

AL-GHITANI'S *ZAYNI BARAKAT*: HISTORY AS NARRATIVE

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Abstract

The study tackles the historiographic metafictional elements of al-Ghitani's *Zayni Barakat*. Even though historiographic metafiction, like Postmodernism at large, is a Western concept and even though al-Ghitani's novel is Arabic-Islamic in many of its aspects, it, nonetheless, employ several compelling historiographic metafictional styles and techniques. A great deal of emphasis is placed in *Zayni Barakat* on reporting or narrating history, the idea being that history is ultimately as multifaceted, problematic, subjective, and fictitious as literary narrative. In both, truth is relative and elusive.

The main issue in the novel, then, is whether history can be told objectively, clearly, and precisely or not. The answer, mainly indirect (through the various narrators, through the ambiguity about characters and situations) is that positivist history is not possible at all. There can never be an overall, clear picture about either persons or things, that history is subjective: it is either total fiction, or is immensely fictionalized. *Zayni Barakat* is, ultimately, about the impossibility of writing or reporting history objectively. The relationship between history, historians, and the "truth" which historians are after is exactly like the relationship between narrative, narrators, and the "truth" which narrators aim to convey.

Keywords: Hybrid, Postmodernism, Historiographic metafiction, Historicity, Multi-narrative, diachronic, Synchronic, Intertextuality, Intratextuality, Fragmentation.

It is only fair to state right from the beginning that al-Ghitani is one of the Arab World's, to borrow a term from Christie Brooke Rose, "most-modern" (McHale, 1987, p. 4) – or Postmodern – authors. Like most, if not all, excelling contemporary Arab authors, he is amply conscious of the latest developments in the realm of literature at large, and fiction in particular. More specifically, his writings in general and *Zayni Barakat per se* fall

under what many have called innovative or experimental fiction. Hāmid al-Nassāj, for example, places al-Ghitani among Arab writers who belong to the latest (“fourth”) period, that of experimentation and innovation (1989, p. 49). Like al-Tayyib Sālih, ‘Abdul Rahmān Munīf, Jabra Ibrāhīm Jabra, Taysīr al-Subūl, Mu’nis al-Razzāz, Ghālib Halasa, Ghassān Kanafānī, and others, he has read extensively in both the Arabic and the Western literary traditions. He has mastered and assimilated in his works many ideas, techniques, and genres from Western literature.

Zayni Barakat in fact nicely combines this dual knowledge of al-Ghitani’s own heritage as well as his own reading and mastery of the modes of expression and strategies of writing prevalent in the contemporary literary scene, which are primarily Western. With respect to heritage, al-Ghitani’s novel focuses on a somewhat remote era of Arabic-Islamic history, that of the very end of the Mamluk period and the very beginning of the Ottoman. His knowledge as well as his depiction of this period is quite remarkable, showing depth of reading, understanding, and thinking about it. He presents that era in the Arab-Islamic past using the latest, most sophisticated narrative techniques, from stream of consciousness, to multiple narrative, to a pastiche-like structure, to generic mixing. Add to all of this the fact that *Zayni Barakat*, like many modern (postmodern, that is) novels is a city novel: it is about the Cairo of that particular period in Arab-Islamic history. The urban setting is essential in much Modernist as well as Postmodernist fiction, from Allison Lurie’s *The Nowhere City* (1966), to Don DeLilo’s *White Noise* (1985), to Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), to ‘Abdul Rahmān Munīf’s *Mudun Al-Milh* (1984) (*Cities of Salt*) and *Sīrat Madīnah* (1994) (*The Tale of a City*), to al-Subūl’s *Anta Mundhu Al-Yawm* (1968) (*You as of Today*), and, of course, Coover’s *The Public Burning* (1977). In all of these novels, as Cairo is in *Zayni Barakat*, the city is not simply a background for action; rather, it is a fundamental force influencing the course of events. In all of these novels also, action is about the urban setting itself; the city is almost like a character in the novel, a being who is alive, at once influenced by what is going on as well as influencing it.

Al-Ghitani is then, without a doubt, a full-fledged Postmodernist. Nearly all features of Postmodernism are reflected in his works, especially in *Zayni*: fragmentation, the multi-narrative perspective, the urban setting, the deliberate omission of many details, indeterminacy, ambiguity of issues, relativity of truth, subjectivity, gaps and ruptures, the emphasis on low culture, and many other features which will be pointed out in detail.

In his latest phase, al-Ghitani devotes a great deal of attention to history, and he deals with it the way Postmodernists at large deal with it. A careful reading of his treatment of history shows that he is amply conscious of the Postmodernist relations as well as demarcations of history and

literature. My focus, in this chapter, is on his masterpiece *Zayni Barakat* as a historiographic metafictional text. Before attempting to point out the novel's historiographic metafictional dimensions, however, I wish to present a synopsis of its plot.

Zayni Barakat was first published in Damascus in 1971. The novel is set in early sixteenth-century Cairo, at the time of the Mamluk Reign (which had begun in the mid-thirteenth-century and lasted until the early sixteenth century, 1250 - 1517) when the Mamluks were about to be defeated by the invading Ottomans, whose star had begun to rise. It relates the events of this troubled, unpleasant period in Egypt's and Arab-Islamic history. It also focuses on the rise of the enigmatic, controversial career of Zayni Barakat ibn Musa, a person who came into power almost out of nowhere, and who dominated Cairo life and controlled almost everything that was going on, though subtly and somewhat ambiguously. His "austere, almost evangelical, attitude to public morality places him at the pinnacle of Cairo's civil society" (Said, 1985, p. vii). In a fascinating way, the novel focuses, though more suggestively than explicitly, indirectly than directly, on his style of government, in a world not only where there is little trust, but where there is little clarity or transparency. It is about the abrupt rise and fall of Zayni under the Mamluks, and then his unexpected, almost baffling rise again under the Ottomans. Simultaneously, the novel dwells in almost minute, though sporadic, detail on the lives of several other characters – both major and minor, as well as common, ordinary citizens, both male and female, the free and the "possessed," slaves.

Thematically, the novel addresses a variety of matters, such as the abuses as well as limits of authority and power, the relation between the government and the governed, freedom and slavery of all sorts, democracy and dictatorship, gender relations, child-abuse, politics and intrigue, economics and power, religion and society, East and West, and so forth. The novel is narrated by a Venetian traveler, Viscontin Gianti and other native Muslims belonging to the Mamluk/Ottoman era: an al-Azhar student, Said al-Juhayni; the Chief Spy of Cairo, Zakariyya bin Radi, and a number of other minor characters.

The first point worth dwelling on in the discussion of the historiographic metafictional dimensions of the novel is the novel's setting, that is, the choice of time and place. The choice of the historical period which the novel tackles is itself very illuminating. It is the transitional epoch at the end of the Mamluk reign and the beginning of the Ottoman, an epoch of extreme unrest, abrupt changes, radical transformations and shifts. It is very tense, very unstable. The very first paragraph of the novel reflects the uneasy, tenuous situation prevalent in the period:

The land of Egypt is in a state of turmoil these days. The face of Cairo is that of a stranger, one that I hadn't encountered on my previous travels here.... I see the city as a sick man on the point of tears, a terrified woman afraid of being raped at the end of the night. Even the clear blue of the sky is thin, with clouds laden with an alien fog that has come from distant lands. (p. 1)

Two remarks need to be made about the novel's revealing opening. The first has to do with the point, made earlier, about the novel as a city novel and Cairo being almost a character in the novel. The three personifications, the "face of Cairo is that of a stranger," "the city as a sick man on the point of tears," and Cairo as a "terrified woman afraid of being raped at the end of the night" all illustrate the central role of the city throughout the novel, the fact that the novel is, in part at least, about the city, and the fact that Cairo is like a person, or a character in a book.

The second remark has to do with al-Ghitani's perceptive choice of the period. What the narrator says about "Cairo in August/September AD 1516/Rajab 922AH" (p. 1) as being "in a state of turmoil," as losing "the clear blue of the sky," and as having "clouds laden with an alien fog" reflects the notion of changeability, unfixedness, uncertainty, unexpectedness which Postmodernists, including writers of historiographic metafiction, find congenial to their subject matter. As the Postmodernist view of history stems from the emphasis on tenuous, changeable, relative, short-lasting realities, the choice of Cairo in "August/September" (notice that it is the end of summer, and the beginning of the fall season, which is symbolically significant) of the said year serves al-Ghitani's purpose very well. In other words, the setting, the milieu, and the atmosphere harmonize with each other very well. Throughout the novel, the atmosphere is described very nicely and succinctly at the outset of a passage narrated on the basis of Said al-Juhayni's vision. The passage begins thus: "This is the age of perplexity, when doubt is master and certainty extinct" (p. 92). Postmodern fiction, including historiographic metafiction, is based, in the way it views place and time, on a radically skeptical view of matters, one which is based on "doubt" and the absence or death of "certainty."

One of the most important questions to readers with respect to *Zayni Barakat* is the relationship between the past and the present. For al-Ghitani, his novel, as has just been prefaced, deals with events that took place in the sixteenth-century. He attempts to recreate an era from which he is more than four centuries removed.

Even though al-Ghitani deals with an era far-removed from his own times, not only time-wise but also temperamentally – an era which has its own singular, peculiar concerns, preoccupations, features, etc. – he succeeds

in depicting compelling analogies and echoes of his own age (al-Marzūqī. 1985, p. 79). When one reads *Zayni Barakat*, one feels he is reading about an alive present and not either a dead or a removed past, even though, it should be emphasized, there is no direct or explicit link. Readers do not have to exert much effort to find striking parallels and analogies; the text itself points us – through its modern (postmodern) perspective, thought, language, vision – to the present. In *Zayni Barakat*, al-Ghitani creates what one might call a “hybrid reality” or a “hybrid parallel” between the past and the present. In other words, characters, minor settings, issues, concerns, approaches, strategies, patterns, etc. of sixteenth-century Egypt mirror, reflect, and signify those of modern-day Egypt, especially during the Naserite era (al-Kakli, 1992, p. 5). This analogy, this hybridity, escapes no vigilant reader. The relation between the past and the present is one of al-Ghitani’s main concerns. In *Awrāq Shāb ‘Āsha Mundhu Alf ‘Ām* (1969), he has Ibn Iyas appear in the Cairo of the 1950s. He has him compare and contrast the Cairo of his own day and modern-day Cairo (n.d, pp. 25 – 44). While traditional historians, or even writers of historical romances or novels, view history as diachronic, developmental or evolutionary, writers of historiographic metafiction (like Postmodernists in general) view history as being largely synchronic, repetitive, cyclical, and even flat (Byers, 1989, p.4). There is no belief in the ability of one or more heroes to make much impact on history. History is seen as a force that overpowers and molds individuals within its fixed models or patterns. This is why characters end up being types or even stereotypes, and why individual effort is frustrated or aborted. Whenever individual characters, such as Nixon, Zayni Barakat or Zakariyya bin Radi make it somehow, it is primarily due to unexplainable, ambiguous circumstances. Most characters are like Said al-Juhayni, who is continually followed, haunted, terrified and crippled by a system that allows him no freedom of movement or maneuver.

Before one delves into narration, characterization, style, the relation of fact to fiction, and other fundamental issues pertaining to the historiographic metafictional dimensions of the novel, it is important to dwell on the relationship between al-Ghitani’s history – historiographic metafiction, that is – , specifically as reflected in *Zayni Barakat*, and history as reflected in the al-Ghitani’s historical source, Ibn Iyas’s book, the historical text on which al-Ghitani based his historiographic metafictional text.

Zayni Barakat draws heavily on history, so much so that some critics have viewed it as being “an immense historical document” (al-Kakli, 1992, p.23). Al-Ghitani himself admits that he has read “all of Egypt’s history” (Ibid.). Al-Ghitani has relied, as a starting point, on history as narrated by Ibn Iyas, among other sources, of course, stemming from his extensive

readings in Arabic-Islamic history. The main source for the historical components of *Zayni Barakat* is the chronicle of the historian Muhammad Ibn Iyas (1448 - 1522), entitled *Badā'i' al-Zuhūr fi Waqā'i' al-Duhūr*. What gives Ibn Iyas reliability of narrative in what concerns the Zayni Barakat story is the fact that, first, he was an eye witness to the historical events depicted in al-Ghitani's novel, and second, he was well-acquainted with its main characters, the main players at the time.

But what al-Ghitani presents is not history, it is historiographic metafiction. Unlike writers of historical romance or historical novels, al-Ghitani neither simply borrows facts from Ibn Iyas, nor does he content himself with modifying them to suit his fiction-making purpose. Rather, he not only subjects but in fact invades, infiltrates, and almost erodes the historical material with a great deal of fiction. It is as if, as Sīzā Qāsim has pointed out, he creates a dialogue with Ibn Iyas, a dialogue which is also ultimately between the past and the present (p. 144). Faysal Darrāj stresses this point, viewing al-Ghitani as creating a “dialogic space” in which the past and the present engage in a debate, without privileging one over the other (1999, p. 230).

One initial point to stress in this context is that the evidence for al-Ghitani's reliance on Ibn Iyas's history is not only external, i.e. that critics have said or proven to us that he in fact has read Ibn Iyas, but is, more importantly, internal. *Zayni Barakat* refers to Ibn Iyas explicitly within its own narrative body. At one point in his narrative, the Venetian narrator Visconti Gianti refers to Ibn Iyas thus:

And so that my compatriot wouldn't miss the description of the procession and to be honest, I am here quoting my friend Shaykh Muhammad Ahmad ibn Iyas, a well-known man of learning in Cairo and the author of a long history of the land of Egypt. I wish, if I have time, to introduce him to my own people. Ibn Iyas, despite his old age, watched the procession and wrote down what he saw. (p. 185)

It is obvious from this quote, and from many moments in the narrative, that al-Ghitani is indebted to Ibn Iyas, and that he is influenced by him. How much of Ibn Iyas is there in *Zayni Barkat* is a matter which is worth addressing, briefly. Ibn Iyas, it should be stressed, appears to have first and foremost influenced al-Ghitani's choice of the historical period itself, the Cairo of the sixteenth century, as Ibn Iyas focuses on it in his own history. In addition, al-Ghitani quotes whole passages, at times almost verbatim from Ibn Iyas. One of these passages appears immediately after the passage just cited. After Gianti refers to Ibn Iyas directly, he quotes his description of the procession in Cairo which he (Gianti) says he missed. Gianti says, “My friend, ibn Iyas says:

Then came the Sultan al-Ashraf Qansuh al-Ghuri. He was preceded by the Caliph about twenty paces in front of him. The Sultan rode a bay horse with a gold saddle and saddle-cloth, wearing a white Baalbeck coat, embroidered with a wide border of gold on black silk; it was said to have in it 500 *mithqals* (weights; measures) of gold. The day was of great splendour and magnificence. The Sultan was handsome and a fine figure in processions. Then came the royal flag and behind him the Chief Mamluk, Sunbul al-Qasmanli, accompanied by the armour-bearers in full uniform. He entered Cairo by Zuwayla Gate and passed through the streets in this awesome procession. All of Cairo trembled at his sight that day and the people who had all come out – nobody stayed at home – greeted him with loud prayers for his welfare, their faces visibly shaking with excitement. The women cheered him by ululating from the windows. (p. 185)

Ibn Iyas's history is fundamental to al-Ghitani. There are many moments in which he relies on his history. One example appears in a very climatic moment in the novel. When Zayni Barakat is at the height of his career, he is arrested and humiliated by Shaykh Abu al-Su'ud. This whole section, historically authentic, is taken from Ibn Iyas, and it is recorded almost word for word:

In the latter part of this night, Zayni Barakat ibn Musa, Overseer of the Sultan's Treasures, Markets Inspector of the Land of Egypt, Governor of Cairo and Tax collector for Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt, was summoned by Shaykh Abu al-Su'ud al-Jarihi, and he went. When he entered he was made to sit down in front of the Shaykh. When he turned to him, the Shaykh paid no attention to him; rather he yelled at him and said to him, "You, dog, why do you oppress the Muslims? Why do you steal their money." (p. 208)

Even though this passage appears, in *Zayni Barakat*, in a letter which the Head Spy of Cairo has sent to Zakariyya, it is a passage which al-Ghitani borrows almost from Ibn Iyas; it appears in part 5, page 114 in Ibn Iyas.

The point to stress here is that al-Ghitani does not attempt to negate Ibn Iyas. On the contrary, he recognizes his work, explicitly as in the passage quoted earlier and implicitly by referring to stories that are taken verbatim from him. There are, in the novel, many incidents, anecdotes, dates, and characters taken from Ibn Iyas which appear in the novel. Upon his coming back to Cairo, Gianti, describing Cairo, says: "I look out as the dark envelopes the houses. I do not see the minaret of the new mosque of

Sultan al-Ghuri, built only a few years ago” (p. 1). There are many references to historical figures, such as Ali ibn Abi al-Jud, Emir Tuman Bey, and others. These names appear quite naturally in the narrative, as if al-Ghitani’s narrative were history. This fact is important to recognize, for historiographic metafiction as a genre does rely on history. Rather than suppress or hide this fact, it introduces and highlights it. Al-Ghitani also mentions many real names, tells many familiar anecdotes, and refers to many real places and dates. It is worthwhile to mention, in this very context, that many verses from the Koran are cited in the text of *Zayni Barakat*, especially at the beginning of official decrees and announcements, in an attempt to make the narrative look or sound historically valid. The chapter on page three begins thus:

In the name of God, the Most Gracious, Most Merciful. “Let there arise out of you a band of people inviting to all that is good, enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong.”

“Help ye one another in righteousness and piety, but help ye not one another in sin and rancour,” as the Glorious Book tells us.” (p. 23)

At this level, historiographic metafiction aims to give the guise of being true, authentic history, and it alludes to, quotes, refers to, paraphrases, and rehashes several elements from real history in the attempt to do so.

Al-Ghitani is indebted to Ibn Iyas in many other ways, among which many of the characters used in *Zayni Barakat*, such as Zayni Barakat himself, Ali ibn Abi al-Jud, Shaykh Abu al-Su’ud of Kom al-Jarih, and Abu al-Khayr al-Murafi’. In addition, al-Ghitani relies on Ibn Iyas in narrating some of the minor stories. It is important to remind in this context that *Zayni Barakat* is a novel which permeates with a large number of anecdotes and short stories, in addition to the stories of Cairo in the said time and place and the stories of the major characters. One such story which al-Ghitani borrows is that story of Ali ibn al-Jud who was overthrown by Zayni Barakat. In *Zayni*, the story appears in the second chapter entitled “Daybreak” (pp. 13 - 22). Ibn Iyas mentions this story briefly.

Beyond this, everything else in the novel belongs to al-Ghitani’s imaginative depiction of the epoch, characters, and stories. It is worth mentioning here that while al-Ghitani does neither directly or openly underestimate or distort Ibn Iyas, he adds to him. The story of Ali ibn al-Jud, as has just been mentioned, is stated briefly in Ibn Iyas. Ibn Iyas reports that Ali Ibn abi al-Jud was arrested, tortured and hanged, upon the request of the Sultan, by the Governor of Cairo. All the details which appear in *Zayni Barakat* about his imprisonment, torture, interrogation, and death by dancing are fictitious. Ibn Iyas mentions Shaykh Abu al-Su’ud on three occasions. In *Zayni Barakat*, he appears on various occasions, and plays an

important role in the events. All other characters, including the main narrator, the Venetian traveler Visconti Gianti, are fictitious. Zakariyya and Said al-Juhayni, who are major characters, are also al-Ghitani's creation.

Even with the "borrowed" characters, they do not appear in the exact manner that they appear in Ibn Iyas. The latter, it has to be remembered, is a historian, who sketches characters very briefly. In al-Ghitani, characters are presented in minute detail – compelling details that do not appear in Ibn Iyas, and are therefore al-Ghitani's own creation. Not only this, however, but al-Ghitani has also modified or altered these characters, at times in radical ways. Take the character of Zayni himself. Zayni, being a major player in the political scene and an important historical figure, is mentioned at some length in Ibn Iyas. It was also mentioned that the Sultan entrusted him with the task of handling the file of the preceding governor of Cairo Ali ibn Abi al-Jud. But the image of Zayni in Ibn Iyas is largely "positive" (Abdel Wahab, 1985, p. xvii): "He is shown to be ambitious but fair, efficient and well liked by the people, as well as by the Mamluks and, later on, by the Ottoman rulers" (Ibid). Zayni's image, as will be shown in detail later, changes not only remarkably but also radically. The language of al-Ghitani, and his treatment of the subject, is of course remarkably and radically different as well. While Ibn Iyas's language, as clear from the above passage, is direct and straightforward, al-Ghitani's is indirect, suggestive, ambiguous, double, etc. It is literary language after all. The following passage embodies the characteristics inherent in literary language: dramatization, insinuation, questioning, suggestiveness, and subtle detail – as opposed to the directness, clarity, and explicitness of the language of history:

A cautious hush fell upon the gathering. I put back the bowl of hot wine; I had only one sip of fenugreek. What has happened to Zayni Barakat ibn Musa? If nothing had happened to him, why were rumors being spread about him? Everyone looked at the man who had asked the question. My guess is that he probably works in a mosque or sells old books. Perhaps he is a student at al-Azhar. The tone of his voice and his demeanour suggest such occupation. Whenever I see a man I don't know, I ask myself what he does. Where has he lived: in China, India or the deserts of the Hejaz? (p. 3)

The various questions asked, the reference to the rumors, and the uncertainty about the occupation of "the man who had asked the question," and the focus on what his tone of voice and demeanour "suggest" illustrate how al-Ghitani's language differs from Ibn Iyas's direct account. It is obvious here that al-Ghitani has taken the matter of Zayni's disappearance

from Ibn Iyas, but he weaves a whole narrative around it, creating characters who debate the matter, questions which dramatize it, and suggestions which aim to highlight and psychologize the mystery.

The relationship between al-Ghitani and Ibn Iyas may be described as one of influence in the Bloomian sense. As is well known, Harold Bloom, in his *Anxiety of Influence* (1973) and *A Map of Misreading* (1975), speaks of precursors who trigger ideas, through their works, in the minds of successors. Successors, in the first stage of the creative process, borrow from precursors; they emulate them, initially. But then, as their ideas begin to mature, they start detaching and distancing themselves from their precursors, until they end up creating their own version of ideas or texts. It is in this – as a result of emulating and borrowing on the one hand and resistance, rejection, and deliberate “misreading” on the other hand – that creativity happens. *Zayni Barakat* grows out of Ibn Iyas’s *Bada’i* in this exact manner. *Bada’i* is a launching pad for *Zayni Barakat*, but it is also a text that the former keeps coming to several times, not just once.

In this sense, it is not only correct but also very perceptive to see al-Ghitani as being engaged in a dialogue with Ibn Iyas (Qāsim, 1982, p. 144). The use of Ibn Iyas as a source, and the references to him in the text, makes a historiographic metafictional text like *Zayni Barakat* an inter- or intratextual one. The inter- or intratextual dimension of this is extremely interesting. Gerard Genette’s *Palimpsestes* discusses all five forms of intertextuality and intratextuality, the fourth of which is termed by Genette as “hyper textuality,” which assumes a relationship between a hypertext with a previous text: “hypotext.” He adds the hypertext is implanted in the hypotext, creating a new text which is the outcome of the dialogue between the two texts. In this sense, a text of this kind is not monologic; it is, rather, dialogic. In its relation to Ibn Iyas, *Zayni Barakat* is a dialogic text, in both its representation of the Mamluk-Ottoman Cairo, i.e. the Arab-Islamic past, and the modern-day Cairo, i.e. the Cairo of the late nineteen sixties and early seventies. The aim is to make a comment on the social dimensions, ideologies of *Zayni Barakat*’s time and the parallel or equivalent ideologies and politics of the present.

It is interesting to note here that while the anxiety of influence in Bloom works at the level of two authors, the precursor who is established and the successor who is attempting to realize and establish him/herself, whose aim is literary creativity, as in the case of al-Ghitani and Ibn Iyas, the anxiety takes on a generic (not just creative) dimension: Ibn Iyas has established himself as a historian; al-Ghitani is attempting to establish himself as a writer of historiographic metafiction. In other words, most of al-Ghitani’s anxieties are tied to his fictionalization and metafictionalization of history.

At this level, al-Ghitani fictionalizes or metafictionalizes a great deal. Toward this end, he employs several strategies, most of the strategies that are employed in *Anxiety of Influence*, especially *clinamen* (revision) and *tessera* (fragmentation). Put simply, the strategies are embodied in all those elements which exist in the narrative body of *Zayni Barakat* and which have not been part of Ibn Iyas's narrative. Among these are: the major and minor characters – including Zakariyya ibn Radi and Said al-Juhayni, the two most major narrators whose narratives occupy a great deal of space in the body of al-Ghitani's narrative, the meticulous elaboration and transformation of borrowed characters and ideas, the addition of the whole system of spies and informers "*bassassin*," which itself forms a great deal of the narrative. Then there are the narrative strategies employed by the main narrator, Visconti Gianti, al-Ghitani's own methods of telling, and the official decrees and announcements. In basing his narrative on real names of a real historical period, but manipulating, falsifying history and subjecting it to fictional processes, and giving history the guise of fiction and fiction the guise of history: by blurring the boundaries between fiction and history, al-Ghitani is being a Postmodernist historiographic metafictional author.

Many of these strategies are related to al-Ghitani's narrative techniques – the plural form is important here, as al-Ghitani employs not one technique but many. The overriding, overall characteristic of al-Ghitani's narrative, which is fundamentally Postmodernist, is its highly indeterminate nature. Indeterminacy, one should remember here, and as Ihab Hassan has insisted, is a fundamental feature of Postmodernist narratives (1985, p. 75); and, since al-Ghitani deals with history, one could view it also as a feature of historiographic metafiction. In al-Ghitani, narrative indeterminacy works at several levels.

One most obvious level is narrative multiplicity. The narrative in *Zayni Barakat* is presented by several narrators. The first is the imaginary Venetian traveler, Visconti Gianti who tells of events during this troubled, unpleasant period in Egypt's history, on the threshold of the long Ottoman epoch, which lasted until the early twentieth century and caused major changes in Middle Eastern history as a whole. Gianti made several visits to Egypt, and he narrated the events he saw during those visits. The other narrators are residents of Cairo, Mamluk (and later Ottoman) Muslims telling of places, persons, and events as they see them unfold. These multiple narrators at times complement one another, but in many instances they are contradictory. The binary of complementary/contradictory narrative makes al-Ghitani's realism "less stable, more tricky, less amenable to definition and representation" (Said, 1985, p. viii). The important point to stress about narrative multiplicity or plurality is its rejection of narratorial domination or hegemony. The existence of one narrator, be he/she

omniscient or first-person, imposes one perspective, one vision on the narrative. Such a style or strategy creates, by imposition, a certain form or order that may not represent reality accurately. Whether the novel is a Bildungsroman or any other type, it ultimately arranges all elements of the story together to form a certain solid, overall structure – one that reconciles, resolves, or even dissolves all inevitable tensions, conflicts, gaps, and contradictions. Postmodernist fiction, by contrast, and *Zayni Barakat* in particular, is written in the Postmodernist mode, and therefore it resists the imposition of form, structure, and order, and avoids resolving or dissolving tensions, conflicts, incongruities, and contradiction. The Postmodernist perspective views experience as necessarily based on plurality, multiplicity, variety, and irreconcilable differences. It also recognizes gaps, ruptures, inconsistencies, fragments, unfinished endings and unreconciled tensions, without the need either to dispel them, reconcile them, or even explain them away. This is also how historiographic metafiction rejects narrative structures in traditional history. History is based on the dominance of one narrator, essentially, though such narrator may be referring to some other minor or major narratives. The employment of multiple narrators moves readers closer to this multi-layered, multifaceted, multi-dimensional reality than mono-narrative. Al-Ghitani resorts to multiplicity not only at the level of major or minor narrators but also at the level of the numerous common, ordinary characters. In the following passage, a number of characters exchange views on what the character of Zayni Barakat is like, on the basis of his being seen in public. At the end of the discussion, neither they, nor the readers of the novel, come up with a definite image of what Zayni is really like:

Safadi, the perfumer in Hamzawi and the best at extracting the essence of lilies, leans forward, placing his hand on his chest. “I saw him.” They look at him. “What piety! What goodness! Everything he said could have come only from a real man. A man such as he was not created to bow before potentate or sultan!”

Mahmud, the milkman, asks “Is he short and dark? I heard it said he was dark, with a long beard ...”

“No. His face is just like that of any of us.”

Master Murshidi laughs, “God forbid! You mean his face looks like your face, your ugly face?” Then, earnestly, he adds, “I saw him riding the *Muhtasib’s* mule on the street, but I couldn’t tell whether he was tall or short.” (p. 42)

It is interesting to note that none of these characters, who speak here as narrators, is a major or minor narrator. *Zayni Barakat* presents a large number of them. But the important point to stress here is the indeterminacy

of the narratives or stories told. This is what Postmodernist narrative generally does: it leaves the reader unsure about even some of the basic facts. It is worth noting here that the characters/narrators in this passage cannot agree about fundamentals, whether Zayni Barakat is short or tall, dark or of ordinary complexion. This passage is typical of the nature of the narrative throughout.

An examination of some of the individual narrators reveals an important dimension of al-Ghitani's historiographic metafictional project, as reflected in *Zayni Barakat*. The choice of Visconti Gianti, the first narrator we come across in the novel, serves the cause of indeterminacy in many ways. First of all, the narrator is an outsider to the culture and the language. It is true that he has been to Cairo and other parts of the world several times, but his knowledge of the Arabic-Islamic East remains limited, at times even flawed. One of Visconti Gianti's main characteristics is his unreliability. As a narrator, historian of a sensitive and complex period, he remains inadequate. For one thing, he neither moves around openly and freely, nor does he get close to people or matters. This becomes clear from the very beginning of his narrative. Says he:

I remember the small villages of India as the plague descends upon them: the air grows heavy with thick moisture. Tonight, the houses are awaiting for something that tomorrow might bring. I listen to the thudding sound of hooves as they hit the stones of the road, moving farther and farther away. I look out of the *mashrabiyya* careful not to be seen by anyone. ... I didn't see it when I came here the last time, before my long voyage in the Orient. I had heard of preparations under way for its construction and the erection of the huge dome facing it. I stick my head out a little way, afraid lest the darkness should suddenly reveal the faces of the cruel-hearted guards. If they were to find out that I am Frankish, they would put me to death with no trial, no interrogation, not even a question about who I am or where I came from. (pp. 1 - 2)

Gianti remains distant from the people whose stories he tells, the locale he describes, the events he recounts, and the culture he presents. First, he has to be careful to literally stay either hidden or in a relatively marginal place, not revealing himself lest he should be discovered. Secondly, he is, and he always remains, from another culture, "foreign" to Arabic-Islamic Cairo. His fear of arrest is partly true, but it is also partly a reflection of his paranoia, prejudice, and mistrust of the Arabic-Islamic culture. This is clearly reflected in the fact that he sees himself as "Frankish."

The fact also that he has been to several other parts of the world, including India, testifies to the shallowness of his knowledge of the Arabic-Islamic world, especially the Cairo whose story he is telling. He is a traveler who does not stay long enough in one place to know it, and who absents himself from places for long times. What we get, in other words, are the “observations” of a traveler who is in a hurry. This idea is underscored from the very beginning. The first chapter introduces Gianti’s narrative as being the “observations” of a traveler “who visited Cairo ... in the course of his travels around the world” (p. 1). He is not an outsider who makes Cairo his home, or who stays in it long enough to develop expertise and knowledge of it. His narrative is based on observation, casual or close, conducted in passing. In this sense, he is like the many occidental Orientalists who pass through the Arabic-Islamic East and report about it with authority and certainty, even though their engagement and encounter with it are very casual and superficial. It is these kinds of experiences that Edward Said critiques and exposes in his monumental masterpiece *Orientalism* (1979).

Add to this the important fact that even though he knows Arabic, his command of it is not so strong as to enable him to understand everything that he hears. At the outset, and this is another example of his unreliability, he tells us that he knows “the language of the city and its dialects” (p. 1). Later on, not only does he inform us that “the people seem to be speaking a different language” (p. 1), but he admits that there are words and sentences which he does not understand. This he confesses indirectly in a crucial passage:

From a distance a clamour arose, approached then turned; a group of carpenters is riding in carts drawn by animals. They were cheering and shouting rhythmically, “Ibn Musa! Ibn Musa! I couldn’t make out the rest of what they were saying. (p. 167)

Gianti’s failure to “make out” what the carpenters were shouting at this crucial moment is revealing. It is important to note here that what Gianti sees and reports in his narrative are incidents and events that happen in the public domain, things related to common, ordinary people who speak the common, daily language of sixteenth-century Egypt, the colloquial version of Arabic, the street language, including slang, which is usually the most difficult to understand by non-native speakers of a language. It is true, of course, that Gianti is familiar with colloquial Arabic; he mentions, for example, that although he is Italian, he is well-acquainted with the language and dialects of the people in the area. “I know the language of the city and its dialects” (p. 1). An example of such knowledge is when he says, “It was, as the common people of Egypt say, ‘a joy cut short’” (p. 18). While Gianti

does report a great deal, there is also a great deal which he either misreports or fails to report, he being an outsider to the culture.

Like Gianti, all other narrators are ultimately unreliable, untrustworthy, and indeterminate. Said al-Juhayni, for example, is one of the most well-meaning and honest characters, as well as narrators. Among all narrators, he is the closest to popular opinion, as well as to transparency and truth. He neither belongs to the authority, nor to the rebels or enemies of the state who have certain agendas in mind. He occupies a middle position. At a glimpse, one thinks of him as having the potential to be a reliable narrator who seems to convey the truth about matters, as objectively as possible. His love for Samah is pure, genuine, and platonic – unlike love relations throughout the novel. His reverence of her father embodies values of chivalry and integrity which are almost absent from the world of sixteenth-century Cairo:

The students and scholars and the dwellers of the tenements and alleys in Batiniyya know him as a kind, gentle and God-fearing man who rushes to help anyone in a tight spot; he would rescue a woman from the hands of a Mamluk who wanted to abduct her by shouting to call the Azhar students, inciting the men who would then surround the Mamluk. The common people say that if Said had the strength of Qurmas, the huge Mamluk wrestler, no Mamluk would have dared snatch even the shell of a bean from a basket carried by a little girl. (p. 64)

A careful look at his character and situation, however, reveals that his narrative could not, ultimately, be reliable. Even though he is by nature honest, by observation sharp, and by temperament moderate, we find him from the very beginning inhibited. Rightly, he does not trust people around him, and he has been indirectly warned by Shaykh Abu al-Su'ud not to trust his schoolmates, especially Amr, who turns out to be a spy. From the very beginning, we are told that "Said is watching developments cautiously" (p. 17). We are also informed of his being suspicious of others, of Amr in particular:

When he talked to him, Said chose his words carefully, avoiding criticism of any emir or notable. Said could visualize Amr heading for that house near Muqattam. He saw him having a private meeting with Zakariyya ibn Radi. No, not Zakariyya himself; maybe one of the deputies.... The following days would bring forth strangers, asking secretly about Said. Some of Zakariyya's lackeys would be following around. He wouldn't know them, but they would know him. They would follow his every step.... (p. 18)

Said, who is scared and almost paranoid, lives in a world where there is no trust, and no freedom to tell what one thinks. He knows that every word he says is going to be reported, and this is why he is to be careful in whatever he says, and this is why he has to repress and hide a great deal. Every time he tries to express himself, speak aloud or state his mind directly, he is repulsed: “Lower your voice, my son; he [Zakariyya ibn Radi] might hear us,” his spiritual godfather Shaykh Abu al-Su’ud tells him (p. 66). As time goes by, Said becomes haunted by the fear of Zakariyya and his spies, to the extent that he starts keeping his thoughts to himself.

In addition, Said fantasizes a great deal. His love for Samah overpowers almost everything else in his mind, and because he is remarkably inhibited, much of his narrative is composed of fantasy:

He has long been in love with this house and its inhabitants, its stones, the wood of its *mashrabiyyas*, the decoration of its walls, the light in its rooms, the hall for Quranic recitation during the holy month of Ramadan, with its high ceiling and small windows near the middle of the wall from which the womenfolk could look and listen to the verses of the Quran, safe from the eyes of strangers. Out of one of these windows she looks, watching and examining him. His eyes take in the little coloured marble tiles, which decorate the basin of the fountain in the middle of the small garden of the house. He looks at the comfortable cushions, which protect her tender body against the hard walls. Samah walks these corridors when the visitors are gone. Said has a vague feeling of satisfaction; he is not considered a stranger here. As he listens to Shaykh Rihan he sees her with his heart’s eye going and coming in one of the rooms, looking out of a window, leaning her head against a pillow He bowed his head, which was heavy with confusion, shyness and perplexity. (p. 63)

It is clear also that Said, in addition to fantasizing a lot, is emotional and romantic. Such emotionalism and romanticism endow him with “confusion, shyness and perplexity.” The point to stress here is that his emotional, romantic nature as a character undercuts his reliability as a narrator also, and this is the point that al-Ghitani is indirectly enforcing. Said is a lover of Samah, but he is also a lover of Egypt; he is a strong, devoted and dedicated patriot – the “national identity,” as Darrāj calls him (1999, p. 230). Such love and patriotism – and therefore such emotionalism, fantasizing, romanticism, and idealism – make him an unreliable, unrealistic narrator. Said, in other words, is too emotionally involved and too much of an idealist to report history reliably.

Three things happen to Said later that ruin, even further, his clarity of vision, faith, and the will to keep going. The first is his disillusionment in Zayni. At the start, Said thought Zayni was Cairo's redeemer. As successor of Ali ibn Abi al-Jud, he loves Zayni. He gradually discovers that Zayni has become as dictatorial as Ali, and Said loses his faith in him and in people's good nature. The second source of his disillusionment is Samah's marriage to another person. The third is his two-year imprisonment, which leaves him afraid, hurt, and suspicious. Toward the end of the novel, when Hamza tells him that he misses him, the comment draws a series of skeptical questions in his mind that reveal what Said has become. The following lines reflect his response to the situation:

Said narrowed his eyes, which had grown tired and had a hard time distinguishing nearby objects. Is Hamza telling the truth? Or is he just pretending? Did he really not know the truth of what happened? Hasn't he heard? If he was pretending not to know, then something must have warranted that. Hasn't he chanced to hear conversation among some of his Azhar patrons? Hamza is rubbing his hands together; there is unmistakable sincerity in his welcome. Have they advised him to fake it? Is there anything in his glances that should make him suspect him? (p. 216)

It is interesting to note here that even though the inability to distinguish "near object" is meant literally here, its significance is largely figurative, for Said discovers that he does not really know the people he thought he has known. One of the most significant lessons behind the story of Said is the difficulty of distinguishing clearly in this ambiguous, confusing, fickle, deceptive, and untrustworthy world. At the end of the novel, Said is totally ruined, not just as a person, but also as a narrator. The last chapter that Said is supposed to narrate is severely amputated, undercut, and empty. On one lone, empty page, only the following words appear: "Oh! They ruined me and destroyed my fortresses" (p. 235). The rest of the chapter is blank.

The vitality of the story of Said, both as character and narrator, stems from its illustration of the notion of displacement and alienation. Said is the embodiment of heroism and sincerity in a narrator that involves sincerity, clarity of vision, chivalry, unadulterated love, and straightforwardness. The novel rejects all of these values, by showing them as no longer viable in the new era. If one takes Said himself as a metaphor, Said would stand for the traditional narrator in literature, the era prior to Modernism or Postmodernism. Said would certainly make an excellent Romantic/Victorian narrator. In modern times, however, he is obsolete, and that makes him both unreliable and irrelevant.

A third major narrator, who is also ultimately unreliable and untrustworthy, is Zakariyya. Zakariyya ibn Radi is the more important, for our purposes, because he embarks on the ambitious project, as will be shown, of recording the history of all of Cairo, if not of Egypt and the Mamluk Sultanate as a whole.

Zakariyya occupies the position of the Chief Spy of the Sultanate. His occupation, as head spy, affects his role as a narrator tremendously. Zakariyya has the intention to monitor all of Cairo, collecting information and recording it in files. He devotes a file to every notable person. To achieve this purpose, he has an army of spies working for him, most of whom are under cover. His dream, which he thinks is possible, is to gather information about all of Egypt and its people. He puts these files in an adjacent building which he visits whenever he needs to check something and feel in control. His scheme is described thus:

Around him the long walls are lined with wooden cases divided into compartments and pigeon-holes, each of which contains a number of books and registers in different colours and sizes. Here the land of Egypt is summed up. Zakariyya always tells his closest aides, “Whenever I want to go to any town or village in Egypt, I don’t journey far from home. I come here. There is a section for each town, village, hamlet, estate or fief in the land of Egypt from one end to the other. Each register contains the description of the place, what it is famous for, its most important personages and everything known about them. The section on Cairo contains its alleys, the layout of its quarters and mosques; its men, old women, boys, slave girls, houses of sin, policemen, guards, its singers and its places of pleasure; the names of the Rumis residing, arriving and departing; the names of the Franks in transit and those and those Egyptians who get in touch with them. Everything, big or small, is here. (p. 31)

Zakariyya aims to be in control. For him, knowledge is power. The more information one has, the more grip he has on the lives of people and the land. More importantly, as is evident from “here the land of Egypt is summed up” and “whenever I want to go to any town or village of Egypt ... [,] I come here,” he privileges the reality or truth of writing and recording over external, daily reality. What Zakariyya, through the help of his army of spies, has written about Egyptian towns, villages and men, in a way, replaces or displaces the Egypt that exists in the physical, real world. There is no need for Zakariyya (who, as will be shown, subverts his own scheme and contradicts himself) to journey in physical Egypt, if he wants to find something out. All he has to do is go into the room and open the files. After

all, he has all of Egypt in a nutshell. In a sense, the Egypt contained in ink on paper, in discourse, is the true Egypt, and truth is not whatever one finds in the real, outside world, but what one finds in the words contained in the files. Zakariyya thinks of himself as a creator of a world, a world made of words. In effect, there is an interesting pun here: word replaces world. Truth is what gets written, what gets recorded, even if, as we discover, it either has little or no basis in real life.

Zakariyya's records or files, which one could call manuscripts, in a way turn him into a historian. The system he creates is almost impeccable. He has spies – they are also called eyes, reporters, *bassassin* – in all places: private homes, coffee shops, markets, streets, offices of officials, harems, etc. Their main job is to observe and report. Zakariyya's system is explained piecemeal throughout the novel, but in the section called "Fifth Pavilion," Zakariyya explains in some detail how he gathers information:

In addition to what we've mentioned, there is another method that we employ to penetrate to the secrets of this world, to reach the quintessential, primal truth: I have designated, for each of the classes and groups, individual spies, who are steeped in their respective customs, traditions and whatever has to do with them. I am now talking about career spies. In addition, there is another class, which is made up of "adjunct" spies, by which is meant a class of spies made up of individuals who join us from those various groups, in the sense that if I want to gather intelligence on coppersmiths, for instance, I would recruit one of them, rather than going around in circles and sending in an outsider who needs time to become an insider. It is important to maintain total confidentiality in the case of adjunct spies and give them a good training to make their talents match our work. Adjunct spies should be chosen on the basis of utmost honesty, trustworthiness and integrity. (p. 195)

The reference to "quintessential, primal truth" as the aim of the writing that spies produce and to "honesty" and "integrity," reminds us of the objectivity of historians. A little later, after this passage, Zakariyya speaks of recruiting "distinguished scholars" (p. 195). In fact what Zakariyya is after is more historical than history. He includes more facts, more material; it is more comprehensive, more voluminous than any one can imagine. In some ways, it is modern, sophisticated history, for while traditional history reports about the lives of those who make an impact, Zakariyya's history records everything that goes on: the lives of commoners or mass culture (Badawi, 1993, p. 66), mundane acts, insignificant daily

occurrences, etc. At some level, Zakariyya's history is Postmodernist history.

Furthermore, Zakariyya acts, behaves, and aims to function as an a knowing-all, omniscient narrator. He is more qualified for this role than the Venetian traveler Gianti and than the narrator with romantic but limited vision, Said al-Juhayni. As chief spy, he certainly has the power and the means to play this role. A few lines after the passage quoted above, he hints very strongly at this idea:

Zakariyya would sometimes brag, saying, "This department of the Bureau is a source of pride for the Sultan and a prized jewel in the crown of the Sultanate. Nothing like this has ever before been done by a *bassass*, Egyptian or Frankish. And if God, the All-Knowing, Ever-Present, wills, there will come a day when every human being will have a section devoted to him alone, summing him from the first cry at birth to the last tremor of death." (p. 31)

It is obvious from his words that Zakariyya plays god, the god who knows it all or who wants to know it all. More importantly, from the phrase "All-Knowing, Ever-Present," it is crystal clear that Zakariyya aspires to be an omniscient narrator. This is also evident in his urge to "sum" up the lives of characters from "birth to the last trimmer of death."

Zakariyya spares no effort to achieve this purpose. In addition to the army of spies he spreads in and around Cairo, whose job is to provide him with numerous reports about what goes on, he himself functions in disguise and goes often to see for himself. It is interesting that Zakariyya, to achieve his purpose, is willing to disguise himself in infinite ways, and be an infinite number of persons at once. In this, he is also being an omniscient narrator who steps in and out of peoples' personalities and lives, knowing no limits and stopping at no points. Zakariyya, in other words, is an impersonator. Such impersonation, and the omniscient narrator impersonizes the whole time, enables him also to visit places, locales, and settings freely:

Earlier in the day Zakariyya had gone into the wardrobe room, a long, narrow room containing every imaginable kind of clothing: sultan's turbans, other turbans that only emirs of a thousand are entitled to wear, frocks of Azhar shaykhs, caftans and cheap galabiyas of pastry vendors, butchers and fruit grocers. (p. 51)

All of these garbs and more are used for disguise. This is what an omniscient narrator does: he narrates the lives of all in the novel, the major and minor characters, the lofty and the low: those with "sultan's turbans" and those with "cheap galabiyas." He steps in and out of lives of characters with a great deal of ease and speed.

It does not take a careful reader long, however, before discovering that Zakariyya is far from a reliable narrator or historian, that all talk about strict methods of information-gathering, strict rules about objectivity, and quintessential truth is not meant seriously. Zakariyya himself aborts and subverts his own method and his own rule. His history is adulterated, fake history.

For one thing, as prefaced earlier, the Egypt in the nutshell that he speaks about – the “true” Egypt in a sense – turns out to be extremely lacking or deficient, and neither as complete as he has originally claimed nor as sufficient or reliable. Otherwise, why does he need to disguise himself and go out to find or check the truth about things from the real world? Why does he have a whole wardrobe of disguise clothes? He says he does not need to go out to any town or village of Egypt, but then he goes out under cover to learn about things which he does not know about in Cairo itself, let alone the other Egyptian towns and villages. The external, real Egypt does exist after all. This is pure contradiction. In a way, this is, of course, the Postmodernist, historiographical metafictional al-Ghitani making fun of the so-called completeness, comprehensiveness, and claims of traditional history and historians. The claim on part of Zakariyya to omniscience, all-knowingness is debunked here. Omniscient narrative is not that omniscient after all; so much escapes recording, and truth or reality can never be represented or pinned down fully.

Secondly, all talk about the making of a spy, about his/her objectivity, pursuit of the truth, accuracy of information, keenness of observation, which Zakariyya tells us a great deal about in his narrative, turns out to be false, at best a pretense. Zakariyya himself falsifies records, falsifies history. This happens on several occasions. One important occasion occurs when Zayni Barakat appears, almost out of nowhere, as the *Muhtasib* of Cairo. Zakariyya is almost horrified. First of all his records have not given him a clue in the least as to Zayni’s rise to power, though there was more than one report about Zayni meeting with Emir Qani Bey. One of the objectives of his records and manuscripts, it should be remembered, was to point clearly to those who are about to occupy important positions. Zakariyya and his system fail to detect the man who has occupied not one position, but several important positions:

Zakariyya is now blowing hot air from his mouth. He had thought, had been certain, that the post [of *Muhtasib* of Cairo] would undoubtedly go to Emir Tughluq. (p. 34)

Not only this, but Zakariyya was willing to forge Zayni’s file. When he, after hearing the unexpected news about the appointment of Zayni, went to his precious records and manuscripts to look at what they had on Zayni in the file, he was disappointed to find very little. He only finds four short

lines, which do not amount to much: “Barakat ibn Musa: has the ability to read the stars; mother’s name: Anqa” (p. 33). This testifies to the insufficiency of the recorded, factual material. And this is al-Ghitani making fun of history as being neither reliable enough, nor representative enough of truth or reality. But what Zakariyya does to the file is revealing. Dissatisfied with what is written in it, he decided to add false information to it. “From a small cavity draped by a small curtain he [Zakariyya] takes out a clay pot and dips a fine-pointed pen in a coloured vessel,” and begins to write material from his own head:

The First Page

10 Shawwal 912 AH

In full view of the emirs and in the presence of a great crowd, Zayni Barakat requested, in a voice overcome with emotion, that his lord relieve him of the Markets Inspectorship. He said in a trembling voice, “The Inspectorship, my lord, is a post the holder of which is entrusted with the affairs of the people (p. 35)

This is all fake, all forged information. It is significant to mention in this context that in the conference held by international spies, which Zakariyya hosted and in which he delivered a speech, a paper was distributed among chief spies “on how to convince people that what does not exist does” (p. 202). The point that al-Ghitani is emphasizing here is two-fold: first, that much of history is subjective – what Zakariyya writes is not so much what happens but what he wishes to happen – and, secondly, that history is fictional or fictitious. Historians, in other words, cannot but fictionalize, for fiction is more satisfying and fulfilling than history. Historians put forth theoretical strategies and premises, which give their methods the guise of scientificity but violate their own methods, strategies, and premises.

Two more points need to be made about Zakariyya’s history. The first is his reliance on spies, *bassassin* in Arabic. A spy, or *bassass*, is a person who not only works under cover, but a person who eavesdrops. Amr bin al-Adawi, one of the minor narrators, represents this level of history accurately. He is entrusted with the task of spying on Said. At times, he gathers information by engaging him in discussions. Most of the time, however, he does two things. The first is to hide in a spot in the coffee house which Said frequents in order to eavesdrop:

Amr had to sit in a place where Said couldn’t see him. Amr wondered how that could be done when the café was so small. At that point the Head Spy spread out a wide sheet of paper on which was a sketch of the café, its utensils and

built-in benches. He pointed to a gap in the wall close to the charcoal-burner and the fenugreek and salep.

“Here you will sit. Said does not come in but stays outside. You can monitor his movements without his seeing you....”
(p. 134)

It is obvious that Said cannot see everything or hear everything; in this sense, his “story” or “report” is going to be highly fragmented. As an eavesdropper, he cannot hope to get the story fully; there will have to be omissions, distortion, misheard words. Such method of gathering “facts” is obviously flawed. At this level, the word *bassass* in Arabic is interesting, and it is always used in a negative context. It refers to a person who steals looks.

The second method Amr uses is to ask people about Said, primarily people who associate with him. In this case, the information he acquires is influenced negatively by two factors: first, people’s fear or mistrust of Amr himself, and second their own prejudice against or bias toward Said. More importantly, such method is based on hearsay. And as is well known, hearsay is unreliable. Even the place he frequents to gather information, the Azhar Mosque, a great deal of “claims” or suppositions are circulated about it; even about basic facts:

Next to the third marble pillar to the right of the old wall at al-Azhar – the pillar under which Azharites claim a buried talisman kept sparrows, snakes and scorpions away from the mosque – he sat many times, holding imaginary conversations with his mother. (p. 46)

A great deal – in Amr’s world, in Zakariyya’s, in Said’s, in Gianti’s, in every character’s/narrator’s life – is built on what is “said,” “claimed,” “reported,” or “imagined.” Gianti builds much of his narrative on hearsay. He says, introducing an aspect of Zayni, “At that time I *heard* an interesting incident, which he himself had resolved. It happened that a white Rumi slave girl sent him a plea for help....” (my emphasis; 4). Gianti builds opinions about Zayni on the basis of a narrative or a story that he has heard, but he reports it as history. It is interesting also in the quote above, how Amr who is supposed to be one of the most reliable sources of Zakariyya’s history, makes “imaginary conversations with his mother.” Said al-Juhayni, somewhat like Nixon in Coover, spends a great deal of his time fantasizing about Samah. Characters in novels do fantasize, but the fantasies of these particular two characters occupy a lot of space in the body of the narrative.

One important characteristic of much of the narrative in the novel is the fact it is fragmentary. It is based on excerpts, which is what makes the narrative indeterminate, indecisive, unreliable, and eventually untruthful – in the sense of not telling the truth, or coming near to telling it: it is the fact,

as we are forewarned from the beginning, that what we get are “excerpts” and not the whole thing. Before the first piece of Gianti’s narrative, for example, we learn that what we are going to read is: “Excerpt A from the observations of the Venetian traveller Visconti Gianti, who visited Cairo more than once in the sixteenth century AD in the course of his travels around the world” (p. 1). All Gianti’s narratives are prefaced with the word “Excerpt.” Half-way through the novel, the following prefatory note appears: “Excerpt B, containing some of the observations of the Venetian traveler Visconti Gianti, who was passing through Cairo for the first time, coming from the Sudan and the lands of the Negroes, heading for the sea for a passage to his country after a long journey” (p. 118). The same thing applies to other narratives as well. Before one of Zakariyya’s letter to the Sultan and the emirs, the following prefatory note appears: “Excerpt from Chief Spy Supreme Shihab Zakariyya ibn Radi’s communication to the Sultan and the emirs” (p. 59). Later on we get an “Excerpt from an announcement repeated by the heralds on the same evening, Tuesday, 7 Dhu al-Qa’da” and “Excerpt from an unusual announcement repeated by Zayni’s men on the evening of Tuesday, 7 Dhu al-Qa’da, among the people who went out on the streets and listened happily to what was being announced” (p. 85). Further on in the narrative, we get excerpts from a sermon: “Special section containing excerpts of what was said about the lamps” (p. 96).

This interweaving of hearsay and fantasy on the one hand, and excerpts of supposed history on the other hand, is what makes this novel interesting. The narrative is a pastiche of discourse that is made up of a vast variety of information built on the basis of an infinite number of processes: observation, eavesdropping, gossip, second-, third- and fourth-hand reports.

But it is also a pastiche of genres. As has been pointed out, there are the multiple-narrators, who are a mixture of I-narrative, limited-omniscient, omniscient narrators, epistles, reports, memos, public announcements, sermons, conference speeches, decrees, registers. The various types of narrative have already been illustrated, as well as the registers. As for the reports, there are several small chapters, as well as sections in chapters, based on reports written by spies.

This specific feature of the novel, the mixing of genres, makes *Zayni Barakat* a Postmodernist novel. This blending is also a historiographic metafictional dimension, in the sense that the novel goes beyond the traditional mono-generic aspects of the novel as well as traditional history. The prefix *meta* in “historiographic *metafiction*” is revealing. It has to be remembered that “meta” means beyond, and historiographic metafiction goes beyond both history and fiction, exploring frontiers that lie beyond traditional frontiers, and arenas that are borderline or mixed.

Much of the focus in *Zayni Barakat* is, clearly, on the character of Zayni himself. As was prefaced, Zayni was, of course, a historical character. His image in Ibn Iyas, however remarkable, differs from his image of Zayni in al-Ghitani. As stated earlier, his image in Ibn Iyas is on the whole positive. Al-Ghitani portrays him as a survivor, “ambitious but fair, efficient and well-liked by the people, as well as by the Mamluks and, later on, the Ottoman rulers” (Abdel Wahab, 1985. p. xvii). More importantly, in *Zayni Barakat*, he appears as largely shadowy, fluid, ambiguous, double, even multifaceted. There is a lot of mystery about him, and a lot of indeterminacy. Till the very end of the story, one does not have a clear picture of him, and there are so many question marks about him. One remains ambivalent regarding his character till the very end of the novel. There are moments when he is portrayed as a saint and moments when he is portrayed as a devil. The most certain thing about him is one’s own uncertainty. Illustrating and augmenting such uncertainty, doubleness, or incongruity, Gianti says:

I haven’t seen anything like it in any country. The people love a specific person, everybody says good things about him, praises him, but at the same time there is a secret undercurrent, an imperceptible feeling permeating people and even inanimate objects, a fear of Zayni, which does not show on anyone’s face but which can be felt. This has really puzzled and confused me. (p. 168)

The point to stress here is that the same puzzlement and confusion that Gianti feels is felt, throughout the novel, by the reader as well. There are many reasons for this duality, this mixture of “love” and “fear.” One very important reason is the fact that Zayni does not speak much. It is interesting that he is the only major character who is not a narrator in the novel. Gianti and Zakariyya speak at length, Amr speaks frequently, and Said speaks a great deal; and though there are ambiguities about them, their characters become coherent and clear because of the fact that they do express themselves significantly, both as characters and as narrators. Zayni, on the whole, does not speak. The only thing attributed to Zayni, which may encourage one to think of him as a “narrator” is a letter sent by him to Zakariyya, explaining to Zakariyya his [Zayni’s] vision of how spying should be conducted for the public good. There are two problems with the letter, however. The first is that one is never entirely sure whether it is written by Zayni himself or by Zakariyya in the name of Zayni. As pointed out earlier, Zakariyya fakes and forges documents. Assuming, however, that it is written by Zayni, the letter is essentially of official nature. It does not reveal much about him as a person. Add to this the fact that it is addressed to Zakariyya, a man whom he mistrusts, which is why he must have been

careful writing it, making it reveal what he deliberately wishes to reveal. He can neither be sincere in the letter, nor transparent. Furthermore, what is most revealing about the letter is its elusiveness. One can never conclude from the letter whether Zayni is a villain, who is suggesting improvements for the system of spies for his own personal benefit, or for the sake of the country; whether he is really honest and well-meaning, and his words have thus to be taken at face value, or selfish and hypocritical, using seemingly objective language to serve his own dubious purposes:

What I offer you here is nothing more than a few ideas and thoughts that have occurred to me. If you think they are valid, I hope we can work together to implement them so that justice might be established and strengthened. In this endeavour, we shall care about nothing except pleasing God, for, as you know, the noblest of God's creatures, peace and prayer be upon him, has said, "He who pleases God by displeasing people shall be protected by Him from their evil; and he who pleases people by displeasing God shall be placed in their charge by God. (p. 129)

It is hard here to see through or penetrate Zayni's words and to arrive at the meaning behind them: is he saying what he is saying seriously and straightforwardly, and he is thus being truly caring about God and the Sultanate and the service of people – and he thus means what he says literally? Or is he using these words tongue in-cheek, ironically, as a cover for his manipulation of people? One can never come up with a conclusive answer.

Even at the level of appearance, Zayni does neither appear very often, nor appear directly and engage in conversation or confrontation with other characters. There are times when he does so, even though such appearance is essentially official, and performs certain acts and rituals as part of his job, and most of these are very carefully thought out and calculated. On the whole, however, he remains in the background on purpose, of course. His appearance happens a great deal at the level of the narrative discourse. His presence is felt and what he does or does not do occurs at the level of reported action, anecdotes and stories told by others. The following passage is a case in point:

Zayni struck him on the face, saying, "Children do not lie," and ordered that he be exposed in disgrace on a donkey throughout Cairo and be locked up at Arqana Prison until his case was decided. Some shaykhs went up to Zayni and said that what happened took place every day and they talked a lot, hinting, rather than stating explicitly, that the man knew some emirs and those, well, you know perhaps ... It was said

that Zayni got up in rage, yelled at them and ordered them out of his sight, saying “No such abomination will ever take place in my administration. I fear only Him.” (p. 70)

The key phrase in the story embodied in this citation, as well as most stories about Zayni, is “it was said that.”

Many characters, and narrators, speak about Zayni a lot. As evident from the title of the novel and from the narrator’s concerns he is the narratee, to borrow a term from Gerald Prince (Tompkins, pp. 7 - 25). He is spoken about a great deal. Ironically, however, even though he is spoken about a lot, one is still stuck about what to make of him, hanging between the ambivalence of the narrators themselves, for the narrators are themselves ambivalent. Besides, the narrators are prejudiced against Zayni, such as Zakariyya who, though he allies himself to him, he finds him a threat; or as in the case of Said, he is initially biased, then disillusioned and prejudiced. Both Zakariyya and Said portray him in the same manner that the letter attributed to him portrays him. At times, one feels he is clear, honest and straightforward, at times not. Take Said’s position toward him: it is composed of love and hate at the same time. He started believing in him a lot, and then became disillusioned. But such disillusionment has no solid foundation or evidence. Zakariyya, who makes it a point to know men, admits the difficulty of understanding Zayni or pinning him down:

This was no joke. He was getting more and more convinced of what he had decided that night, but the truth was, Zayni was a man the likes of whom he had not known. Sometimes Zakariyya thought he should have come years later than this age; how many years he did not know, but it would be more fitting to live in a far-off time, where he could find those devices he dreamt about but couldn’t quite define because of his inability to realize. This Zayni has also come from that mysterious, far-off era, in which he wanted to live. A man like Zayni should not be underestimated. (p. 126)

The fact that Zayni is, and remains throughout the novel, mysterious is obvious from this citation. And it is also obvious that Zayni is more complex, more many-sided, and multi-layered than he appears in Ibn Iyas (and this is indirectly al-Ghitani correcting Ibn Iyas on this, in the Bloomian way referred to earlier). But the last sentence in the citation – “A man like Zayni should not be underestimated” – is a warning to the reader as well, that Zayni has more than one side and that one should not simplify his character. At times, he is even elevated to a mythic level; he becomes a legend, and people weave stories around him and exaggerate his image a lot. Zakariyya does that, and so does Said. Even Gianti subscribes to this

propensity. In his depiction of him early on in the book, Gianti, for example, says:

I have seen many men: Berbers, Indians, Italians, princes from Gaul, Abyssinia and the northernmost parts of the world. But I haven't seen anything like his gleaming eyes, which narrow as he speaks as if they were the eyes of a cat in the dark. His eyes were created to pierce the dark for of the countries of the North, to penetrate their total silence. He does not see one's face or features; rather he penetrates to the very bottom of the skull, to the ribs of the chest, uncovering one's hidden hopes and true feelings. His features radiate with a brilliant intelligence, while a momentary closing of his eyes shows a kindness, a tenderness that makes one want to be close to him even while one is still in awe of him. (p. 4)

The dual image that narrators create of Zayni is obvious in the last sentence of this citation, namely, that Zayni is at once tender/kind and awesome. The citation, however, illustrates the point introduced earlier, namely, the mythicization of Zayni. This passage turns him into an utterly mysterious, superhuman, and god-like figure.

Different narrators present different images of him, at times contradictory ones – in fact, as obvious from the pervious two quotations by Gianti, the contradiction appears even in one narrator. The following passage from Gianti himself introduces Zayni with no duality, no ambiguity. He appears as a person who is totally loved by his people. There is no awe, no fear of him whatsoever, which is the opposite of what Gianti narrated before.

I have seen Zayni go down to the markets himself, arguing with the vendors of pastries, cheese and eggs, standing along with the peasant women who sold chicken, geese, rabbits, and ducks. He set the prices himself and had the violators publicly exposed and disgraced. I know that the people are pleased with him, that they love him. I remember what I wrote about him after I had met him for the first time. (p. 4)

This leads us to raise and highlight an important point regarding historiographic metafiction, namely the idea related to self-reflexivity. Ultimately, it becomes clear that *Zayni Barakat* is about telling, writing, or presenting history. Its subject matter, like that of history *per se*, is the career of Zayni Barakat, himself a historical figure who played an important role, at one point in time, in an important Arab-Islamic period, the late Mamluk epoch. A great deal of Arabic history is told in this way. Eras or epochs are dealt with by historians in relation to certain figures who either ruled or had a great bearing on the way events happened (Badawi, 1993, p. 69). Hence

Arabic-Islamic history is tackled, for instance, in relation to main figures, such the four Caliphs, Mu‘aāwiyah, ‘Umar bin ‘Abdel ‘Azīz, etc. When we study the Omayyad period, or the Abbasid or the Ottoman, historians tend to study it in relation to the rulers or persons who had an influence on events. What al-Ghitani does in *Zayni Barakat* is to focus on this particular point. Since history is tied to individuals, since epochs are known mainly through the individuals who ruled, can we really know these epochs – clearly, precisely, coherently, and objectively? The answer, which comes through the whole novel, is no.

Zayni Barakat makes it clear that history is essentially narrative, like any narrative. Like any narrative, history is about people reporting about people; and since historians are tellers or narrators, they are prone to be influenced, by how much they know, by the limitations of such knowledge, and by their own biases, prejudices, and relations. In this sense, they are like Zakariyya, Amr, Said, Gianti and many others, all unreliable: Zakariyya because he is an ideologue and a forger of facts, Amr because he works for the authority, Said because he is a passionate patriot and a romantic, and Gianti because he is a colonialist.

It is interesting in this context to raise the story of Sha’ban. Sha’ban is a beautiful young boy who had a close relation with Sultan al-Ghuri (himself a historical figure). Zakariyya, who is suspicious of everyone and who makes it a point to know everything about everyone and everything, wanted to know the nature of the relationship between the boy and the Sultan. So he kidnapped Sha’ban and tried all means possible to get information from him about the relationship. To this end, he used the carrot and the stick alternatively, and he finally arrived nowhere, even though Sha’ban kept insisting, directly and indirectly, that they had a normal relationship. Zakariyya started with a hypothesis and he wanted to prove it. He suspected the Sultan to have a sexual relation with Sha’ban. This was denied by Sha’ban. Even when Zakariyya could not find any single evidence for this hypothesis (this story of his), he could not change his position and accept any other story. Since he himself finds it hard to believe that relations in the world are not based on anything except interest or sexual relations, he could not understand that a relationship between Sha’ban and the Sultan may exist outside the context of interest and sexuality. He ends up raping and killing Sha’ban. Sha’ban dies without Zakariyya ever knowing any truth.

In the final analysis, historians like Zakariyya hold prior notions, crystallize positions, and construct narratives, which they try to prove by hook or crook. Zakariyya’s rape and destruction of Sha’ban is a metaphor for historians who “rape” and “destroy” the historical material, in an attempt to prove their point, though they end up proving nothing, of course. *Zayni*

Barakat makes it clear that this cannot be achieved: objective truth, positivist truth, is an illusion, and that is why history itself is an illusion. History is made up, just like narrative. In this sense, *Zayni Barakat* is a deconstructive text. Not only does it deconstruct history, but it deconstructs the historians' traditional ways of narrating history.

The main issue in the novel, then, is whether history can be told objectively, clearly, and precisely or not. The answer, mainly indirect (through the various narrators, through the ambiguity about characters and situations) is that positivist history is not possible at all. There can never be an overall, clear picture about either persons or things, that history is subjective: it is either total fiction, or is immensely fictionalized. *Zayni Barakat* is, ultimately, about the impossibility of writing or reporting history objectively. The relationship between history, historians, and the "truth" which historians are after is exactly like the relationship between narrative, narrators, and the "truth" which narrators aim to convey.

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