

Improper Narratives: Egyptian Personal Blogs and the Arabic Notion of *Adab*

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Abstract

In recent years several international scholars have started to move beyond the social and political effect of blogging to define blogs in terms of literary writing (See Fitzpatrick, 2006; Himmer 2004; Van Dijk, 2004). Also in the Arab world, the fact that several blogs have been turned into books and have had considerable success, has provoked a debate over the literary status of blogs: while some critics hail them as a new literary experiment, others claim that they do not have the legitimacy to be included in the category of *adab* (literature). This has perhaps to do with the fact that in the Arab world (as elsewhere) printed books enjoy more prestige; but also with the fact that the Arab notion of *adab* is gradually coinciding, though still differing from the European notion of “literature”, and this defines the boundaries of the literary field. In other words, to claim that a work is “literary” because it has aspects of “literariness”, does not wholly correspond to saying that it is *adabi*, i.e. “literary” for Arab critics. In this article I will discuss aspects of literariness and *adab-icity* by means of an analysis of the blog *al-Kanabah al-Hamrā* (The Red Sofa), written by the Egyptian Bilāl Ḥusnī. The blog has been reviewed in several Egyptian newspapers and literary websites as “an interactive fiction” or a “*adabi*/literary and visual blog”. However, its style, contents and materiality challenge both our notion of “literature” and the Arab concept of *adab*.

Keywords: Egypt, blogs, literature, literariness, *adab*

Introduction

As most readers would probably already know, a blog, or “weblog,” according to the most basic, stripped-down definition, is ‘a frequently updated website consisting of dated entries arranged in reverse chronological order’ (Walker 2005, 45). Blogs can be created by individuals or by groups; they focus on subjects that are personal, political, journalistic, technical, academic,

or, often, random; they often include multimedia content, including images, audio, or video. Besides the main body which contains the blog entries, blogs also generally include: a header, that is an image that appears on the top of the page; a profile page of the blogger, which provides general information about the author; a blogroll, which is a list of links to other weblogs the author recommends; a comment section, which allows readers to respond and discuss posts and to interact with the blogger and other readers.

In recent years several international scholars have started to move beyond the social and political effect of blogging to define blogs in terms of literary writing (Fitzpatrick 2007, Himmer 2004, Van Dijk 2004). It appears that there is still no clear definition of what a “literary blog” is. Some scholars define it as a blog that offers commentary about literature, as it contains novel reviews, information about authors, and links to news about books (Nelson 2006, 6). Others define “narrative blogs” or “literary blogs” as blogs that have literary ambitions: that is, personal blogs who show aesthetic qualities. (Fitzpatrick 2006, Sefarty 2004, Sorapure 2003). In the Arab world, the fact that several blogs have been turned into books and have reached a great success has also provoked a debate around the literary status of blogs: while some critics hail them as new literary experimentations, others consider them as forms of writing that do not have the legitimacy to be included in the category of *adab* (literature).

In my doctoral thesis I conceive Egyptian personal blogs as forms of autofictional writing, providing a close reading of several blogs and an analysis of the context and mode of production of these texts². In this paper, I will restrict my analysis on the blog *The Red Sofa* in order to provide some preliminary thoughts about the following issues: if and how the blog present aspects of *adab-icity*³; how the nature of the medium influences the way *adab* is produced and read; and how this text contributes and challenges the same notion of *adab*. Before proceeding with the analysis, let me first contextualize this blog in the larger framework of the Egyptian blogosphere.

1. *The Egyptian blogosphere: a literary space?*

As pointed out by Marc Lynch (2010), blogging remain a very small phenomenon in Egypt, although one that has noticeably grown in the last years. Internet penetration counts 29,809,724 Egyptian Internet users for June 30, 2012 (35.6% of the population), compared to the 3 million users registered in 2003 (from <www.internetworldstats.com>, 10/2012). Accordingly, the number of blogs has risen from just 40 in 2004 to an estimated 160,000 in July 2008, according to a report released by the Egyptian Cabinet’s Information and Decision Support Center (IDSC; from OpeNet Initiative: <<http://opennet.net/research/profiles/egypt>>, 29/10/2012). However, these numbers might not account for the significant effect of blogs on society.

The first blogs appeared in Egypt in 2003 as a tool for political discussion and were mostly written by liberal anti-establishment, leftist activist who wrote mostly in English. The blogosphere began to broaden only in 2005, also for political reasons: in this year Egypt witnessed a flare-up of political activity, since multicandidate elections were allowed for the first time, which gave rise to the emergence of grassroots opposition movements⁴ and the organization of street demonstrations. At the same time the government, apparently unaware of the growing possibilities enhanced by new media, encouraged IT innovation, lowering the price of internet connection and improving the technological infrastructure. Blogs came to constitute an alternative platform for information and protest: they were used to denounce serious social and political events which had been ignored by Egyptian mainstream media, as for example videos of violations and torture against civilians recorded with a mobile camera and posted online for the world to see⁵. Blogs were also used to start political campaigns and organize street demonstrations, which culminated in the “January 25” uprising and the downfall of Mubarak’s regime. Because of its anonymous nature and seemingly unlimited freedom, blogging also allowed social, religious and sexual minorities to express their views and share their identities.

In the following years Egyptian blogs ceased to be only tools for political and human rights activists and turned into a larger space for creativity and personal expression. From 2006, the year which has been defined as the “flood age of Egyptian blogging” by the blogger-journalist A. Naji (2010), the Egyptian blogosphere has witnessed the emergence of several blogs written in the form of memoirs and personal diaries. In a period of social and political turmoil and of state and self-censorship in the traditional media and society, blogs appeared as the best tool for self-expression and self-discovery (Weyman 2007). The anonymity of the medium allowed Egyptian youth to express criticism and frustration about daily life without losing social credibility. The interactivity, which grants readers the possibility to leave comments on blog entries, made it possible to connect people with similar interests and values and to receive feedbacks and advice. Egyptian young people used blogs to talk about themselves in a way they were not allowed to do both in traditional media (for religious and political reasons but also because of the difficulty of entering the cultural field) and in public (because of social pressures). The blogosphere was also enriched by thousands of blogs written by women recounting their ordinary lives, focusing on simple daily life details, ambitions, dreams, and love problems.

In addition, many young people blogged in pursuit of literary aspirations and tried their hand at writing. Even though many independent publishing houses are now emerging in Egypt and are interested in publishing new young literary talents, publishing in print form still requires money (the publication is often at the writer’s own expense) and finds very little distribution (Jac-

quemond 2008, 72). The accessibility of the blogosphere and its anonymity (the possibility of publishing using a nickname) certainly encouraged many young Egyptians, who would not have had easy access to literary circles, to write and distribute their writing to a wider audience (El-Sadda 2010, 318). Many young talented bloggers have not only received big popularity within the online community but also gained the attention of independent and mainstream publishing houses, and have eventually made their way to the landscape of Egyptian literary circles.

In 2008, three Egyptian blogs written by three women bloggers were published by Dar al-Shuruq, the biggest private Egyptian publishing house and entered the best-seller lists of Cairo bookshops. At the Cairo Book Fair 2009 the three women, known within the Egyptian blog-community as “Bride”, “Rihab” and “Ghada”, were introduced to the public with their real names: seated on a stage and surrounded by literary critics, they were invited to talk about blog literature and to sign books, marking the entrance of blog-writers into the Egyptian literary field⁶. The most relevant aspect of this phenomenon is how personal writing, not intended for publication, written by common citizens who are outside the circle of intellectuals, managed to enter the biggest publishing house in Egypt and to achieve such a big success. In this way, as explained by Klinenberg and Benzecry (2005, 8), new communications technologies have reduced the price of entry into a cultural field, creating openings for people who were previously unable to make their work public as they did not belong to the circle of intellectuals nor had any mentor who could guide them through it⁷.

Since the appearance of these book-blogs, Arab literary critics and academic scholars, who first devalued the digital space as a space for amateurs and non-professional writers, have put their interest on blogs, not necessarily turned in print form, evaluating them as forms of literary writing. Thus, terms as *mudawwanat adabiyyah* (literary blogs) and *adab al-mudawwanah* (blog literature) have appeared on several newspapers, literary journals, academic papers and conference panels. In this ongoing debate, while some critics highlight “the newness” of blogs as literary forms, others claim that blogs do not have the legitimacy to be included in the realm of the *adab* (literature). This has to do perhaps with the fact that in the Arab world (as elsewhere) printed books enjoy more prestige; but also with the fact the Arab notion of *adab* is gradually coinciding but still differs from the Western notion of “literature”. In other words, to claim that a work is “literary” because it presents aspects of “literariness”, does not entirely correspond to saying that it is *adabi*, that is “literary” for Arab critics. Thus, the analysis of blogs in the field of Arabic Literature needs an understanding of how *adab* is conceived and produced in the Arab world. In the next paragraph I will provide a brief history of the term *adab* and I will show how the semantic origin of the term defines the boundaries of the Egyptian literary field.

2. *Adab* and *adab-icity*

When I claim that the term *adab* partly differs from that of “literature” it is because, they are historically grown and to a certain extent culture-bound concepts. As with all concepts, the semantic history of the word continues to have an effect on the nature and function attributed to this body of work. Indeed, the original meaning of the word *adab* implied both a moral component, in the sense of “good-manners, politeness” and a cultural one, which is the “body of written works”. *Adab* indicated works dealing with non-religious knowledge, but still its function was to “discipline, educate the mind”⁸.

Over the centuries, with the development of the caliphate, the works informed by the writer’s wish to contribute to *adab* (knowledge, culture) became a means of education but also entertainment for the members of the court: so, it came to include besides manuals of behavior and conducts, also genres as biography, history, and travel accounts. The assertion that *adab* was meant to have both an entertaining and educational purpose seems to be the equivalent of Horatian formula “dulce et utile”; however the presence of such non-fictional genres, a distinct characteristic of the phenomenon of *adab* that is to a certain degree still valid today, renders the concept of *adab* almost equivalent to the concept of “humanism”, rather than “literature”⁹.

During the *nahdah* (Arabic Modernism), a period of intellectual modernization and reform which took place in Egypt and then spread to Syria and Lebanon in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a transformation of the term *adab* took place, which it began to include “fictional works”. This process unfolded within a cultural context in which two major forces were in play and sometimes in confrontation. The first of them is what has been termed “the rediscovery of the West” – more particularly, an interest in the products and critical methods of Western literary traditions. The second is a search for inspiration in the Arabic literary heritage (Allen 2000). In the process of encounter with the West, Arabic intellectuals tended to reject loanwords, but rather to Arabize foreign concepts, either by creating new terms from existing roots, or by incorporating them into existing concepts. The latter was the case with “literature”, as the Western concept was absorbed by the old concept of *adab*; so we may speak of an “*adab*-taption” of the Western concept of literature. Western literary genres were “*adab*-ted” to serve the purpose of *adab*: the novelistic genre, for example was admitted by presenting itself as a moral, or didactic, as being as more realistic possible and thus removed from fiction; also short stories and dramatical pieces were used by Arab writers as a means of illustrating social problems. But also vice versa: the concept of *adab* began to integrate the notions of what the European genres stood for “literature”, that is fictionality, originality, creativity. Nowadays these fictional genres have established a place for itself within the currents of intellectual change, and constitute the major part of the *adab* production.

So, while Western literary critics tend to define “literature” as a “special kind of discourse” and an “autonomous work of art”, in the Arab world the dual concept of *adab* as “politeness” and *adab* as “literature” is still valid today. Richard Jacquemond, in his book *Conscience of the nation* (2008, 9), argues that it is by drawing on the long standing semantic link between “morality” and “knowledge” that censors of every type have continued to criticize literary works up until today putting those of which they disapprove in the category of the improper or impolite (*qillat al-adab*). Moreover, the continuing power of the classical conception of *adab* as instruction through entertainment can be seen within the still important idea that good literature harmoniously combines a didactic aim with aesthetic or artistic pleasure¹⁰. According to this view, Jacquemond (2008) argues that the writer in Arabic societies has a double function: s/he is an omniscient being who has the ability to depict the society to whom he belongs, and s/he is the scribe, the functionary responsible for communicating the words of the dominated to the dominant. At the same time the ancient idea of *adab* includes conformity to linguistic norms such as those governing purity and correctness, as well as aesthetic ones, such as those governing the prosody of classical poetry. Thus until today one of the tasks of literary criticism is to ensure that works conform to linguistic standards. According to this view, all the works written in Egyptian dialect, *ammiyya*, (the spoken language) are considered to be lacking in value and are not allowed into the canonical culture unless they have been domesticated as folklore, serving the “higher” purpose of nationalism. Also in Postmodern turns, while Western critics claimed the death of big ideas, and the art eschewing of responsibility, Arab writers still claimed the need for a committed literature, an art that cannot be excluded for its political role. Andreas Pflietsch (2010, 28) argues that in the Postmodern era, even authors who are not avowedly political never completely deny the political moment in their work¹¹. Being committed to the social and political context is one way of remaining trustful to the idea that literature should not be only entertaining but also useful. This has gradually changed only recently, in the 90s, when a new generation of writers has turned their back on the sociopolitical discourse to privilege more intimistic, autobiographical narration. Given the collapse of external reality¹² many young writers have argued that a focus on the personal and the subjective is potentially more powerful and more genuine for the search for truth in the larger sense. Thus, also the turn to the subject has often a political dimension, as it is a reaction to the political situation and perhaps an act of political opposition, of refusal of the norms imposed on writers by the dominant political-cultural norms. However, these forms of fictionalized self-writing have still received hostility by the Arab literati, who have accused them of giving publicity to self-discourses and self-images. The fact that this debate has taken place only ten years ago highlights that Arab criticism is still hesitant to establish an autonomous conception of art and literature; at the

same time the fact that these works have been included in the mainstream circles is a sign that the concept of *adab* and its functions are changing as well (el Sadda 2012, 163).

Have also new media contributed to the transformation of the literary field? Are the accessibility, anonymity and interactivity granted by the blogs also a way of changing the dominant view of what is legitimate literature and what is not? In order to suggest some preliminary answers to these questions that will be further developed in my doctoral research, I look into the blog *The Red Sofa* to find aspects of *adab-icity*. It should be kept in mind that a work that is meant to be *adabi* is expected to present elements of literariness¹³, such as fictionality, presence of a plot, self-referentiality of language; but also to “be polite”, to be written in a pleasant language, and to have a didactic function or be committed to a higher cause.

3. The Red Sofa *blog*

Bilal Husni is not a professional writer, nor does he define himself so. In the interview that I conducted with him in March 2012, he claimed to be a 32 year-old young emergent film-maker, scriptwriter, and blogger from Alexandria, Egypt.

He established his blog *The Red Sofa* in January 2007, and in the profile page of his blog he introduced himself to the blogosphere with his real name and with these words: “Last year my mom departed, without any notice and justification; she took everything with her as a souvenir from the Earth and she left me a sofa, so now I wander between rented houses carrying her sofa, or the sofa carries me”¹⁴. As anticipated by this short paragraph, published on the blogger’s profile page, the blog tells the story of Bilal’s journey on his red sofa. In his online diary, that was regularly written until January 2009 and is still available online, Bilal recollects the events that took place after his mother’s death, and provides an account of the present period which he spends with his friend Bahz in their shared flat in Alexandria. As the narration unfolds we can see that, besides recounting his wanderings in Alexandria, *The Red Sofa* also tells the story of Bilal’s inner journey, of his process of formation that takes place over these two years through the act of online self-writing: a process that takes him from the tragic shock of his mother’s death to the construction of an adult independent life. Indeed, as he explained to me, his mother’s death had changed his life completely: left alone broke and without a place to stay, Bilal felt carried away by a flow of events that were real and incredible at the same time, thus they were worth to record and to tell to the online audience. Just as in an ordinary private diary, writing down his feelings on the blog offered him relief from his mother’s death and gave him the possibility “to record the present and the past in order to turn it into nice memories for the future” (9/01/2007). However, unlike private diaries, the blog is published upon a public space and it is accessible to everyone: indeed, by blogging Bilal wished to “meet and

connect with other people who might share his own interests and lifestyle, to receive feedbacks on his poetical attempts and his life writing" (01/07/2007). In addition, Bilal wished to record the events and to comment upon them in public because they could be useful and inspiring for others.

In this way, the function of the blogger resembles the function of the "scribe", whose task is to register, document history besides producing a creative work; a function that was attributed to the Arab *adib* (writer of *adab*) involved in the process of nation-building in the Twentieth century. Revealingly, the Arabic word for "blog", *mudawwanah*, comes from the verb *dawwana*, that means "to register, to render words official by putting them on paper". In fact, a review of the blog *The Red Sofa* published in the literary magazine *Akhbar Al Adab* (Literary News) underlines that the blog is *adabi* because it is a "hyperreal description of how young Egyptian live in contemporary society", highlighting the didactic, useful aspect of this text. One of the questions that arises from the blog phenomenon, but that will not be developed here, is if and how bloggers function as "modern scribes" of the nation while they publish on the World Wide Web and most of them write in Egyptian dialect.

The moment he starts writing, the blogger informs his readers that his blog is meant to be a work of *adab*. Indeed, he stresses the fictionality of his diary that, as I have mentioned above, has become one of the main aspects that *adab* has absorbed from the Western literary genres in the Modern Period. Even if we can find many similarities between the first person narrator/main character of the blog and the physical profile of the blogger, Bilal claims that the events narrated are "imagined", a "manipulation of real life events" (09/01/2007); the fictionality, he claims, relies in the making up of details, as for example imagining that he has inherited the sofa from his mother: "making up details is a way of saving life from death", he adds, "a way of becoming eternal" (16/01/2007), thus of reacting to the process of disintegration that affects his mother, himself and the sofa. Some posts are named as *fusul*, that is the Arabic word for "chapters"; to the readers who invite him to publish his blog in book form, he clarifies that his intention is to write a blog-narration on the life story of a sofa, and that he has chosen the online medium because of its interaction and freedom and the possibility to combine writing with other media. However, the blog complicates the distinction between fiction and non-fiction¹⁵. In the blog the "I" of the narrator does not refer to an imagined character, rather refers to a character that exists in real life with the same name and that shares with the narrator many aspects of his life. While Bilal is documenting the development of his self over the days and the years, he is at the same time claiming that this self is fictional: in this way he is opening up a grey area between the documentary and the fictional account. This ambiguity with regard to the ontological status is confirmed by the reaction of the readers to his life stories: while some readers deal with his writing as fiction, commenting on his style and the way he represents feelings and emotions, many readers tend to identify the blogger with his online alter ego

and hence feel entitled to comment on his behavior. This anxiety of the readers towards the truth value might also be linked to the episodic format of narration: the character of the blogger is constructed through an ongoing, complex interaction of episodic narratives: interruption, deferral, and waiting produce the desire that makes the reader return. In this sense, the blog offers both a voyeuristic pleasure and a strong identification pleasure. Fitzpatrick (i.e., 176) argues that this question around the truth status and the episodic format links blogs to early forms of novel and constitute the main pleasure of blog readings, which attributes literariness to this form. However this pleasure is also a matter of frustration for Bilal: he fears that the people he meets in offline reality tend to attribute to him the characteristics of his online counterpart. This is given by the fact that he blogs with his real name, and Alexandria is a small city and that the blogging community meet and interact regularly also offline. Another aspect that complicates the distinction between fiction and non-fiction is the fact that the blog, besides the narration of Bilal's journey on the sofa, includes film reviews, comments about music, book reviews, song videos, and calls for meetings, social events and political demonstrations. As claimed by Himmer (2004), the fictional is blended with the outside reality and the extra-literary world, the personal is strongly intermingled with the public, making the personal and the political not discernible.

Apart from fictionality, another element of literariness is the presence of a plot in the blog-narration¹⁶. In the beginning the account is focused on the present: Bilal describes his present staying on the red sofa in a poor flat in Alexandria. Through the description of the sofa we are introduced to the characters who usually sit on it: his flat mate and best friend Bahz, the nosy doorman Uncle Saad, the Spanish flat mate converted to Islam, his girlfriend Amira, Matthew the Scottish flat mate, and of course his mother, to whom the sofa originally belonged. Then, one day, Bilal announces that one of the readers has suggested in a comment to auction the sofa. This encourages him to go back to his past and recounting to the readers the entire story of his past journey on the sofa that took him to the present flat. This journey resembles a journey that starts from death and goes towards a new life: it takes him from his mother's flat to one situated in the basement of an old building that resembled a tomb, and where actually an old beggar had just died; then to a flat where he spends his days tinkering on a bicycle; then another one that he shares with a lazy teenager; until finally he settles down with his peer Bahz. This disclosure of his memories goes parallel with his description of more intimate and embarrassing details about his present and verbal depictions of his fat, nude body. This goes on for several months until the blogger starts confessing his gradual frustration at blogging, his need of separation from Bahz, his desire of getting rid of the sofa. Indeed the result of this undressing is a feeling of breakdown both existential and professional, as "this feeling of failure comes from inside" (31/12/2007). Bilal loses his desire for confession in an open space as he feels his complete disclosure on the blog

has attributed him only a “big social whipping”, both in the blogosphere and in offline reality (since he blogs with his real name). Also, he feels that the blog has led him to a dead end street where he is rotating around the same fictional characters that he has created (13/08/2008). The end of the blog is anticipated but not properly announced, leaving the readers the possibility to make up their own ending or waiting for the blogger to come back to narration at any time¹⁷. As we can see, the plot is not planned from before but it is constituted by the accretion of the narratives published regularly on the blog. Also the plot of the narration is not exclusive to the writer. As shown by the example of the auction, we can see that the readers influence the development of the plot and their comments lead to unexpected changes. The characters described in the narration are not only constituted by the writers’ word but they themselves speak with their own words (his flat mate Bahz for example often contributed to the narration) and contribute with their knowledge to the blogger’s self-representation. This is because on the Web, private diaries become not only public but also interactive. In an online diary, each entry is published once at a time, remaking the diary as a serialized form in which readers follow a story that is evolving and to which they may contribute. The Web’s interactivity and the immediacy of its publishing enhance that aspect of diary writing concerned not with solitary and private reflection, but with communication and community (Sefarty, 2003).

Another element of literariness in the blog is the anthropomorphization of objects, which is causing the reader to perceive objects as living creatures. The sofa, as many others of the object depicted in the blog, are turned into living beings. Its body undergoes a process of transformation that reflects the passing of time and goes through the different stages of life. See for example its description in this passage:

Two years before her death she [his mother] was bored of sleeping in her room so she decided to sleep in my room, since then until her death I slept on the sofa... At this time the sofa was strong and covered with a bed sheet, like a lady that stretches her body while sleeping in front of me ... Shortly before her death the sofa got completely spoiled, because I was getting up often at night to take my mum to the bathroom, or she was calling me, not that she wanted anything; she just wanted to call me. The sofa got spoiled and the bed sheet fell down, her body was loosened, you could see, it was marked with a white spot of sperm that didn’t make the sofa any close to an abstract work of art. (2/10/2007)

Like the sofa, the bicycle is described as a human character, to the extent that the character has to sleep while giving his shoulders to “her”, as he is disturbed by the presence of her body. Not only objects are alive, but they are also attributed an active role in the unfolding of the events: by linking the sofa to his mother’s death, making up that he inherited it from her, Bilal renders the sofa the element that connects his separation from his mother to the start of a new life.

In the blog, the red sofa does not simply identify an ordinary object, but rather it is a metonymy that uploads the object with additional meanings and functions. The *Red Sofa*, as the title of the blog, is perceived by the readers as the name of the space where they are welcomed to take a sit and have a chat with Bilal's new and old friends, and where they feel authorized to leave a mark, to influence its shape. The *Red Sofa* is also perceived as the alter ego of the blogger himself: his body is huge and heavy, just like the blogger's body, and contains all the good and sad memories from the past. When he expresses his frustration at blogging, Bilal claims that it is because the sofa is swallowing him.

There is something to be specified also about the materiality of the blog and how it challenges traditional views of how we see and read literature and *adab*. Blogs can be read vertically, thus following the chronological order (starting from the earliest entry to the oldest or vice versa) but also horizontally, thus following multiple diarists on a single day. This shows that blog reading involves an active engagement of the reader in creating the meaning of a story by selecting different pathways through it; each of the methods of reading described above would convey a somewhat different diary, and a somewhat different impression of the writer (Sefarty, 2003). Also the notion of writing is redefined for online diarists, as they also "write" with images, navigation choices, and site structure. As in print autobiographies and diaries that include photographs or illustrations, autobiographical expression is not limited to language, although on the Web the means of expression extend beyond visual elements. Both in the header of the blog and right side, Bilal uploads pictures of Jennifer Garant's paintings that show whimsical chefs while running around on bicycles to carry food and wine. The profile picture also depicts a chubby chef that clumsily serves two bottles of wine. By choosing this picture, the blogger is highlighting his body features, also depicted in his writing. Also, he is anticipating that his blog contains some elements that might be considered *haram* (forbidden by the Islamic law) by the more conservative readers. To the more unconventional readers, instead, he seems to suggest taking a drink and to comfortably sit on his red sofa and enjoy his stories.

This warning seems necessary, as Bilal's narration is "impolite", in the sense that is often disrespectful of the dominant moral values in Egyptian society. Indeed, while telling the story of his journey on the sofa, the narrator is also encouraged to reveal embarrassing, intimate details of his past, like his praying impure at his mother's funeral, or masturbating towards the sky as a reaction to his mother's illness. Through the sofa we read about Bilal's funny and embarrassing sexual adventures, his use of drugs, the pile of dirty socks that becomes higher and higher, his complete distrust in God. Bilal accurately recounts his attempt to bring a prostitute to the flat out of the doorman's sight (28/01/2008); he discusses his disapproval of Antonio's conversion to Islam, as he prefers him to be "without a God" (28/05/2007); he describes the spot of sperm on the sofa that "doesn't make it any closer to an abstract work of

art”; he confesses his devilish instincts that drives him to read all the emails of a girl who forgets to close her Yahoo Message in a cyber café (03/07/2007). While some readers appraise his courage and find his narration entertaining, others feel harmed by the fact that the blogger reveals very private issues in a public space; as one of the commentators points out, “by writing his stories in public, he depicts his people as dirty and rubbish” (28/01/2008). In short, some readers seem to disapprove the fact that even if the blog is written in a literary style, yet it is “indecorous”. These comments reveal that the readers’ reception mirrors the link between *adab* and morality that I have pointed out before. By signing with his real name an autofictional account of his youth, the author is presenting his life story that challenges the dominant view of morality, youth and masculinity represented in mainstream circles; in this way he is producing a work that is meant and perceived to be *adabi* but that at the same time that disrupts the link between literature and morality that is at the core of the same notion of *adab*.

Another element that challenges the inclusion of the blog in the category of *adab* is its language and literary style. Indeed, *The Red Sofa*, as many other blogs published online, although it is published on the worldwide web, it is written mainly in Egyptian dialect mixed with Modern Standard Arabic¹⁸. The blog texts are made sometimes of very long sentences, without punctuation, that seem to follow the spontaneous order of the thoughts and feelings rather than a syntactical structure. The narration is strongly influenced by the oral language, as if the author would be sitting on the sofa and talking to his readers. The blog presents also several spelling and grammatical mistakes, which indicates that the blogger does not revise his posts before publishing them on his blog. This spontaneity of language is a means of entertainment for readers and what encourages them to follow the blog and comment: they point out that the blogger is writing to them in their own words and do not seem to care about language mistakes. As for literary critics, some of them argue that because of this linguistic deficiency, blog literature poses a danger for the literary production: since blogs allow everybody to be a writer, even without being endowed high literary skills, and since these writings do not undergo any critical evaluation or revision of language, they might ‘falsify’ the creative literary process (Ibādah, 2008). In other words, they might devalue the prestige of *adab* as “high literature” written in a pleasant, high language that conforms to specific linguistic standards. Other literary critics praise this spontaneity of language because it brings novelty and freshness to the literary language; also they argue that it brings a larger number of readers to the literary production.

Indeed, the presence of a large readership that provides an immediate feedback is another new element brought by blog literature in Egyptian literary field. The visitors counter of *The Red Sofa* reports 49,727 page views until the present date. This is a significant number, if we compare it to the

fact that print runs are usually limited to a thousand copies in small private publishing houses (Jaquemond, 76) and to five thousands as in the case of Dar al-Shuruq, the biggest mainstream publishing house. Before the spread of social networks and blogs, literature had been confined to the intellectual niche. Egyptian writers used to complain that “being a reader meant also being a writer” (Interview with Youssef Rakha, Egyptian writer and journalist, performed in January 2010), as they used to read and discuss each other’s works, without receiving attentions from outside the intellectual circles. In this sense, the blogosphere has granted a huge proliferation of literary texts and readership, besides promotion of printed books, literary events and organization of online and offline readers’ club.

Conclusions

The blog *The Red Sofa*, written by Bilal Husni, shows how Egyptian online literature is challenging and contributing to the Arabic notion of *adab*. By defining himself a blogger, and not a writer, by circumventing the print media which imply the review of censors and literary “purists”, Bilal has been able to add new meanings and functions to the notion of *adab*. His blog is an autofictional works in which he does not deal with socio-political issues; rather he represents his life stories addressing the readers with a simple, yet literary language, that often disrupt the moral and linguistic norms that have defined the borders of the literary field until recent years. Like Bilal, many other Egyptian bloggers are presenting their individualities and forming communities that are able to question and change the dominant view of what is legitimate and not in the Egyptian literary field. At the same time, Arab critics are showing their interests in these forms of online writing, probably inspired by the revolutionary breeze of the Arab Spring, admitting that a change, not only political, is needed.

Notes

¹ I have transliterated Arabic words and names in accordance with the system used by the International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies. I have omitted the use of Arabic diacritics, except for the *ayn* (‘) and the *hamza* (‘). Initial *hamza* is also dropped.

² My doctoral thesis, to be completed within October 2013 is entitled *Fictionalized Identities in Egyptian online literature*. For a more detailed description of the project see: <<http://www.hf.uio.no/ikos/english/research/center/islamic-and-middle-east-studies/projects/fictionalized-identities.html>>.

³ I coined this term for readers not acquainted with Arabic language to indicate “literariness” within the Arabic tradition of *adab*.

⁴ The “Egyptian Movement for Change” (also known as *Kefaya*, Enough) was a grassroots coalition that was founded in 2004 to oppose Mubarak’s regime. The movement made much use of blogs as a tool of political information and organization.

⁵ For example, in 2006 the famous blogger Wa’il ‘Abbas used his blog *Digital Misr* to broadcast a video of police brutality filmed with the camera of a mobile phone, which lead to

the conviction of a police officer for torture. Bloggers also addressed the big case of the sexual harassment silenced by mainstream media, that took place during the 'Id (Islamic feast) celebration at the end of Ramadan in 2006, when crowds of men began sexually assaulting women, both veiled and unveiled – while the police stood around and watched the mass.

⁶ In '*Ayiza Atgawwiz* (I want to get married), the most famous of the above mentioned blog-books, the blogger deals with the problem of marriage in Egypt and recounts her family's desperate attempts to find her a groom, since she is turning 29. The book has reached its ninth edition, has been translated into several Western languages and has been turned into a television series which was released during Ramadan 2010. Ahmad al-Zayadi, chief director of Dar al-Shuruq publishing house, specifies that each print constitutes of 5,000 copies (Interview, Cairo, 05/2010).

⁷ For more on Egyptian blog-books see Pepe 2011, 75-90.

⁸ The origin of the word is with all probability in the pl. 'adāb from 'ad'āb, sg. da'b, that means "norms and customs, tradition", so the word *adab* coincided largely with the word *sunna*, that in Islamic times came to signify the tradition and customs of the Prophet. After the spread of Islam, while the *sunna* started to be used exclusively to indicate the norms of the Prophet, *adab* acquired a different meaning; on one side it meant the moral education, the corps of good norms and besides that, the sum of all non-religious knowledge. Thus, the main purpose of *adab* was "to discipline the mind and to teach, educate". For a further discussion about the word *adab* see the etymological-conceptual study "Politeness, Höflichkeit, 'adab" by Guth (2010).

⁹ For the equation of *adab* as "humanism" see Guth (2010, 9-29).

¹⁰ The novelistic *genre* was admitted in the twentieth century by presenting itself as a moral, or didactic, as being as more realistic possible and thus removed from fiction. See Guth 2011, 147-179.

¹¹ Andreas Pflitsch writes: "The continuing discrepancy – or non-contemporaneity – between the Western and the Arab way of dealing with the relationship of politics and literature was made glaringly obvious in a discussion between Alain Robbe-Grillet, one of the most renowned representatives of the French *nouveau roman*, and the Palestinian author Jabra Ibrahim Jabra at a literature festival in Baghdad in 1988. Robbe-Grillet could not conceal his amusement about an Iraqi literature professor who demanded a commitment to social issues from literature. 'We've moved on from this,' he remarked, 'we've finally overcome this foolish delusion.' Jabra defended the professor, making it abundantly clear that in illiberal societies such as those that exist in Arab countries one simply could not indulge in the luxury afforded to writers in the West; that is to achieve such a degree of distance in art and literature that they are decoupled entirely from society and social conditions. Two years later, the Egyptian authors Sonallah Ibrahim and Ibrahim Aslan argued along similar lines in a discussion with the French Nobel laureate Claude Simon, another exponent of the *nouveau roman*. Simon had divorced the personal nature of literature from politics, thus provoking rebuke from his Egyptian colleagues, who adhered to literature's political claim" (Winckler 2010, 29).

¹² Arab intellectuals conceive the crushing defeat suffered by the Arab states at the hands of Israel in the June War of 1967 as a point of non return. Also the Lebanese civil war that broke out in April 1975 has had a similar impact on literature (Pflitsch 2010, 31).

¹³ I rely here on Derek Attridge's definition of literariness, that in his book *The Singularity of Literature* claims that literariness is not only rendered by the imaginative nature of the work, but by two additional properties: singularity and inventiveness. Literary invention for Attridge is a result of linguistic innovation that is the possibility of stretching, twisting, exaggerating, combining every norm, habit, rule and expectation involved in the use of language. This invention however takes place only when the reader experiences it, that is, when the characters and the events brought into being by the language are brought into his mind, into his consciousness, in ways that change it (Attridge 2002, 54).

¹⁴ All translations of the blog texts are mine. For the quotations derived from the blog, I indicate in brackets the date of publication of the blog entry.

¹⁵ For a discussion regarding the autofictional nature of blogs see Pepe 2012, 1-10.

¹⁶ According to the Russian Victor Shklovsky the plot is an element that contributes to defamiliarization, and thus, to literariness because is a distortion of the normal storyline (Williams 2004, 5).

¹⁷ In the interview Bilal states that he stopped blogging because his relationship with the sofa had come to an end. For him the blog was a temporary tool that helped him to recover from his mother's death. He moved out the flat he shared with Bahz and got married. As for the sofa, he left it on Cairo-Alexandria desert-road, "in the middle of nowhere", letting it continue its travel alone and start a new set of stories.

¹⁸ Egypt, as many of the Arab countries, faces a problem of linguistic diglossia. Egyptian dialect, that significantly differs from Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), is the mother tongue of all Egyptians and is used in face-to-face interactions, television, radio and Internet media. MSA is used mainly in written texts. For a survey of the use of Egyptian Vernacular in Egyptian literature see Mejdell 2006, 195-213.

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