats of desire. It is a writing ... that belongs to the individual; it turns away from the collective and with it, politics, history, and society.

*Mustafa Dhikri*

The Egyptian author and screenwriter Mustafa Dhikri is a distinctive representative of the so-called "Generation of the 90s" in Egypt. This generation of young writers published their first works during the 1990s, mostly through the small publishing houses *Sharqiyyat* and *Mirit*. They can be considered as the second generation of the *hassasiyya jadida* (New Sensibility), a term coined by the Egyptian writer and critic Edwar al-Kharrat. In the aftermath of the political and ideological disillusionment of the 1960s, Arabic literature underwent a "crisis of representation"; writers turned away from realism and romanticism and their established aesthetic and poetic norms. The "New Sensibility" thus resulted in a literature "breaking the preordained order of narration (...) plunging into the interiority of the character (...) or incorporating or re-incorporating dreams, legends, and implicit poetry", as Kharrat has put it.

The literature of the 1990s allows for greater artistic freedom and radicalizes the renouncement of the collective. In consequence, it deals intensively with the self – and the text. While some critics disregard it as narcissistic, one has to see this preoccupation in a broader context. Sabry Hafez has said that the "Generation of the 90s" experiences continuous political, social and even urban marginalization and helplessness, which influence both the content and form of the new novel. One

could even say that as a consequence of Cairo's ever increasing population density and the lack of green space, the self and the text are the last "rooms of one's own" in which writing can take place. But instead of retreating into solitude and silence, the literature of the 1990s tells of the struggle of the decentered, marginalized self for self-assertion. Unlike in the "literature of the *infītah*" (open door), this struggle often loses its concrete historical and social dimensions, turning instead towards an "absolute present", a more existential conflict taking place in the here and now. Thus, this literature moves away from politics, history and society to become "a chaos of art without opinion or illusions", as the Egyptian writer and critic May Telmissany has put it.

Like the "New Sensibility", the "Generation of the 90s" should not be considered as a homogenous school or movement. It includes various tendencies and such diverse writers as Miral al-Tahawi, Somaya Ramadan, May Telmissany, Ibrahim Farghali, Adil Ismat, Muntassir al-Qaffash, Nora Amin and Husni Hassan – to name a few. Among them, Mustafa Dhikri may be called the *enfant terrible* for his taboo-breaking work, his radical combinations of high- and lowbrow literature and of high standard Arabic and vernacular Egyptian and for his experimental kind of *Gedankenprosa*, or contemplative prose.

Born in 1966, Mustafa Dhikri studied philosophy and received a degree from the Cairo Film and Television Academy in 1992. As a screenwriter he wrote the two feature films *Afarit al-asfalt* (*Devils of the Road*, 1996) and *Gannat ash-shayatin* (*Paradise of the Devils*, 1999), both of which are celebrated for their innovative ways in which they deal with violence and death – ways that go far beyond mainstream cinema. Dhikri has published two collections of short stories, five novels and a diary; his novel *Lamsa min 'alam gharib* (*Touch From a Strange World*, 2000) was awarded a State Encouragement Prize in 2004.

*Hura' mataha qutiyya* (*Much Ado About a Gothic Labyrinth*, literal translation: *Idle Talk of a Gothic Labyrinth*) was published in 1997 and contains two *riwayatan* (novels). The first novel, *Ma ya'rifuhu Amin* (*What Amin Knows*), recounts one day in the life of Amin, who is a helpless intellectual from Helwan (a suburb of Cairo). In the second novel, *Much Ado About a Gothic Labyrinth*, the marginalized protagonist, who also lives in Helwan, tells of his painful encounter with an attractive nurse in the hospital. Here, the self-conscious narrator intertwines digressions, anecdotes, day-dreams, reflections and stories, so that the text becomes a confusing labyrinth of plot and time. *Much Ado About a Gothic Labyrinth* may therefore serve as a good example of the "chaos of art" that the literature of the 1990s represents, as well as a telling narrative of the self.

By way of departure into Dhikri's text, this essay will first explore the link between a literature that reflects upon itself as literature, namely metafiction, and the self that writes about itself.



## Metafiction and Writing the Self

I write, I erase. I write. What if someone reads these leaves of paper before they're ... complete? Writing is never complete ... Not being is more merciful surely. For being demands that we never end ... never. Being demands that we erase and return to writing and life once again, a writing and life that might be.

*Somaya Ramadan*

A major feature of the writers of the 1990s is a preoccupation with the self. Indeed, Mustafa Dhikri has stated that they all write autobiographies but differ in their approaches. Certainly, one will rarely find traditional confessions; instead their works tend more towards fictionalised autobiographies and/or autobiographical novels in the vein of Edwar al-Kharrat's influential *Turabuha za'faran* (*City of Saffron*, 1985). In regard to this novel, Stephan Guth has remarked that "writing autobiography means producing a fictional account." This postmodern conviction is related to the notion of the "narrative self" that Wolfgang Kraus describes as follows in his study on transitory identity:

Language doesn't carry the inner life outside, but produces it. Since we are all involved in social structures, there is no thinking about and feeling ourselves possible outside of language (...) By narration, the self organizes his multifaceted experience in contexts referring to each other. The narrative structures are no creation made by the self, but anchored in and influenced by the social context, so that their genesis and transformation take place in a complex context of constructing social reality.

As a consequence, the narrative self challenges the idea of a stable and prior identity by highlighting the various processes of its own construction through narration, or, so to say, through fiction. This conviction has an important impact on metafiction, the literary strategy of self-reference that Linda Hutcheon defines as "fiction about fiction – that is, fiction that provides within itself a commentary on its own status as fiction and as language, and also on its own processes of production and reception." Because the self is constructed by narration, preoccupation with the text equals a preoccupation with the textually constructed self – and with the narrative norms of society. When the self is the text and the text is the self, then metafiction becomes more than fiction about fiction: it becomes fiction about the fiction(s) of the self, a tendency that one could call "autobiographic metafiction". Unlike traditional autobiography, autobiographic metafiction does not necessarily deal with the historical author outside the text. Instead, it deals mainly with the fictional author within the text and is therefore a kind of meta-autobiography.

This autobiographic tendency can be found in varying intensity in the novels of the 1990s, ranging from Miral al-Tahawi's *al-Khiba'* (*The Tent*, 1996) to May Telmissany's *Dunyazad* (1997); and even more so in Nora Amin's *Qamis wardi farigh* (*An Empty Pink Shirt*, 1997), where the female protagonist writes about the writing of her love story and so produces a multi-layered palimpsest of the narrative self.

Autobiographic metafiction is not a mere narrative narcissism, as one might think. In his study of *The Postcolonial Arabic Novel*, al-Musawi has highlighted the "critical endeavor" of the metafictional discourse in Arabic literature, which leads towards cultural contestation and self-definition. Autobiographic metafiction narrates the various struggles of the self in and with narration. In the case of the Egyptian literature of the 1990s, it deals less with societal narration and its norms, instead bringing to the fore the narrative ambitions of the self that is not struggling for a national or cultural assertion, but seeking its own very individual self-assertion. In the end, despite their uneasiness with the collective, these novels nevertheless provide an account of the narrative rules and constraints of society – even if they do so *ex negativo*.

### The cinematic humiliation: what Amin knows

Therefore, marginalization appears to be one of the major and lasting concerns in that kind of modern prose that especially the new generation of authors writes.

*Sabry Hafez*

Despite their differences, the two novels of *Much Ado About a Gothic Labyrinth* both feature an intellectual protagonist who suffers marginalization and humiliation. Since each deals with these misfortunes differently, the two novels can be interpreted as two versions of a single antihero's story. In this regard, the generic term *riwayatan* may equally signify *Doppelroman*, or double novel, that is a single novel using strategies of double or multiple narrations; here, the two narrators' points of view on intellectuals living in Helwan, the suburb of Cairo. In the second part of the novel, the reader plunges deeply into the interior life of the first person narrator, whereas in the first part of the novel (which Dhikri initially wrote as a screenplay) the reader observes Amin through the dispassionate lens of a third-person narrator. Against this background, the first part deals with self-assertion in the outside world, the second with self-assertion in the inner world.

Amin wants to watch *The Misfits*. But driven by compulsion, he involuntarily leaves his home and castle and finds himself on the street. There he falls victim to his social tormentors, who make fun of him, mock him and even beat him up.

Feeling that there is nowhere safe to watch the movie, he flees from Helwan to the center of Cairo, where he rents a room in a hotel. Even there, he can't escape humiliation. When he falls asleep in the hotel lobby, two children put his finger in cold water, so that he wets himself, to their great delight.

Despite all his efforts, Amin cannot assert himself. As an intellectual, he has no niche in society, whether in unsophisticated Helwan or in highbrow Cairo. He is as much of a misfit as the protagonists of the movie, except that whereas Gay Langland (played by Clark Gable, the "King of Hollywood") is a "clear symbol of masculinity", Amin is a real misfit, a loser. In its cinematic rewriting of *The Misfits*, the novel rejects the common transfigurations of the outsider's role as cowboy, Steppenwolf or Zarathustra. Instead, it recounts the marginalization of the intellectual who cannot even find himself an ivory tower. Amongst the manifold dimensions of marginalization, Dhikri also highlights the results of the exploding population of Cairo: an urban marginalization, where spatial restrictions enhance the feeling of mental or intellectual restrictions.

In the "literature of the *infatab*", the antihero often undergoes a process of disillusionment, a good example of which can be found in Sonallah Ibrahim's novel *al-Lajna* (*The Committee*, 1981). During the course of events the highly committed hero turns into a frustrated antihero, who withdraws into his own world and finally consumes himself. In contrast, in the metafictional autobiographies of the 1990s, disillusionment is not the final result but rather the starting point. Amin's neurotic compulsions, which may be interpreted as the psychological effects of previous humiliations, initiate a merciless odyssey that never ends.

### The artist's novel: art or life

I say to you that I'm often dead tired of portraying human life without taking part in it (...) Is the artist a man at all? One must ask the woman! It seems to me that we, the artists, share the same fate as those modified papal singers (...) We sing quite touchingly, but ...

*Thomas Mann*

In the second part of the novel, the reader's view shifts from the outside world to the inner world of a first-person narrator, an author who lives in Helwan. While witnessing a street-fight, he is accidentally injured and taken to the hospital, where he encounters the frivolous and mocking nurse, Ragawat; an encounter that awakens his sexual desires and opens up old sores. Brought up in the unsophisticated social sphere of Helwan, he has been an outsider from his early childhood. While the others prove to be highly talented when it comes to "life", which signifies

women, sex, violence and suburban eloquence, the protagonist suffers the fate of literature:

Cursed should be literature and all who practice it. Is it always my fate to know everything later – a cold, neutral knowledge only suitable to be written down and to be documented? Or are writing down, documenting and the ideas of writing things that, by nature, only occur afterwards?

Feeling estranged from life, he worries that his profession handicaps him by preventing him from taking part in the world. This fear leads to humiliation when Ragawat rejects him sexually; he believes that her reason is that he is a writer and so cannot assert himself as a man. The binary opposition between life and art is a classic topos of the artist's novel, as is well expressed in Thomas Mann's novella *Tonio Kröger* (1903). In *Much Ado About a Gothic Labyrinth*, this dichotomy is clearly embodied in the figure of a poet, who, in his old age, is finally successful with both poetry and women, but he is no longer able to have sexual intercourse, so that he has to satisfy his women by alternate means. Instead of using his penis, the poet uses his hand – to write. Writing is considered as a kind of Freudian ersatz, a pale imitation of the authentic life that the story's author can never achieve. The only possible way towards life, or towards participation in life, is to write it.

Unsurprisingly, in many autobiographic metafictional texts of the 1990s, the “self-conscious narrator” is not a lay narrator writing for the first time, but an experienced professional author. As a consequence, these texts offer heterogeneous and multi-layered concepts of writing.

In *Much Ado About a Gothic Labyrinth* the narrator creates a polyphony by intermingling two distinct writing concepts with one another. On the one hand, he “documents” incidents such as the humiliating encounter with the nurse, the eloquent vernacular *bon mots* of the others and his own inability to be as quick-witted as they are. This kind of “mimetic representation” reinforces the narrator's marginalization and underscores his inability to assert himself. On the other hand, he presents himself as a “tricky author”, who does not consider writing to be a substitute for life, but celebrates it as a stage for himself. Here, he appears as a witty trickster, reminiscent to a certain degree of the eloquent and artful protagonist of the classical Arabic *maqama* genre. This kind of “poietic representation” offers the narrator the narrative freedom to assert himself:

Now you will say, dear reader, that I'm a tricky author and that I pursue a labyrinthine and digressive way. And I say: Yes! I'm crazy about labyrinths and corridors that lead to nowhere.

These two modes of writing do not remain separate and distinct, but are intertwined throughout the novel, shaping its narrative maze.

### The narrating self and the narrated self

Here we find the mysterious double play of both the selves, the superior narrating one and the stunned experiencing one; therefore also the natural intellectualism.

*Leo Spitzer*

In his famous study on Proust, Leo Spitzer distinguishes between the *erzählendes Ich* (narrating self) and the *erlebendes Ich* (experiencing self, or narrated self). The first person narrator (autodiegetic narrator) can emphasize the temporal and/or spatial difference between himself as narrator and himself as protagonist, or even highlight the transitory aspects of his identity. In *Much Ado About a Gothic Labyrinth*, the first person narrator subverts the marginalized role he plays as protagonist with the picaresque role he plays as narrator.

During a nocturnal fight, the protagonist and the very sportive Nunna start in pursuit of a friend. But when the protagonist catches Wafdiya's mocking and scornful glance, he gives up the pursuit, feeling stigmatized as an author who can't stand his ground. The narrator recounts this scene twice. The first time, he depicts it very concisely in a neutral tone; the second time he changes his tune, subtly making fun of his "rival" Nunna. Using an "as-if" construction, he compares him to a runner on a treadmill who doesn't get anywhere, no matter how fast he runs. This causes "the author's moving away from the narrated subject, a distance between the narrating self and the experiencing self", as Spitzer puts it in regard to Proust. In the case of *Much Ado About a Gothic Labyrinth*, the narrator creates an ironic distance to Nunna, offering the humiliated protagonist a hidden counter-narrative to his experience of social defeat. Ultimately, this irony cannot change the course of events, but it helps him to a subtle self-assertion.

The frequent use of "as-if" comparisons in the novel keeps the mysterious double play of the selves going. Unlike in many traditional autobiographies, the narrating self is not superior because of its wisdom, knowledge and life experience. It is superior because writing offers the narrator an extended freedom to act. To write means to re-read, rewrite the story and to provide supplementary narratives. The narrator suggests to the reader elsewhere that a certain detail is "brought into the story by force", so that he can use it for his own purposes. The focus is no longer the story, but the way in which the story can be written. Or, as Jean Ricardou has put it in reference to *nouveau roman*, literature is not the writing of an adventure, but the adventure of writing. As a consequence, the story consists only of "minimal

narratives”, leaving room for the sparkling intellectualism of the narrating self. This *Gedankenprosa* is implicitly metafictional insofar as it shows the narrator using and abusing the protagonist’s story for his own purposes.

### Between fusha and ‘ammiyya: the narrator’s carnival

Carnival brings together, unifies, weds, and combines the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid.

*Mikhail M. Bakhtin*

The mysterious double play between the narrating and the narrated selves must also be interpreted against the background of such dichotomies inherent in the novel as *‘ammiyya* (Egyptian vernacular) and *fusha* (high standard Arabic), periphery and center, lowbrow and highbrow, provocation and taboo, frivolous and frigid sexuality ... Although the protagonist suffers marginalization in the periphery, he does not disregard his surroundings in a Freudian sublimation. Instead, he admires in others the vernacular eloquence and quick-wittedness that he can never achieve – or if he does, one of the others “steals” it from the tip of his tongue. The only thing he can do, as he complains, is to “document” their witticisms. But this documentation can easily shift toward self-presentation, as the beginning of the novel illustrates:

About the corpulent and stout nurse Ragawat, Nunna used to say in his vulgar and direct tone: “Perfect is just her bone frame.” Her stout figure can be related – though only from afar and with some good will and clemency – to the old Arabic standard of beauty, when they used to say: “That is a beautiful woman with shapely limbs. She feeds the nursling and warms the darling.”

With this commentary, the narrator introduces himself as someone who is at least as eloquent as Nunna. At the same time, he offers the highbrow reader an *intraduction* that combines a *traduction* (translation) of the periphery with an *introduction* to the center: he translates the Egyptian vernacular to high standard Arabic and prose rhyme (*saj’*). But with the notion that only goodwill and clemency will justify his commentary and translation, he treats his speech ironically. As a result, he implicitly brings to the fore the artfulness of a rather far-fetched self-presentation. He also claims a *mésalliance* that unifies what doesn’t fit together, like the classical Arabic rhetoric and the vulgar Egyptian vernacular – or the sexuality of the periphery and the one of the center, as the following “carnivalization” demonstrates.

The narrator derives the high standard word *thuwwa* (road-sign) from the vernacular word *suwva* (mons veneris), since *thuwwa* is explained in the dictionaries

as “what is raised above the earth and visible” and shares a similar shape with the *suwwa*. By this ironic philological *ishtiqaq* (derivation), which is based on the vernacular homophony of the letters *tha'* and *sin*, the narrator offers a vernacular reading of high standard Arabic. In what follows, he uses the words *thuwwa* and *suwwa* interchangeably. This carnivalization of pure language and culture offers the narrating self a space “in-between” the center and the periphery, the *fusha* and the *'ammiyya* and so on. Foregrounding the far-fetched pretexts for his misalliances, he appears as a self-conscious narrator, seeking to convince his audience indirectly that he is an eloquent and masterful trickster.

### The imaginary labyrinth: an example of the *riwaya qasira*

The composition of vast books is a laborious and impoverishing extravagance ... A better course of procedure is to pretend that these books already exist, and then to offer a résumé, a commentary ... More reasonable, more inept, more indolent, I have preferred to write notes upon imaginary works.

*Jorge Luis Borges*

From implicit metafiction, Dhikri's novel shifts to explicit metafiction, where the narrator addresses himself directly to the reader in order to convince him of his wit:

Now I will tell you a story devoted to labyrinths that I wrote a long time ago. I've always been of the opinion that it is skilled and proficient to kill two birds with one stone. So what do you think about killing all birds with one stone?

By virtue of this rhetorical question, the narrator performs a kind of modern *fakhr* (boasting), celebrating his skill and proficiency as author. The birds that he claims to kill, are, as he elaborates, threefold: the story devoted to labyrinths, the novel he is writing about the events in the hospital and finally the reader. For him, killing the three birds with one stone means creating a genre suitable for his purposes. Therefore, he combines the *riwaya* (novel) with the *qissa qasira* (short story) into a kind of *riwaya qasira* (short novel); a term not mentioned in the novel itself, but employed by several authors of the “Generation of the 90s” and also mentioned by Dhikri in an interview. This term is reminiscent of al-Kharrat's *qissa qasida*, a poetic prose that combines the *qissa qasira* (short story) with the *qasida* (poem) to create a new hybrid genre. Dhikri's text also denies the traditional rules of genres, “so that [these rules] will not help you to know if what I am telling you is a novel or a story.” For the narrator, the *écriture transgénérique* (writing beyond the genres)

serves as a picaresque genre allowing him to “kill two birds with one stone and little effort and to become narrator and novelist with a single blow”.

In the story of the labyrinths, the narrator makes use of this waning of generic borders to challenge the borders between reality and fiction. He constructs a labyrinth in order to confuse the Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges, the labyrinth's doyen. While he describes the labyrinth to him over the phone, he gets the impression that Borges uses his words against him: “Does he make fun of me and weave threads of a labyrinth out of my mouth, without my recognizing it? For his own labyrinth, not for mine.” In consequence, it is not Borges who is confused but the narrator, who lost this *munazara* (dispute). At the end, he notices that his readers and critics are confused by the order of the literary labyrinths and cannot distinguish clearly between them. Taking advantage of this confusion, he suggests to the reader that he first constructed Borges' labyrinth and is now inventing his own. With this tricky maneuver, he rearranges the labyrinth and its counter-labyrinth in his own favor, demonstrating how brilliantly he can manipulate the story.

Just as Borges deals with “imaginary books”, the narrator prefers “imaginary labyrinths” to constructing complete labyrinths. Once again, it is not the labyrinths but the re-reading and rewriting of the labyrinths that is the focus: “But I admire the possibility of seizing a literal expression as if it were a concrete thing that could be stolen unexpectedly in order to serve a purpose that nobody yet knows.” Such is the narrator's artfulness.

The *riwaya qasira* appears frequently in the autobiographic metafiction of the 1990s, such as in Telmissany's *Dunyazad* or Somaya Ramadan's *Leaves of Narcissus* (2001, *Awraq al-Narjis*). As *Much Ado About a Gothic Labyrinth* exemplifies, this genre challenges the clear-cut boundaries between the embedded stories and their contexts; between the imaginary books and their notes; between the “story about a labyrinth” and the genesis of this “story about a labyrinth”. Confusing, or even erasing, the distinctions between the meta-, intra- and extradiegetic levels of narration, these short novels – despite their brevity – can be considered an extension of the fictional battlefield.

### Rewriting the Arabian Nights: never ending details

In *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, I read this sentence, which gives me pleasure: “Cloths, sheets, napkins were hanging vertically, attached by wooden clothespins to taut lines.” Here I enjoy an excess of precision, a kind of maniacal exactitude of language, a descriptive madness ... The exactitude in question is not the result of taking greater pains, it is not a rhetorical increment in value, as though things were increasingly well described – but of a change of codes:



the (remote) model of description is no longer oratorical discourse (nothing at all is being “painted”), but a kind of lexicographical artefact.

*Roland Barthes*

Metafiction in *Much Ado About a Gothic Labyrinth* elaborates as much on the state of the text as on the state of the self. While the narrator describes his “poetics of detail”, he asks himself whether a normal person in Helwan – Hajj Abdallah, for example – would understand his elaborations or if he would in fact be considered abnormal or even “sexually deviant”. First, he tries to explain his passion, desperately but quite unsuccessfully, before he suddenly recognizes that to “stop talking would be my death or sexual violation by the six sons of the Hajj.” This reminds him of Scheherazade in the *Arabian Nights*, who saves her life by telling stories. As a consequence, he pursues his speech not in order to convince the Hajj, but merely for the sake of talking:

I said to myself: (...) Let it be a vociferous speech (*hadith*), without drawing a breath. Let it be a crazy, incorrect speech combining *fusha* and *'ammiyya*. Let it be a speech unguided, merging in my mind and in the mind of both reader and critic. Let it be a rousing speech whose only goal is to increase the number of pages, so that the author – that is me – is convinced that he is able to narrate, to narrate truth and untruth. So be it then the story (*hadith*) of Harun al-Rashid and the story of the enchanted bag.

Metafiction explains not only how the text is made, but why the text is made in this manner. The continuous narration serves the author as a means of self-assertion. It is no longer important *what* he narrates, but *that* he narrates.

This paradigmatic change of representation is well expressed by Dhikri's rewriting of the story of “Ali, the Persian” from the *Arabian Nights*. This story deals with two persons who claim ownership of the same bag. To find out who is the legitimate owner, the judge orders each of them to describe the contents of “their” bag. Both exaggerate to such a degree that the bag could not possibly hold everything that they have described; therefore, neither could be the true owner. When the bag is finally opened, it contains only “bread, a lemon, cheese and olives.”

The narrator in *Much Ado About a Gothic Labyrinth* provides a modern rewriting. Tamratag, one of the two “owners”, lists, mostly in Egyptian vernacular, more than fifty items all belonging to the realm of modern popular culture; ranging from lipstick to a Yamaha drum set. Wardatag, the other “owner”, uses high standard Arabic and prose rhyme to enumerate items belonging to the realm of classical heritage; ranging from two robes to “one thousand castles, the biggest as huge as Egypt and a part of Syria.” When caliph Harun al-Rashid appears, the

bag is opened. It contains the curse of a witch condemning Wardatag, Tamratag and the judge to repeat their descriptions until the witch's death.

It is obvious that the detailed and exaggerated descriptions do not describe the bag's contents; instead they provide a "change of codes", as Barthes has called it, that regards details as "lexicographic artefacts". In this context, writing no longer has the purpose of telling the reader a reliable story, but turns towards the radical aesthetic of *l'art pour l'art* – or at least of *l'art pour l'auteur*. The narrator celebrates his pleasure of enumeration and thereby achieves his goal of "increasing the number of pages" while proving that he is a masterful author.

This change of code – from illustrating a situation prior to writing to writing an artifact – is reminiscent of Barthes' elaboration on the word "to write" as an intransitive verb and its impact on the writer:

I would say that we should no longer say today "j'ai écrit" but rather "je suis écrit", just as we say "je suis né" ... In the modern verb ... to write, however, the subject is immediately contemporary with the writing, being effected and affected by it. The case of the Proustian narrator is exemplary: he exists only in writing.

### Limitations of self-assertion: body and emotion

As for expression and feelings or emotions, the liberation, in contemporary society, from the older *anomie* of the centred subject may also mean not merely a liberation from anxiety but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling.

*Fredric Jameson*

Fredric Jameson describes the "waning of effects" as constitutive for western Postmodernism, "since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling." *Much Ado About a Gothic Labyrinth* may be considered for several reasons as a postmodern work; it includes metafiction, deconstruction, fragmentation and playfulness. Unlike in Jameson's elaboration, the subject or self in *Much Ado About a Gothic Labyrinth* is not dead, however, but decentered; it retains both its body and its feelings, which sometimes antagonize the narrating self and frustrate its tricky purposes.

When the narrator rearranges the order of the labyrinth, he suddenly feels trapped in the center, which he has created to confuse Borges. It is a dark room with clouded mirrors on the wall. This reminds him of the saying: "He who looks in the deep-black darkness at his reflection in the mirror becomes insane." In the darkness, of course, he cannot see his reflection; he therefore has no visual proof of his existence. Trapped in his own fiction, the narrator raises his hands in fear, gets

goose pimples, and flees his fictional labyrinth. While the narrator takes advantage of the fictionality of the labyrinths on the one hand, he is disturbed and disquieted by the possible fictionality of his own self on the other. Writing fiction not only offers the freedom to act; it sometimes causes fear.

The infinite rewriting of the *Arabian Nights* finally comes to an end when the narrator imagines 'Amm Diyab entering the room and defending him from all harm, like a father would his daughter. A never-ending repetition of all the details may be considered as a curse not only for the characters in the story, but also for the narrator, who suffers the fatigue of telling his tales even after the allotted one thousand and one nights – until the witch's death.

In another story, the body and sexual desire play a major role. After the nurse Ragawat has rejected the narrator sexually, he wants to take revenge. He decides to listen to Ragawat's life-stories *ad infinitum* and not any longer with sexual desire, but like a priest taking someone's confession. While the priest, the narrator's alter ego, hears the confession of Ragawat's attractive alter ego, he feels suddenly aroused. Consequently, he betrays the beautiful woman to a Nazi who orders her immediate execution. In this allegory, the narrator's sexual desire re-emerges in the allegorical figure of the priest and unintentionally causes his quite unpriestly behavior. Ultimately, the narrator cannot deny his body or his sexual feelings in the narrative, not even in the allegorical figure of a priest.

Writing in this intransitive form gives birth not only to a self that is "being written" rationally, but also to an emotionally and physically written self. This emotionally written self cannot celebrate its complete fictionality, since it is overcome by fear. It cannot celebrate the infinite telling of the story, since 'Amm Diyab's parental feelings cut the story short. It cannot re-invent itself as a priest, since its sexual longings turn the allegory upside down. Thus, the narrative self is not only rational, but also emotional and physical. Body and feelings have a deep impact on the decentered self. *Much Ado About a Gothic Labyrinth* – and other autobiographic metafiction of the 1990s – has little in common with the kind of postmodern literature that deals only with surfaces. Although the self is decentered, it has a deep structure that influences and limits the struggle for self-assertion.

Therefore, emotional self-assertion must sometimes take place in a realm beyond writing. In Nora Amin's *An Empty Pink Shirt*, for example, the female protagonist gets emotionally trapped in her narration so that she finally ceases to write in the manner she was used to. And in *Much Ado About a Gothic Labyrinth*, the protagonist finds his *dénouement* in a kind of topographical vision of the Japanese Garden.

## The Japanese Garden in Helwan: a sexual heterotopia

And also a totally different androgen appearance was on my mind in Japan, an appearance that drives the thinking mind (...) to contemplate the problem of hermaphroditism: the form of the Buddha. Is it imagined as asexual, monosexual or bisexual?

*Magnus Hirschfeld*

The Japanese Garden in Helwan is of great importance to the protagonist. In school days, he and his friends went to a prostitute in the garden's toilet. Waiting outside for their turn, they sat on the statues of the Buddha and imitated sexual intercourse by touching the Buddha's belly. The Japanese Garden, which is home to a large number of plants and trees from the Far East as well as about forty statues of Buddha, is an extraordinary place within the urban fabric of Helwan. It is a "cultural translation" of the Far Eastern Buddhism that preaches chastity as embodied by Buddha. But in the surrounding of Helwan, it becomes a brothel for minor clients located in dirty toilets.

The protagonist recognizes the peculiarity of this place when he contemplates the Buddha's "effeminate-looking and arousing body with soft folds of fat, one over another, and above a thin blanket uncovering the fleshy chest and the *thuwwa* of the round belly." This sexualized shape seems to him to have nothing in common with the demands of chastity. At the end of the novel, he believes that he will one day sit in the Buddha's lap while Ragawat sits in his lap and that the streetlamp's light will hit them "as if we were three images of the god Buddha." This sexual ambivalence, similar to that described by the German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld at the beginning of the last century, neither accurately reflects Helwan's frivolous sexual identity, nor the upright sexual identity of Cairo; much less the celibacy espoused in the sayings of the Buddha. Instead, the ambivalent Buddha embodies a kind of sexuality "in-between" these identities, entities and places. The presence of the statues of the Buddha renders the Japanese Garden in Helwan a "contestation of all other places", similar to Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia – at least with regard to sexuality.

Like Amin, the protagonist of *What Amin Knows*, the narrator cannot find his place in greater Cairo. But while the Japanese Garden renders scene to Amin's humiliation, the narrator of *Much Ado About a Gothic Labyrinth* finds refuge in the garden – its statue of the Buddha serves him as neither center nor periphery, but as a counter-place. Becoming itself the "Buddha of Helwan" in his vision, the narrator finally finds a "room of his own". It is not a room of writing, but a room of sexuality. The narrator imagines his self-assertion beyond the "white sheet of paper" and the act of writing.

## Conclusion

Who says that I want the normal reader? The normal looks for the normal.  
The great is great. And the text is text, text, text.

*Mustafa Dhikri*

The “Generation of the 90s” often deals with life as a “fictional account”. Terms like identity and self are no longer prior to the act of writing. Therefore, metafiction facilitates reflection not only upon the text, but also upon the texture of the self and its identity. Leaving grand narratives aside, this literature often depicts the struggle of the individual or self within the text: within its own texture and that of society. In the case of Mustafa Dhikri’s *Much Ado About a Gothic Labyrinth* metafiction becomes a powerful method of achieving self-assertion, it foregrounds the shift from passive documentation to assertive writing. The double play of the narrated and the narrating self, carnivalization, the *riwaya qasira*, the change of codes – all these strategies fathom out the possibilities and limitations of the narrative textures. The ability to write becomes the *sine qua non* of the narrative self: I write, therefore I am. As consequence, self-assertion can be interpreted as control over the texture of the self, as the case of Amin in *What Amin Knows* illustrates: since he can neither narrate nor express his own point of view emphatically, he suffers from the humiliating speech of the others without either “writing back” to them or “being written” differently.

Despite all its disillusionment, the autobiographic metafiction of the 1990s – or at least Dhikri’s *Much Ado About a Gothic Labyrinth* – does, at times, employ an idealistic concept of writing. The page serves as a place *besides* or sometimes even *beyond* the narrative constraints of society, allowing a somewhat idealistic texture of the self to appear. But at the same time, this literature narrates the limitations and failures of self-narrations; they are set and uncovered by the body and the feelings. Thus, this idealistic inclination does not necessarily produce an idealistic text. In fact, these narratives give evidence of the sometimes joyful, sometimes bitter existential *Geworfenheit*: the thrownness of the artist into writing. Since the self cannot exist apart from writing, it can only act within the possibilities and limitations of writing. In this context, writing is no longer the result of careful reflection, but becomes as spontaneous as life itself, erroneous sometimes, frightening, and also surprising and hopeful.

## WORKS

- Tadribat 'ala al-jumla al-i'tiradiyya* (Practices of Parenthesis), Cairo: al-Majlis al-A'la li-l-Thaqafa 1995
- Hura' mataha qutiyya* (Much Ado About a Gothic Labyrinth), Cairo: Dar Sharqiyyat 1997
- al-Khawfy'a'kulu al-ruh* (Fear Eats the Soul), Cairo: Dar Sharqiyyat 1998
- Lamsa min 'alam gharib* ('Touch From a Strange World), Cairo: Dar Sharqiyyat 2000
- Mir'at 202* (Mirror 202), Cairo: Dar Mirit 2003
- Rasa'il* (Letters), Cairo: Dar Mirit 2006
- "Shahadat al-shakl wa-laysa al-madmun" ("A Statement of Form, Not of Content"), <http://www.smartwebonline.com/New Culture/cont/018100070017.asp> (access September 11, 2007)
- 'Ala atraf al-asabi': Yawmiyyat* (On the Tips of the Fingers. A Diary), Cairo: Dar al-'Ayn 2009

## TRANSLATIONS

- "Four Tales", transl. Waiel Ashry, in: *Banipal* 26 (2006), pp. 110-113

## FURTHER READING

- Sabry Hafez: "Jamaliyyat al-riwaya al-jadida. al-Qati'a al-ma'rifiyya wa-l-naz'a l-mudadd li-l-ghina'iyya", in: *Alif. Journal of Comparative Poetics* 21 (2001), pp. 184-246
- Ismael Hissu: "Aswat adabiyya shabba tu'lin al-infisal. 'al-Kitaba al-jadida fi Misr' milaffan fi 'Banipal'", in: *al-Hayat*, May 3, 2006
- May Telmissany: "al-Zaman ka-mataha fi adab al-tis'inat. Muntasir al-Qaffash wa-Mustafa Dhikri namudhajan", in: *Nizwa* 39 (2004), pp. 272-76

## OTHER WORKS CITED

- Alif laila. Book of the Thousand Nights and one Night, commonly known as the "Arabian Nights Entertainments"*, ed. William H. Macnaghten, Calcutta: Thacker 1839-42
- Mikhail M. Bakhtin: *Problemy poetiki Dostoevskogo* [= *Problemy tvorčestva Dostoevskogo*], Leningrad: Priboj 1929
- Roland Barthes: *Le plaisir du texte*, Paris: Seuil 1973
- Roland Barthes: "Ecrire, verbe intransitif?", in: *Œuvres complètes. 1966-1973*, vol. 2, ed. Eric Marty, Paris: Seuil 1994, pp. 973-80
- Karl Heinz Bohrer: "Zeit und Imagination. Das absolute Präsens der Literatur", in: Karl Heinz Bohrer, *Das absolute Präsens. Die Semantik ästhetischer Zeit*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1994, pp. 143-83
- Wayne Booth: "The Self-Conscious Narrator in Comic Fiction Before Tristram Shandy", in: *Publication of the Modern Language Association of America* 67 (1952), pp. 163-85
- Jorge Luis Borges: *Ficciones 1935-1944*, Buenos Aires: Sur 1944
- Michel Foucault: "Les hétérotopies" [radio lecture, December 7, 1966], in: Michel Foucault: *Die Heterotopien. Der utopische Körper. Les hétérotopies. Le corps utopique*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 2005, pp. 37-52 (bilingual, with Audio-CD)

- Stephan Guth: "Why Novels – Not Autobiographies?", in: Robin Ostle, Ed de Moor, Stefan Wild (eds.), *Writing the Self. Autobiographical Writing in Modern Arabic Literature*, London: Saqi 1998, pp. 139–47
- Magnus Hirschfeld: *Weltreise eines Sexualforschers im Jahre 1931/32*, Frankfurt/M.: Eichborn 2006
- Linda Hutcheon: *Narcissistic Narrative. The Metafictional Paradox*, New York, London: Methuen 1984
- Fredric Jameson: *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham: Duke University Press 1991
- Edwar al-Kharrat: "The Mashriq", in: Robin Ostle (ed.), *Modern Literature in the Near and Middle East 1950–1970*, London, New York: Routledge 1991, pp. 180–92
- Wolfgang Kraus: "Falsche Freunde. Radikale Pluralisierung und der Ansatz einer narrativen Identität", in: Jürgen Straub, Joachim Renn (eds.), *Transitorische Identität. Der Prozesscharakter des modernen Selbst*, Frankfurt/M., New York: Campus 2002, pp. 159–86
- Thomas Mann: "Tonio Kröger" [1903], in: Thomas Mann, *Große kommentierte Frankfurter Ausgabe. Werke – Briefe – Tagebücher*, ed. Heinrich Detering et al., vol. 2 (Frühe Erzählungen, 1893–1912), Frankfurt/M.: Fischer 2004
- Frank C. Maatje: *Der Doppelroman. Eine literatursystematische Studie über duplikative Erzählstrukturen*, Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff 1968
- Muhsin Jassim al-Musawi: *The Postcolonial Arabic Novel. Debating Ambivalence*, Leiden: Brill 2003
- Somaya Ramadan: *Awraq al-Narjis*, Cairo: Dar Sharqiyyat 2001 (English translation: *Leaves of Narcissus*, trans. Marilyn Booth, Cairo, New York: The American University in Cairo Press 2004)
- Leo Spitzer: "Zum Stil Marcel Prousts", in: Leo Spitzer, *Stilstudien*, vol. 2, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1961, pp. 365–497