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Copts, Islamists and Jews: gender, minorities, hybridity (and its limits) in two novellas by Bahaa Abdelmegid

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Abstract *Bahaa Abdelmegid's novellas Saint Theresa and Sleeping with Strangers feature a range of intertwined relations: sexual, commercial, as neighbours, and as colleagues between Jews, Christians and Muslims in Egyptian society since 1967. This paper explores the implications of Abdelmegid's portrayal of Egyptian society, in which he celebrates its internal diversity whilst simultaneously warning of the dangers and disruptions of 'too much' hybridity and of over-familiarity with the 'Other'. I argue that Abdelmegid's Egyptian masculine is fragile, brittle, and under threat from a dissolute West and an extremist and inauthentic Islam. Abdelmegid articulates a modern warning to this frail masculinity, as well as to a more stable and worldly-wise feminine, about the dangers of undisciplined relationships with both Western culture and religious fundamentalism, both of which stray away from a real Egypt he constructs.*

After the fall of Hosni Mubarak and during the brief rise to power of the Muslim Brotherhood, attention focused on Egypt's communal relations. Violence between Muslims and Coptic Christians has been read in the light of resurgent Islamist militancy in the Middle East, or of Western stereotypes about 'ancient religious rivalries'.¹ However, cultural production by Egypt's post-war writers, film-makers and other artists suggests that Egypt's inter-ethnic relations (and the attitudes of Egyptians towards them) are both much more complex and, at times, much richer and more harmonious. This has been reflected in literature,² from Naguib Mahfouz's controversial novel *Awlad Haratina* (Children of our Alley/Children of Gebelawi) (1959) to Alaa Al-Aswany's international blockbuster *Imarat Ya 'qubyan* (The Yacoubian Building), whilst recently the "sympathetic treatment of Egypt's Jews and its depiction of their fierce anti-Zionism" in the 2015 Ramadan TV serial *Harat al-yahud* (The Jewish Quarter) aroused both criticism and praise.³ My wider research on representations of amatory encounters between Arab-Jewish and Muslim-Jewish

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¹ Detailed discussions of place and uses of notions of sectarianism and religion in the Arab Uprisings can be found in Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, "Politics of Sectarianism: Rethinking Religion and Politics in the Middle East". *Middle East Law and Governance* 7 (2015), 61-75 and Mark Farha, "Searching for Sectarianism in the Arab Spring: Colonial Conspiracy or Indigenous Instinct?". *Muslim World*, 106, 1 (January 2016), 8-60.

² Hilary Kilpatrick, *The Modern Egyptian Novel: A Study in Social Criticism* (London: Ithaca Press, 1974), 181-183.

³ David Kirkpatrick, 'For Many in Egypt, TV Show's Shocking Twist Is Its Sympathetic Jews', *New York Times* 24th June 2015.

characters suggests increasing discussion since the late 1980s of this particular strand of inter-ethnic life,⁴ as depicted in novels by authors writing in Arabic or in European languages. This chimes with observations (both academic and popular) that fictional representations of (non-amatory) relations between Muslims and Jews are on the rise, and that this may signal a new point in debates about the place of Jews in the (historical and contemporary) Arab and Muslim worlds.⁵

This article focuses on two novellas, *Sant Tereza* (Saint Theresa), published in 2001, and *Al-nawm ma' al-ghuruba'* (Sleeping with Strangers) from 2005.⁶ Their author, Bahaa Abdelmegid, is a lecturer in English literature at Ain Shams University who has written a number of novellas, short stories, and English-language opinion pieces on the Egyptian experience since 2010. Both *Saint Theresa* and *Sleeping with Strangers* depict a variety of amatory encounters – both positive and negative in tone and outcome – between Egyptian and non-Egyptian Muslims, Christians and Jews, in settings of Cairene life from the mid-1960s to around 2000.

This article attempts to tease out some of the key representations in Abdelmegid's novellas of inter-ethnic and inter-faith romance and to explore the meanings and resonances of Abdelmegid's portrayals. Whilst my main focus has been on Muslim-Jewish relationships, in Abdelmegid's work this issue is intimately entwined with a broader discussion of the nature of an 'Egyptianness' which emphatically incorporates Coptic identities whilst offering more tantalising suggestions as to the place of Egypt's Jews. Coptic Egyptians are not 'hybrids' but authentic Egyptians, Abdelmegid seems to assert; by the same logic so are Arab Egyptian Jews. But what are the possibilities for hybridity in Egyptianness, for inclusivity and new Egyptians? As such, I propose a reading of the novellas which, drawing on theories of nostalgia and on feminist scholarship on the meaning and use of gender and sexuality in conditions of conflict, sees Abdelmegid as locating cross-community harmony in an idealised past which is contrasted with and critiques a chaotic and intolerant present.

Inter-ethnic Romances in Egyptian Literature

There exists a long history of Egyptian fiction and autobiography which uses interpersonal, and especially romantic or sexual relationships as a way of thinking about identity and nationality. Perhaps the most widely-discussed examples are those of writers such as Tawfiq al-Hakim (*Return of the Spirit, A Bird of the East*) and their autobiographical or semi-autobiographical explorations of the relationship between colonised and coloniser through romances between young Egyptian men and Western

⁴ I would like to thank Dr Nacim Pak-Shiraz of the University of Edinburgh for her guidance during the dissertation which provided the theoretical background for this paper; participants at the 'Visions of Egypt' conference at the University of Hull who discussed my paper of which this is an expanded and (hopefully) improved version; and Dr Bahaa Abdelmegid for his encouragement to publish this discussion of his work.

⁵ See, for instance, Arabic Literature (in English) blog, 'Najat Abdulhaq on the Emergence of the 'Arab Jew' in Contemporary Arabic Literature'. <http://arablit.wordpress.com/2014/10/14/najat-abdulhaq-on-the-emergence-of-the-arab-jew-in-contemporary-arabic-literature/>, accessed October 2014.

⁶ In the interests of consistency and comparability, this paper uses Rossetti's translations and transliterations as a source of quotations and transliterations. Bahaa Abdelmegid, *Saint Theresa and Sleeping with Strangers*, trans. Chip Rossetti. Cairo: University of Cairo Press, 2010.

women.⁷ Early Egyptian novels such as Mohammed Hussein Haykal's *Zaynab* also view the development of core ideas about hegemonic national masculinity through the choices and challenges that their male protagonists – termed '*nahda* heroes' by Hoda Elsadda – face in finding women who fit their often troubled and conflicting standards.⁸ In these novels, debates over what it means to be 'Egyptian' often assume there are but two male identities: the secularised, educated Sunni Muslim who agonises over how to find a balance between Western/modern and Egyptian national pride; and the rough, uneducated, yet authentic Muslim fellah.⁹ Women, Christians, Jews (even those of Egyptian origin and culture), and non-Sunnis lie outside the standard definition of the national. As Hilary Kilpatrick has pointed out, non-(Sunni)-Muslim characters, especially women, “appear for a special reason”. Christian and Jewish women, in particular, exist primarily to give verisimilitude to romantic plot-lines in which it would have been socially impossible to include a respectable Muslim woman.¹⁰ In addition, these examples often take place outside Egypt, or involve romantic interest in a person – usually a woman – who is emphatically *not* Egyptian. They are primarily explorations of the colonial power relationship and of the encounter between the Egyptian and the Other, not debates about definitions of Egyptianness as it applies to different groups within the broader Egyptian nation.

In terms of novels which consider identity and the Other within a single broader category, Naguib Mahfouz' *Awlad Haratina* (Children of our Alley/Children of Gebelawi) addresses the relationship between the Abrahamic faiths as depicted in a “semi-realistic Cairo neighbourhood”.¹¹ However, this novel lacks the romantic aspect central to this paper, and its main concern is an allegorical exploration of inter-faith relations on a global or conceptual scale. As for Egyptian novels that deal directly with relationships between Muslims, Christians and Jews within Egypt, and which do so at least in part through amatory relationships, the earliest example appears to be Waguih Ghali's *Beer in the Snooker Club* (1964). Earlier examples do exist from other parts of the Arabic-speaking world, especially Palestine, dating back at least to 1919. As Muhammad Siddiq observes, “With the exception of works written by Coptic writers... and Mahfouz... credible Coptic characters are conspicuous by their absence from Egyptian fiction written before the 1970s”.¹² Ghali's novel was from 1964, but it was written in English and we can assume not intended for popular consumption within Egypt. This lacuna represents the absence of the Copts, a people presented in the work of some Coptic writing as the most authentic or deepest-rooted of Egyptians, albeit marginalised in intellectual, creative and political narratives.¹³ Other Egyptian minorities, such as the substantial Jewish population of the

⁷ Hoda Elsadda, *Gender, Nation and the Arabic Novel* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 59-60.

⁸ *Ibid.*, xxxi, 51.

⁹ Elsadda, *Gender, Nation*, xxxi, xxxvii, 63, 65; Muhammad Siddiq, *Arab Culture and the Novel: Genre, Identity and Agency in Egyptian Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2007), 80.

¹⁰ Kilpatrick, *Modern Egyptian Novel*, 181.

¹¹ Ruth Roded, “Alternate Images of the Prophet Muhammad's Virility”. In *Islamic Masculinities*, ed. Lahoucine Ouzgane (London: Zed Books, 2006): 67.

¹² Siddiq, *Arab Culture and the Novel*, 148.

¹³ Anthony Gorman, *Historians, State and Politics in Twentieth Century Egypt*. (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 146, 153.

pre-*Nakba* era, and the so-called *mutamaşşirūn*,¹⁴ have also only appeared regularly and believably in Egyptian novels in the last couple of decades.¹⁵

The more recent increase in tackling inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations through fiction, including romantic and sexual themes, seems to have been led in the Egyptian case by Fathi Ghanim's *Ahmed wa Daoud* (Ahmed and David) in 1979 (Arabic original) and to have blossomed since the millennium, in Egypt as well as other parts of the Arab world. In addition to the ubiquitous Alaa Al-Aswany (*The Yacoubian Building* and *Chicago*), examples include Ibrahim Farghali's *Ibtisamat al-qiddisin* (Smiles of the Saints, 2004) and Kamal Ruhayyim's *Qulub munhaka: al-muslim al-yahudi* (2004, translated as *Diary of a Jewish Muslim*, 2014), *Ayyam al-shatat* (Days in the Diaspora, 2008), and *Ahlam al-'awda* (Dreams of Return, 2012), which depict the conflicted identities of Egyptian Jews living in diaspora.

Nostalgia and 'Real' Egyptians: Jews and Copts in *Saint Theresa*

Bahaa Abdelmegid's two novellas feature a range of intertwined amatory relationships – both consummated and unconsummated – between Muslims, Copts and Jews. In doing so, they present a picture of communal relations in Egypt between the 1960s and today that acknowledges tensions while suggesting the potential for harmony under a flexible, hybridised Egyptian identity. My contention is that Abdelmegid's characters and the plots within which they move use devices of nostalgia, gender, and sexuality to raise possibilities of communal harmony and hybrid identity, and then to critique social forces which foreclose such potential. The novellas also confirm Samira al-Aghacy's contention that more Middle Eastern male writers are “becoming more consciously aware of their gender and of the instability of masculinity”.¹⁶ I argue that this provides a significant means for Abdelmegid to explore and challenge narratives of identity. Through a reading which focuses on the Jewish characters in the two novellas, contrasts them with their Coptic neighbours, and explores other notions of insider/outsider in Abdelmegid's characters and settings, I interrogate Abdelmegid's exploration of categories such as *Jew*, *Israeli*, *Egyptian*, and *foreigner*, and his presentation of their relations with those identities he sees as representing the core of Egyptian society. I do not argue that Abdelmegid is attempting a historically accurate portrayal of change in inter-ethnic relations in Egypt, but rather that by locating his stories in a historical setting and over a period of time, he is able to use temporal distance and a sense of nostalgia to posit a past ideal against which to contrast an imperfect present.

Saint Theresa is set in the Cairo neighbourhood of that name in the years before and after the *Naksa* of 1967 (the shock defeat of the combined forces of Egypt, Jordan and Syria by the State of Israel, and the occupation by Israel of the West Bank, Gaza, the Golan and Sinai). In this setting, which pays homage to Mahfouz's alley, the story follows the lives of two girls who grow up in the same alley – Budur, from a Coptic family, and

¹⁴ Egyptianised foreigners of various European origins resident in Egypt from the nineteenth century onwards, in many cases resented/excluded by Egyptian nationalists. Substantial numbers left or were expelled under Nasser in the 1950s. Gorman, *Historians, State and Politics*, 181, 194.

¹⁵ Siddiq, *Arab Culture and the Novel*, 148.

¹⁶ Samira Aghacy, *Masculine Identity in the Fiction of the Arab East Since 1967*. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2009), 132.

Sawsan, from a Muslim background. The novel opens in a series of spaces filled with women where daily activities carried out by women are marked by religious symbols such as crosses, but without the implication that these are means of separation. Indeed, Sawsan mentions visiting the church of St Theresa along with her mother, suggesting that Abdelmegid wants to frame religious identities at this point as flexible and inclusive.¹⁷ In addition, physical relations between the genders – often seen as the site at which borders between identities are most stringently enforced by national and patriarchal norms¹⁸ – seem to be permitted between Copts and Muslims, suggesting that the differences of creed are subsumed beneath a greater category of 'Egyptian'. Sawsan's brother, Said, who is killed in the 1967 war, enjoys a brief kiss with Budur, who remembers his embrace “whenever she hears his name”, despite her later marriage to a Coptic man.¹⁹ Despite the trials which both face in life, Sawsan can later say to Budur that “I've known you since I was born, Budur. We're like one person. You're a part of me... and your husband Girgis is like my brother”.²⁰ The baseline, therefore, seems to be that Copts and Muslims are *not* to be defined as separate; they are both fundamentally Egyptian, as expressed in this fictive kinship, drawn from the mixed but harmonious environment of the alley. That commonality is the key identity that defines them, and it is broad and flexible enough to encompass their confessional variety.

Also notable is the fact that, in *Saint Theresa*, this accepting, tolerant, stable form of Egyptian identity lies in the female characters. Although Abdelmegid engages with the images of hegemonic masculinity portrayed by Haykal and al-Hakim, he also challenges them. A stable feminine representation of Egypt and her [sic] values, however mirrors – in a subtly critical way – common ideas about women as the repository of national identities and virtues. As a wide range of scholars, including Caren Kaplan, Inderpal Grewal and Nira Yuval-Davis, have written, such ideas often see female figures of the nation (Marianne in France, Mother Russia, the female peasant of *Nahdat Misr*) portrayed in positive ways, but translate in quotidian settings and for ordinary women into controls on the body, sexuality and public activities in order to maintain nationally-identified virtue.

The main Jewish character in *Saint Theresa*, the clothes merchant Luka, is to some extent given a sympathetic portrayal, but he does remain a somewhat ambiguous figure. On one hand, he is handsome, polite and respectful, as well as being successful in his business. On the other, after an initial introduction simply as a *khawaga* or foreigner, the announcement that he is Jewish comes in quick succession to Sawsan's musings on her brother's death – which she denies has happened, since “we never got his body back”.²¹ So despite Luka's positive attributes, he is rapidly associated with hostile relations with the State of Israel, and with the instability and unhappiness of uncertainty. This link reappears in Girgis's fury at Luka after he is cuckolded by him; Girgis focuses his rage on Luka's Jewishness and rages that it was Jews who “usurped the land of Palestine and disgraced

¹⁷ Bahaa Abdelmegid. *Saint Theresa and Sleeping with Strangers*, trans. Chip Rossetti (Cairo: AUC Press, 2010), 19.

¹⁸ Eg. Nickie Charles and Helen Hintjens, 'Introduction: Gender, Ethnicity and Cultural Identity – Women's 'Places''. In *Gender, Ethnicity and Political Ideologies*, ed. Nickie Charles and Helen Hintjens (London: Routledge, 1998), 5-6.

¹⁹ Abdelmegid, *Saint Theresa*, 9-10.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 73.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

the Holy Land”.²²

Luka is also confirmed – despite his “fluent” Arabic – as an outsider, someone who immigrated to Cairo from Greece “a long time ago”, not a 'native' Egyptian.²³ Prior to 1948 such mobile existences across the Eastern Mediterranean were not unusual and many Egyptian Jews had what would now be termed hybrid identities, drawing on Egyptian, Arab and Jewish referents.²⁴ But the polarisation and suspicion engendered by pre-1948 Zionist ambitions and acts such as espionage by the post-1948 State of Israel,²⁵ and conflicts between Israel and the Arab states, mean that by the time in which Abdelmegid's novel is set a Jewish figure such as Luka was much less familiar member of society. This identity also posits Luka not as a Cairene Egyptian Jew, deeply rooted in Arabic culture, but as one of the more liminal figures (some of them Jewish) who, although often cited in recent nostalgia literature (see below) as a symbol of a multicultural and cosmopolitan Egypt, were largely dependent for their status on the colonial system and only minimally integrated into ordinary Cairene society.²⁶ Abdelmegid does not represent the traditional Cairene Jewish community in this novel or the definitely Middle Eastern 'Arab Jew' as described by Ella Shohat and others,²⁷ but given the territorially-based, otherwise flexible definition of nationhood he seems to employ, it seems likely that these Jews *would* fit into his notion of Egyptianness. (The question, of course, remains: why did Abdelmegid not include such a character in his own 'Cairo neighbourhood'?). Luka therefore seems to embody the complexities of Ella Shohat's discussion of hybridity in the post-colonial setting; where she states that: “no matter how hybrid that identity has been before, during, and after colonialism, the retrieval and reinscription of a fragmented past becomes a crucial contemporary site for forging a resistant collective identity.”²⁸ We see in the character of Luka one who comes close to attaining hybridity, but for whom the “brutal ruptures” of colonialism – as imposed both on himself and on the society he almost manages to find a place within – are too strong to overcome.

Luka's romantic past is also used to suggest the question of outside allegiances. Before the novel's events, he had been in love with an Italian Christian woman who refused to marry him because of their differing faiths. This is the true love which he insists later has “hurt him on the inside”.²⁹ It reinforces the idea of the Jew as suffering figure, injured in particular by Christianity, and is contrasted with the affair he starts with Budur, which remains explicitly on the level of physical need and a kind of convenient affection. The situation seems to mirror the claims often made by earlier eras of Egyptian intellectuals that the '*mutamaşşirūn*' – Egyptianised foreigners, often middle-class and, like Luka, business-owners – ultimately had allegiances that rested elsewhere and would not remain

²² Ibid, 78.

²³ Ibid., 15.

²⁴ Rami Ginat, 'Jewish Identities in the Arab Middle East: The Case of Egypt in Retrospect', *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 46,3 (August 2014): 594-5.

²⁵ Joel Beinin, 'Nazis and Spies: Representations of Jewish Espionage and Terrorism in Egypt', *Jewish Social Studies* 2,3 (Spring 1996): 78, 80.

²⁶ Vivian Ibrahim, 'Beyond the Cross and the Crescent: Plural Identities and the Copts in Contemporary Egypt', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 2015 38, 14 (2015): 2585.

²⁷ Ella Shohat, “Dislocated Identities: Reflections of an Arab—Jew,” *Movement Research: Performance Journal* 5 (Fall-Winter 1992).

²⁸ Ella Shohat, “Notes on the 'Post-colonial'”. *Social Text* 31/32 (1992), 109.

²⁹ Abdelmegid, *Saint Theresa*, 26.

loyal to Egypt if their personal interests were put into competition with national ones.³⁰ One might also see the (Greek-originating) Luka and his Italian beloved as an expression of the failed model of a European-facing Egyptian nation put forward by some early Egyptian nationalists.³¹ Christians can be part of the Egyptian mosaic, in this reading, but only *Coptic* Christians can be truly Egyptian, and Luka's outsider status is thus confirmed by his preference for the Italian over the 'indigenous' Budur.

Luka is seen as an ambiguous figure, not entirely 'Egyptian', and disruptive of Egyptian identity, but he is emphatically not coded as Israeli, despite the occasional comparisons and juxtapositions. The threat he poses to the stability of Egyptian life and identity is not an external, geopolitical one. Instead, drawing on political fears about Israeli infiltration and more existential insecurities about the identity/ies of the Egyptian nation and their delineation, it is related to his very closeness – economic, social and sexual – which signals a more potent danger to the internal coherence of Egyptian society. As such, the portrayal of Luka has much in common with postcolonial readings of the complexities of contemporary Jewishness, reflecting on one hand the Jew as a colonised and oppressed figure in the European context, and on the other hand as a coloniser within the modern Middle East.³² The mirroring of this dynamic in Luka's relationship with Budur is highlighted when she describes how he has told her “Cleopatra loved Egypt, and I love Egypt, too”. Cleopatra, a ruler of Egypt from a Greek lineage, caused chaos with her love for the Roman Other Mark Antony. And when Budur responds by asking herself, “what does Egypt have to do with anything: I want to know, does he love me or not?”³³ she highlights the ambiguity of Luka's position vis-a-vis Egypt itself. As the female character who, along with Sawsan, most strongly represents Abdelmegid's 'Egypt', Luka's ambivalence towards her is also an ambivalence towards the nation she symbolises.

The effect of this is most strongly indicated by the results of Luka's entanglement with Budur on Budur's husband, Girgis, who is also Luka's employee – an expression of the colonial power which the *khawaga* has over the authentic Egyptian. Abdelmegid's writing of the character of Girgis mirrors representations of the indigenous Egyptian male found in early twentieth-century Egyptian novels, as analysed by Hoda Elsadda and Muhammad Siddiq.³⁴ This again suggests that (male) Copts are very much included in Abdelmegid's definition of Egyptianness. Initially portrayed as robust and masculine, with “broad shoulders” and body-hair emerging from his shirt,³⁵ he is contrasted with the elegant, almost dandyish Luka. Eventually, however, he is cuckolded by the foreigner and descends into depression, drink and drugs. “The *khawaga* [Luka] had come between them,” observes Sawsan, “and muddied the clear water of their lives”.³⁶ Girgis, initially a character who conforms to hegemonic ideas of masculinity, suffers a kind of double emasculation. In terms of feminist analysis of the meanings of gender and sexuality in national contexts, not only is 'his' Coptic woman involved in sexual encounters with a non-Egyptian, non-

³⁰ Gorman, *Historians, State and Politics*, 181, 19.

³¹ Siddiq, *Arab Culture and Novel*, 29.

³² Isabelle Hesse, 'From Colonised to Coloniser: Reading the Figure of the Jew in Edgar Hilsenrath's *Der Nazi und der Friseur* and Jurek Becker's *Bronsteins Kinder*', *Postcolonial Text* 9,4 (2014): 2-3.

³³ Abdelmegid, *Saint Theresa*, 26.

³⁴ Elsadda, *Gender, Nation*, 65; Siddiq, *Arab Culture and the Novel*, 80.

³⁵ Abdelmegid, *Saint Theresa and Sleeping with Strangers*, 11.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

Coptic man,³⁷ but she does so willingly, since he has failed not only to keep 'the Other male away from her, but she has actively chosen this Other over him.³⁸

It is also worth considering what it might mean for *Saint Theresa* to be set in the period either side of the 1967 war. The Jewish character is presented as problematic, although not irredeemable, but Coptic-Muslim relations are seen as largely natural and harmonious, the proper state of real Egyptians in contrast to disruptive foreigners. It is, perhaps, telling that the book is set immediately before and during the Sadat era, characterised by the state's ultimately catastrophic tolerance for sectarian, especially Islamist, politics and rise in hostility towards Copts.³⁹ There is a wistful feel to *Saint Theresa* that coincides with Dennis Walder's idea that nostalgia can be not just a rose-tinted view of the past, but a way for post-colonial writers to use an idealised past to think about or imagine desirable, but currently unattainable, visions of the future.⁴⁰ In *Saint Theresa*, Abdelmegid presents us with a potential aspirational image of what Egypt could be, but has to use the language of the past to do so. This writing of Egypt, and particularly its urban centres, also taps into, but to some extent critiques, the growing literature (much of it written by émigrés) celebrating – and to some extent inventing, as Deborah Starr points out – a “lost Egyptian cosmopolitanism”.⁴¹ Unlike much of this nostalgia genre, Abdelmegid's Cairo is firmly rooted in its tightly-packed alleyways, not in its elite Europeanised areas or chaotic tourist districts. As such, it presents an image of Egyptian Cairo familiar to its ordinary residents but not reflected in most of this nostalgia literature, especially those examples (the bulk of them) written in languages other than Arabic.⁴² Even in this search for nostalgic possibility, though, Abdelmegid does not extend into the pre-Nasser era of Cairo's vibrant Jewish community, but into the more modern reality of Cairene alleys largely stripped of their Jewish residents, with just a “minuscule, diminishing population” remaining.⁴³

Orientalism and Corruption: *Sleeping with Strangers*

Sleeping with Strangers has a more contemporary setting. In the mid-1990s, having

³⁷ Eg. Charles and Hintjens, 'Introduction: Gender, Ethnicity and Cultural Identity', 5-6, 10-11. Such analyses contend that sexual 'possession' of women of one nation or ethnicity by men of another represents a challenge or attack on the masculinity and ethnic purity of the women's own group; sexual control of women by men serves to demarcate national and ethnic lines. The most widely recognised examples tend to be those of rape in war, in which women's bodies are used by men of the attacking group to show rival men their own weakness. In the most extreme cases, such as Serbian assaults on Bosnian women in the 1990s, women are deliberately impregnated by wartime rape in order not only to reinforce the message that 'their' men have been conquered and control wrested from them, but also to force the women to bear 'mixed' children who bear the genetic heritage of the 'victors'.

³⁸ Mary Layoun, *Wedded to the Land? Gender, Boundaries and Nationalism in Crisis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 96, 102.

³⁹ Gorman, *Historians, State and Politics*, 146-9.

⁴⁰ Dennis Walder, *Postcolonial Nostalgias: Writing, Representation and Memory* (London: Routledge, 2011), 12, 72, 78, 112, 167.

⁴¹ Deborah Starr, 'Sensing the City: Representations of Cairo's Harat al-Yahud'. *Prooftexts* 26, 1&2 (Winter/Spring 2006): 138.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 139.

⁴³ Shane Minkin, 'Simone's Funeral: Egyptian Lives, Jewish Deaths in Twenty-first-century Cairo'. *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, 16,1 (March 2012): 73.

studied literature in Vermont for a year, Cairene Nadir visits his cousin Basim in Boston. In an updated *homage* to the early Egyptian semi-autobiographical novels about Egyptian men living and studying abroad and their encounter with the West as symbolised by European women,⁴⁴ Basim has had a succession of American girlfriends, often casual, of whom he speaks in terms which constantly refer to cultural misunderstandings and differences.⁴⁵ Despite a brief reference to Western science and learning, the USA is primarily depicted as a realm of promiscuity, excessive spending on credit cards, casual drug use and dysfunctional, short-lived sexual relationships.⁴⁶

Sleeping With Strangers reprises *Saint Theresa's* sense of nostalgia towards the fairly recent past. In this instance, it is Nadir and Basim's parents' generation, with its serious interests in religion, literature and politics,⁴⁷ which contrasts with the increasingly dissolute lifestyles of their offspring. Honour and beauty are represented by brief historical incidents. Some come from within the family, such as a great-grandfather's involvement in Urabi's nationalist uprising,⁴⁸ whilst others occur outside it, such as a Palestinian doctor in the USA who talks wistfully about his memories of Jerusalem. He is prevented from returning to the "lemon and olive trees" of his homeland and his vocation to treat Intifada victims by his American wife,⁴⁹ who, like the temptations that have wrecked Basim's life, clearly represents the idea that Arab men turn aside from their duty and honour when they encounter Western women.

On his return to Egypt, Basim falls in love with and gets engaged to a Jewish-Canadian woman. Initially this improves his life – he stops using drugs and gets a job. But Judy's rich parents come to take her back to the West, removing her from what turns out to have been a middle-class Western girl's orientalist dream of toying with a fantasy version of her Jewish history. In Abdelmegid's words, she has been: "searching for the meaning of the East between the legs of an Egyptian man whose semen might grant her the essence of eternal life".⁵⁰ Like Luka, Judy is not Israeli and is not, therefore, coded as an obvious threat but, like him, her ultimately destructive influence seems to reveal an underlying anxiety about the figure of the Jew – akin to the semitic Arab, but in whom this affinity can be dangerous as well as desirable. The idea that Judy's ideas of her own Jewishness might be sought in an Arab male refers to this affinity, but also highlights its limitations for the Western Jew who has remained too long away from the East. As in *Saint Theresa*, the impact of the Other – of his overseas experiences and his failed relationship with Judy – destroys the Egyptian male, Basim, with his connections to the regime and his masculine confidence. In some respects, Abdelmegid seems to confirm for the reader Kaplan's questioning of Western readings of ideas of travel and nomadism. Escape and flight, often viewed from a privileged Western perspective as liberating, can mean something very different from a viewpoint which involves political authoritarianism/corruption, economic difficulties and cultural or psychological turmoil.⁵¹ Far from being granted freedom by

⁴⁴ Elsadda, *Gender, Nation*, xxi, xxxi, xxxix.

⁴⁵ Abdelmegid, *Saint Theresa and Sleeping with Strangers*, 101, 105.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 104-111.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁵¹ Caren Kaplan, *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 86-90.

travel and exposure to other cultures and identities, Abdelmegid presents Basim's experience of outside – travel and foreigners – as a source of conflict and disruption, not of liberation or happiness.

In *Saint Theresa*, the female experience of Egyptian built heritage – monumental and historical – is that Sawsan and Budur both draw strength and reassurance from monumental buildings, as when Sawsan “walked below the two stone lions that guard the bridge” and is reminded of Said's death (in this setting painted as heroic) in the 1967 war. In contrast, in *Sleeping with Strangers*, Basim sees Egypt's ever-present history as corrupted and stultifying. Its new buildings, such as the National Theatre in Cairo, he describes in demeaning terms, comparing it to the “strip clubs” of New York. The “stone blocks of the pyramids” and the temple at Karnak he experiences as a dead weight, compared to a people “turned to stone” and unable to change or adapt.⁵² Having travelled and found love only with foreign women, Abdelmegid's character has moved too far from his home to be able to enjoy the internal flexibility of its hybrid identities. But to the sexual colonialists he desires, he is ironically attractive only as this static stereotype, an orientalised plaything. Like them, he has reduced the Egyptian man to a rigid stereotype within which he is now trapped. The Egyptian woman, in Basim's schema, is meanwhile imbued with all the virtues of the idealised national female, compared, like something from a classical Arabic poem, to a perfect horse – “soft hair flowing down over her back and over her forehead like an Arabian mare, purebred like the Eastern fillies famous for their splendor, beauty and nobility”.⁵³ But, like the stagnated personality he attributes to the Egyptian male, this resplendent, eroticised mother-figure he evokes is also stone-like, unable to offer succour in his miserable state and, like his home nation, incapable of helping him when he is imprisoned abroad.

In response to the challenges of the exterior, Basim follows a similar route to Girgis, drowning his sorrows in drink and drugs, and abusing the young and working-class Egyptian women with whom he has relationships, cheating on them, and forcing them to buy drugs for him and to have pregnancies aborted.⁵⁴ In the case of both of his main relationships with foreign women – Judy the Canadian and Lucine, a French girl who has Basim's baby but takes the child to Paris and refuses to return⁵⁵ - parental intervention is key to the women's success in leaving Basim. In terms of feminist theories of gendered relations between different national groups, Basim has won with his sexual conquest of these women, but the paternal male Other regains the upper hand, luring them back and leaving Basim emasculated and damaged. We can read the parental influence as that of the fatherland or motherland, the parent-as-nation. The passivity to which Basim is reduced references the stereotypes which shaped (and continue to permeate) many Western depictions of the Orient.⁵⁶ But although the apparent victory of the Other over the Egyptian male would seem to suggest that Abdelmegid is using the character of Basim to question this gendered structure, the importance of the parental intervention actually underlines the model of gendered power relations, where generational authority combines with paternal

⁵² Abdelmegid, *Saint Theresa and Sleeping with Strangers*, 118.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 190-91.

⁵⁶ Mounira Charrad, 'Gender in the Middle East: Islam, State, Agency'. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 37 (2011): 430.

power to overcome the younger male.

In one episode Nadir also tries to reassemble Basim's prison diaries but openly admits that he has to fill in the gaps in Basim's memoirs using his imagination.⁵⁷ The reader cannot, therefore, tell which parts of the narrative are meant to be true and which are fiction in relation to the central characters. In some sections of the novel Abdelmegid deliberately confuses the narrator's voice and that of Basim, for example in a chapter called "Autobiography" that tells the story of Basim's childhood in the third person.⁵⁸ Again, under pressure from the cacophony of outside voices, Basim's identity (and perhaps Nadir's too) becomes blurred and his story is shown as appropriated and alienated from him. It is therefore no surprise that ultimately, Nadir follows Basim's descent into depression and chaos, pursuing a brief affair with one of Basim's former girlfriends and hanging around seedy tourist cafés – central points of the corrupting Other – in the centre of Cairo. Despite her descent alongside Basim into drug use and poverty, one of the few Egyptian girls with whom he has a relationship is also imbued with overtones of authenticity; as a working-class Cairene, she continues to love him even after he has left her. The spiritual overtones which Abdelmegid gives to the real Egypt through the female characters in *Saint Theresa* is echoed, albeit in a distorted and impoverished way. Nadir discloses that after Basim leaves her, having taken her virginity, his former girlfriend adopts the veil, whilst in another scene he refers to her vagina as the "holy of holies" immediately before leaving her bed, in its childlike pink bedroom, to pray.⁵⁹ If she represents a debased version of the female, urban, authentic image as previously embodied by Budur and Sawsan, this scene can be read as Nadir's abandonment of the genuine female holy to engage in his own hypocritical and ineffective act of religiosity. Eventually the desert is held out in Basim's mind as a possible salvation, an authentically Arab space offering spiritual and artistic rebirth,⁶⁰ as seen in motifs of the desert environment and lifestyle from both classical and modern Arabic literature.⁶¹ But given the depths of depression and passivity to which he seems to have sunk it seems unlikely that Nadir will follow this course.

Islamism, urbanism and cosmopolitanism

The only serious romantic encounter engaged in by Sawsan, Budur's friend from their childhood alley in Cairo, illustrates another trend which seems to endanger the tolerant co-existence of their idealised space. Moving from the (partially justified) paranoia of 1960s Egypt over Israeli infiltration to the (equally justified) fear of militant Islamism, Abdelmegid presents in Budur and Sawsan a juxtaposition of what are often seen (at least in retrospect) as the most pressing threats to the Egyptian polity of the Nasser and Sadat eras. Like the figure of Luka, this threat is coded as both internal (apparently from Egypt) and external (underneath an Egyptian veneer foreign and alien) and draped in deceptively familiar garb. Salim, a man Sawsan meets at university, seems to be a left-wing activist, but turns out to be part of a militant Islamist group who preaches that "in revenge there is

⁵⁷ Abdelmegid, *Saint Theresa and Sleeping with Strangers*, 119.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁶¹ See eg. Andras Hamori, *On the art of Medieval Arabic Literature*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974/2015), 4, 22.

life”.⁶² The scenario reflects the historical fact of the rise of Islamic militancy in Egypt during the Sadat era; the slogan which Salim uses to Sawsan is said to have been used in recent contexts by various militant Islamist groups, and Sadat's assassination is mentioned later in the novella. Like Luka and Budur's affair, which takes place far away in Alexandria, Sawsan's discovery of Salim's true opinions happens in an isolated house, in a setting of dream-like descriptions and unreality, surrounded by darkness where men cannot be properly seen and the women are hidden behind niqabs.⁶³ Sawsan is ordered to sit in a separate room, symbolising Salim's separation from the stable, tolerant feminine she and Budur represent.⁶⁴ In a brief incident which mirrors Abdelmegid's disapproval of rigid, exclusive religious categories in this Islamist setting, we also witness Girgis, in the depths of his destroyed life, having a Christian cross tattooed on his wrist “with a rusty needle”.⁶⁵ Faith (even the faith of the authentic Egyptian Copt) can be a positive force in this schema, but only when it is personal, flexible, and unostentatious.

It is also notable that the Islamists' house is in a rural environment. The countryside and peasant purity have, as Selim discussed, been used as symbols of the integrity and continuity of Egyptian identity. Later novels however, tackling the social and political changes of the Sadat era onwards, used these images to explore the disruptions and complexities of Egyptian society.⁶⁶ Abdelmegid seems to locate himself in this latter tradition; his countryside, rather than being the site of the authentic Egypt, is actually a place from which the harmonious diversity to be found in its cities is threatened. As Joel Gordon has noted, despite the passage of time, “acute wounds” remain “within an intelligentsia that still cannot... discuss [Sadat's] career or legacy in measured terms”.⁶⁷ Against such a background, Abdelmegid's presentation of the pitfalls of openness to strangers – be they decadent Westerners or Islamists, also framed as 'foreign' in ideas if not nationality – seems to imply a critique of Sadat's policies of political and economic opening or *infatih*. In terms of his presentation of the city, Abdelmegid also follows a longer trend in Egyptian literature, in which the focus shifted in the second half of the twentieth century from the rural idyll or symbolic desert to the city. More precisely though, as Ostle has argued, there are two cities in play: the aged medina – traditional, authentic and virtuous – and the new city riven with vice and corruption.⁶⁸ The calm dignity of Sawsan and Budur in their medina alley is juxtaposed not only with the countryside, with its sinister militants, but also with the chaotic uprootedness of the new city in which the moral and psychological decline of Bashir and Nadir takes place.

This sense that the real Egypt is embodied by its vibrant, diverse cities is expressed in an episode in which Sawsan experiences an almost transcendental sense of belonging and connection, drawing together statues of the ancient Egyptian Pharaoh Ramses II, the tomb of a Muslim saint, and the everyday journey on a microbus through her home city. The various symbols of key phases in Egyptian history – the Pharaonic (often identified

⁶² Abdelmegid, *Saint Theresa and Sleeping with Strangers*, 53.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 50-53.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁶⁶ Samah Selim 11-12, 16-17, 21.

⁶⁷ Joel Gordon, 'Days of Anxiety/Days of Sadat: Impersonating Egypt's Flawed Hero on the Egyptian Screen', *Journal of Film & Video* 54, 2-3 (Summer/Fall 2002): 27.

⁶⁸ R.C. Ostle, “The city in modern Arabic literature”. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 49,1 (February 1986), 200-201.

with the Copts) and the Islamic – are thus combined with the quotidian to create an image of a coherent, secure and deeply satisfying whole.⁶⁹ In the closing passages of the novella, it is Budur and Sawsan's returns to their old neighbourhood and the square outside the church of Saint Theresa that seems to offer some kind of resolution for their troubled personal lives.⁷⁰

Conclusion

Reading Abdelmegid's two books through the lens of ideas about gender, national or ethnic relations and hybridity reaffirms the ways in which literary depictions can explore the complexities of consensual multi-ethnic sexual relations. The figures of Girgis and Nadir reinforce an idea of Egyptian masculinity threatened with emasculation by the Other. But the nature of this Other changes between the two novels. In *Saint Theresa*, the threat is ambiguous in nature, not entirely outside and – whether in the figure of the Jew or the Islamist – partially disguised. Reflecting an Egyptian society in flux, with massive internal migration, economic change and increasingly in touch with people from all parts of the globe, the more contemporary setting of *Sleeping with Strangers* instead finds the disruptions to Egyptian society coming from the outside, from the danger of letting the foreigner too far in, economically or culturally.

Reading the two novels together also highlights the fragility of the idealised Egyptian male; in the end, the most stable site of the values with which Abdelmegid wishes to imbue Egyptian society – resilience, tolerance and wisdom – lies in the female characters of Budur and Sawsan. Unlike the men, they weather the temptations and corruptions of outsiders – be they wealthy Jewish lovers or ideological Islamists. In some senses this reinforces a familiar trope of the stability of national identity lying in its women and the domestic sphere. But unusually, the image with which Abdelmegid presents this gendered symbolism is one of internal diversity, emphasising the limited hybridity he chooses to celebrate. The nature of the romantic relationships themselves also suggests a difference between how the figures of the Jew and the Islamist must be viewed *via-a-vis* Egyptian society. Sawsan's relationship with Salim is brief and unsatisfying, and the militant Islamist is coded as profoundly alien to Abdelmegid's tolerant, cosmopolitan Egypt. The Jewish figures are, however, more problematic; Luka and Judy are *almost* positive characters, they *almost* incorporate themselves into Egyptian life and find a role within its diversity. In the romantic hopes held out by Budur and Basim in their relationships with Jewish characters, there is a yearning for a longer-lost closeness, a possibility that has existed, but that has been eroded by past events and anxieties about infiltration and outside loyalties. From the perspectives of the two Jewish characters, there is a suggestion that Cairo and its people are their true home from which they have been detached. Judy's search for this – albeit in the form of what turns out to be merely a cynical holiday romance – is articulated clearly. For Luka, too, despite his eventual rejection of Budur and thus of his fragile claim to hybridity, there is a sense that this is the most real any of his *amours* have been, much more so than his unrequited passions for European women, and that in leaving Budur he has lost his opportunity to reunite with the authentic Easternness of his Jewish self.

⁶⁹ Abdelmegid, *Saint Theresa and Sleeping with Strangers*, 64.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 95.

In articulating this network of relationships and the identities they symbolise, Abdelmegid continues the formulation of those novels of the first half of the twentieth century that helped to set out the nature of Egyptianness and its relationship to the Other. But his Egyptian masculine is a more fragile affair, under threat from both a dissolute West and an extremist and inauthentic Islam. Seemingly as hegemonic and powerful as it was in its earlier incarnations, it is actually brittle under stress. Abdelmegid articulates a modern warning both to this frail masculinity and to the more stable and worldly-wise feminine about the dangers of an undisciplined relationship – whether with the temptations of Western culture or simplistic religious fundamentalism, both of which stray away from the real Egypt. To follow the apparent liberation of the Western lifestyle or the easy answers of the political Islamist threatens the truer, more viable freedom to be found within the confines of authentic Egyptian society. As such, Abdelmegid suggests a critique of the extremes of discourses of hybridity and nomadism, as well as of individualism and fundamentalism. Whilst many of the characters in both novels seek to capitalise on their mixed identities, venturing outside the safety of the alley in search of romance, pleasure and excitement, the results are invariably painful and destructive. The alley of the Cairene medina, with its mixture of Muslims, Copts and – once upon a time – Jews, is the site of a limited but fulfilling diversity ultimately of greater value than the unreliable attractions of unfettered neoliberal individuality.

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