

### The writing of lives: An ethnography of writers and their milieus in Alexandria

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## The *writing of lives*. An ethnography of writers and their milieus in Alexandria

Samuli Schielke and Mukhtar Saad Shehata

Egypt's thwarted revolution of 2011 has invited increased international interest in Egyptian cultural production (*ibda`* in Arabic). There has been some well-deserved attention to art works and music, slogans and poems, blogs and novels, and those producing or making use of them – especially in the context of the revolutionary uprising.<sup>1</sup> Much of this attention has been rather selective, however. International interest in contemporary Egyptian cultural production has tended to highlight specific scenes that seem to harmonise with the tastes and desires of a liberal-left international audience (for a critique, see Eickhof 2016). And yet most cultural production in Egypt is grounded in other configurations of aesthetics and politics, and takes place outside the internationally visible cosmopolitan scene. To understand how artistic and literary imagination is part of social dynamics – and continuities – it is imperative to expand the scope of inquiry.

Based on our ongoing ethnographic fieldwork with writers in Alexandria, Egypt's second city, we focus in this article on two literary circles and a handful of writers from the city. Exploring their different takes on literary aesthetics, institutions, morals and politics, we search to answer two ques-

tions. First: how do specific institutional, cultural generational and class milieus contribute to the making of literary careers, sociality and aesthetics? Second: what kind of productive relationships can be observed between literary writing and the crafting of life trajectories?

Building on the work of scholars who have studied the relationship of cultural production with institutional power, ideology and morals, class, and generation and age (e.g. Bourdieu 1998; Armbrust 1996; Abu-Lughod 2005; Winegar 2006; Jacquemond 2008; Mehrez 2010; Olszewska 2015; Eickhoff 2016), we argue that literary writing is related to intimate and social lives in a complex way that calls for an analysis that may bring together structuring power relations, social mores, existential motivations, the circulation of texts and genres, class habitus, gender, and individual idiosyncrasies.

The writers we write about do not belong to the most famous names of Egyptian literature. This is a conscious choice. Stardom is rare and exceptional. Most writers gain at best a modest share of fame and success in the course of their careers.

Egyptian literature of the 20th century posited a figure of the author who is on the one hand a romantic individualist, a gifted genius producing from out of his or her authentic experience and inspiration, and on the other hand, a committed citizen acting as a »conscience of the nation« and as part of an »army of the letters« (Jacquemond 2008). In the course of early 21st century, this aspired unity of aesthetic autonomy and nationalist commitment has increasingly eroded (al-Dab' 2016). It was never uncontested in the first place, and different understandings of the role of the writer and the meaning and purpose of literature have competed for space for a long time in Egypt

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Mehrez 2012; Colla 2012; Schanda 2013. In the field of writing, bloggers in particular have gained significant attention (see, e.g. Hirschkind 2011; Pepe 2014; Jurkiewicz 2012), partly because blogging was instrumental for the shift of language and style that marked the first decade of the online era in Arabic writing that coincided with the 2011 uprisings. Blogs also provide a more durable record for study than other forms of online writing. By the time of this writing, the short golden age of blogs is already over in Egypt, and blogs have become one online medium among others, accompanied and at times overshadowed by more transient formats like Twitter and Facebook (Pepe 2014: 47).

(Jacquemond 2008). But the past two decades have witnessed a growing split within the literary landscape, polarised between public sector institutions and authors committed to a rather conservative version of 20th century modernist aspirations on the one hand, and a so-called independent cultural scene marked by more experimental and cosmopolitan aesthetics, on the other. (The »independent scene« is properly speaking only independent from the Ministry of Culture, and usually highly dependent on international and private funding. Cultural production is always dependent on powerful others, be it through funding and patronage or the market. See Eickhof 2016; Winegar 2006). This split is far from absolute of course, and at a closer look the literary landscape is made of a large number of small circles of friends, institutions with their regular crowds, and regular meeting places which are in a constant process of fragmentation and rearrangement. But there is a tangible polarising tendency that corresponds in a complex way with generational experience, class and political positioning. This tendency has been further magnified in the aftermath of 2011. In the course of our fieldwork, we began to use the shorthand expressions »conservative« and »avant-garde« for the extremes of this split. Writers themselves would often rather distinguish between good literature (that is, the literature they produce and appreciate) and bad literature (produced by people in other circles).

It appears tempting – and indeed promising – to study this split as a competition for symbolic capital within the literary field and, by extension, the wider field of political and social power with the tools offered by Pierre Bourdieu (1984; 1998). Such an analysis is necessary but not sufficient. Writing is an essentially social practice made possible and limited by the milieus and the fields of power in which the writer acts in her or his capacity as a writer. But writers are also commonly non-conforming, exceptional figures who are drawn to the work of literary imagination for various reasons. Although Egyptian writers often hope to speak for the society, they are seldom read and heard – with the exception of a handful of literary stars. Writers may be respected but also considered foolish and weird by their relatives and colleagues (much depends on the specifics of family and professional socialisation in a way that is influenced by but not reducible to class positioning). Only in exceptional cases they may gain wealth and fame. How to understand the motivations and consequences of writing in a society where there are much more effective and profitable ways to find success and recognition? This idiosyncratic, non-deterministic aspect requires a more existential approach that highlights intersubjective experience (see, e.g. Jackson 2013; Ram and Houston 2015). These two approaches – social capital and existential motivations – do not easily fit together, but we find both necessary.

The most immediate and tangible level of sociality is what we call *circles*, the specific cultural and literary gatherings of like-minded people, often combining friendship and shared interest, and constantly in process of fragmentation and formation. Any given author would be likely to move in several circles but be more at home in some than in others. Circles include formal literary groups (*gama'a adabiya*) but also the powerful social institution of the *shilla*, »clique« (de Koning 2009; Morsi 2009; Kreil 2012: 113-115), a more or less closed group of friends who gather frequently and often also encourage and assist each other in their professional and other pursuits. Circles typically come together and share in what we call *scenes*: assemblages of physical and virtual sites where cultural production comes together, is made possible and encouraged: cultural centres, art spaces, cafés, organisations, online groups and networks.<sup>2</sup> On a higher level of abstraction, we speak of the *milieu*: the wider social space that includes not just the literary space but also generational experience and class socialisation of people participating in that space.<sup>3</sup> All these levels of sociality are to some degree exclusionary, and are defined against each other as well as against the wider social mainstream. In colloquial Egyptian parlance of the urban bourgeoisie,<sup>4</sup> this wider mainstream against

**2** Rather than being parallel or alternatives to face-to-face gatherings and material scenes, online networks commonly work as their extensions, involving people in the sociality of a circle even when they cannot be physically present. The limits of online communication and sociality are more fluid and usually less exclusive than, say, a gathering in a café. Online networks have allowed people who only rarely physically frequent cultural spaces to get at least partially involved in some of their activities. They have also resulted in interesting transformations of the writer-reader relation (Pepe 2015).

**3** A milieu in this sense is neither a clearly marked social structure nor a continuous tradition. Rather, it is something like a sociological reading of the phenomenological notion of the lifeworld (or, alternatively, a phenomenological reading of Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and social field): the coming together of specific formative contexts, traditions, powers and materialities in intersubjective experience.

**4** Today, the term middle class is used to describe so many different social strata and groups that we find it no longer helpful to locate people socially. (Although it remains very useful as a way to understand social aspiration.) Poor people with higher education but few material means may see themselves as middle class, and so may rich and powerful people, including judges, military officers and businesspeople. In Egypt, the English term middle class or upper middle class is usually used to describe people who stand clearly above the middle income strata: they live in affluent neighbourhoods of major cities, have superior educational and economic capital, and come from families that earn their living in well-income positions in the public sector, white-collar positions in the private sector, business, and free professions – that is, people who in an older social scientific parlance would have been called the bourgeoisie. For the sake of clarity, we therefore systematically speak of bourgeoisie to describe people from the above-mentioned social stratum.

which one searches for distinction is called *al-bi'a* »the environment«. Incidentally, both »milieu« and »environment« can be translated in Arabic as *bi'a* (although *wasat* »middle« might offer a less ambiguous translation of »milieu«), reminding us that sociality always carries the duality of inclusion and mutual support, and exclusion and rejection of others.

The aim of our exploration of sociality, however, is to understand the relation of life and writing on a more idiosyncratic level. How can we understand the fragile and often indeterministic formation of the unique voice of a writer in the context of (but not simply determined by) a milieu with its specific aesthetics, political economy, relationships of power, class and gender?

But this is not how we started. Our original research question was much more individualistic. It concerned the motivations of writing. Why do some people write? This individualistic line of research turned out a failure, but a productive one.

### 1. A questionable endeavour

In spring 2013, Samuli met with the poet Shaymaa Bakr in a café in eastern Alexandria, far from the literary epicentre of the city. We had gotten to know her as a writer who cultivated contradictions. At our first interview in spring 2012 she, wearing a face veil but not minding about sitting in our male company, had identified herself as a Salafi, and added that she writes about sex, desire and discontent. She was an outsider to the literary circles of the city, but her poetry was close to the poetic mainstream produced today in the wake of the 20th century modernist avant-garde: combining metre and rhyme with a free verse structure, and often dominated by a subjective first-person voice. At the interview she recited to us passages from her long poem »Ruby on their embers« (Bakr unpublished) which circles around the themes of desire and temptation, and concludes as follows:

لا مرة فعلت ما أشاء  
لا مرة شئت الذي فعلته  
لا انهرت في جهر  
ولا ثبت في خفاء  
لكنني حمدت في أني  
بقيت رغم محنتي  
ياقوتة تلمع فوق  
جمر  
هؤلاء

Not once did I do what I wanted  
Not once did I want what I did  
I did not collapse in public  
Nor was I steadfast secretly  
But I praised myself for  
remaining, in spite of my ordeal  
a ruby glowing above  
their  
embers

The poem's first-person narrator makes a point of cultivating ambivalence. She also insists on remaining something special in face of the demands and temptations of others. This was also very much how Shaymaa Bakr presented herself as an author to us. Her conscious performance of idiosyncrasy, her determination to appear as a peculiar individual and not as a member of a category or a group, drew our attention in a moment when our fieldwork was still circling around the question of individual trajectories of poets. Shaymaa Bakr, however, refused to tell us anything about that. We know very little of her – we are not even sure if she is known as Shaymaa Bakr also by her colleagues and family.<sup>5</sup> All she let us know was that she worked as a teacher and that her economic and private situation were precarious. She kept different parts of her life strictly apart: »Nobody at school knows what else I do.« Her face veil further underlined that gesture of separation. This was her specific solution to the tension between her declared intention »to speak out loudly« and her other private roles in life. The popular neighbourhoods of Eastern Alexandria where she lives are a conservative and gender-anxious place to live. Speaking out publicly about intimate experiences can expose a woman to gossip, scandal, and problems with her family, colleagues and neighbours. (More bourgeois milieus offer somewhat more leeway, but the way women act in public is the source of major moral anxiety across social classes.) Other women writers often try to find an appropriate balance between such conflicting demands. Some (fewer) take a more radical path and consciously

<sup>5</sup> Due to the genealogical structure of Arabic names (first name followed by father's name, then grandfather's, then grand-grandfather's, etc.) in combination with the proliferation of nicknames, the difference of »real name« and pseudonym is not clear-cut in Egypt. It is common that the same person is known by different versions and combinations of her or his name in different contexts. For example, a man with the name Muhammad Ziyad Fathi Muhammad Al-Naggar on his ID card might be known as Hammuda by his parents, Mido by his friends (both are different nickname versions of Muhammad), Muhammad Al-Naggar by people in his native village (to associate him with the extended family or clan he belongs to) and Ziyad Fathi at his workplace in a city (where Muhammad may be dropped because there are so many people with that name).

contest gendered ideas of modesty and privacy in their writing and public persona. Shaymaa Bakr chose a different kind of radical solution: keeping things apart.

How to write about such a writer? In her view, it was a questionable endeavour to start with. In a meeting with Samuli in spring 2013, she went so far as to contest the very idea of an anthropological study of writers and poets:

Why do you as an anthropologist study poets? Anthropology should be about the whole of society. Poets are outsiders, they are exceptional and disconnected, they do not express or represent the society.

We, however, were not trying to represent »the society«. We were interested in people like her. And people like her drew us to ask questions about literature and society. The writers we met kept telling us how important the support and feedback of peers, friends and literary circles, readings and chances to find readers were for becoming a writer – and even more, for remaining a writer, since most literary trajectories turned out to be short, only covering a limited period in life (youth and old age being the most likely life stages). Also Shaymaa Bakr was not fully an outsider. We had originally met her through another poet who was well-connected in eastern Alexandria. At the interview in spring 2013, she was in a hurry, on her way to present her poetry at a symposium (*nadwa*) in a different city, thanks to the invitation by a senior relative who was supporting her literary career. Being a writer often comes along with some sort of estrangement or non-conformity. And yet being a writer is also a thoroughly social affair, embedded in and structured by literary networks and forms of sociality (Olszewska 2015; Jacquemond 2008).

## 2. Openings and closures

In autumn 2014 and spring 2015, Mukhtar – sometimes accompanied by Samuli – was regularly attending meetings in four literary spaces: the Alexandria branch of the Writers' Union of Egypt, a debating group called *Sardiyat* (Narratives) at the Alexandria Library, symposia at the El Cabina art space run by an independent cultural association, and a writing workshop at Fabrica, a self-funded cultural space.<sup>6</sup> It was a time of heavy-handed political clampdown on anything resembling po-

<sup>6</sup> Many other literary and cultural spaces of the city might have equally merited in-depth fieldwork, notably so the Jesuit Cultural Centre, the Hurriya Cultural Palace, the Tadhawwuq Cultural Palace, the Atelier, the Itlala and Hala literary groups, the Goethe Institut and the Institut Français, along with many others. However, the constraints of ethnographic fieldwork necessitate a closer focus on a small number of places, which always goes at the cost of other important ones.

litical opposition, and also independent cultural spaces that often rely on international funding were beginning to feel the pressure. Literary and cultural circles were still flourishing, but the cultural boom that had begun in 2011 was coming to an end. By the time of the publication of this article, both Fabrica and El Cabina have closed their doors.<sup>7</sup>

Mukhtar's own literary trajectory as a novelist born to a fisherman's family in a village and working as a teacher in Alexandria had taken him from more accessible but in aesthetic terms more conservative circles similar to the Writer's Union towards more experimental but less accessible circles that had places like El Cabina and Fabrica among their meeting places. He did not feel quite at home in either, however.

He noted that the globally connected scene of downtown Alexandria, while open to the world and new ideas, was constantly busy drawing visible and invisible social borders around itself. This scene is organised to a large extent around »independent« (that is, independent from the Ministry of Culture) cultural institutions that rely on international and private funding, and its aesthetics follow global developments more closely. This is the cultural scene that foreign researchers and students living in and visiting Alexandria are most likely to know. Writers active in this scene are often internationally connected, and some of them have travelled abroad to residencies and literary festivals. It is in this scene that innovative genres like the »prose poem« (*qasidat al-nathr*, free-verse poetry without metre; see Furani 2012; al-Dab' 2016) and the graphic novel<sup>8</sup> have been introduced and developed. Socially controversial texts (such as sexually explicit narration and unorthodox or irreverent takes on religion) are well represented in the symposia and workshops of this milieu, as are

<sup>7</sup> Fabrica closed as a cultural space in late 2015. El Cabina closed in August 2016 after the end of the rent contract for the space, but its activities continue in the two other spaces of Gudran Association: El Dukkan and Wekalet Behna (see El Shimi 2016).

<sup>8</sup> While caricatures and comics have a long history in Egypt (Sherif 2016), the graphic novel (*riwaya musawwara*) is a very recent genre. *Metro* by Magdy El Shafee (2012; 2013) is usually mentioned as the first Egyptian graphic novel. It was first published but immediately banned in 2010, and had its second Arabic edition in 2013. In a matter of five years, a small but innovative scene of authors and publishers of graphic novels has emerged. Fabrica, where we did much of our fieldwork 2014-2015, was among the first publishers of graphic novels in Egypt. In 2015, Fabrica closed as a cultural space, and one of its founders Ahmed Salem tried to continue it as a publishing company dedicated to graphic novels. In a way that is characteristic of the centralistic landscape of publishing in Egypt, he also relocated to Cairo where he found a better business environment. And in a way characteristic of the precariousness of independent publishing and cultural institutions, he had to close shop in 2016 because of rising production costs and low sales.

international theoretical debates translated into Arabic. Participants hail from urban families but not only from the bourgeoisie; many of the founders of these spaces who are now in their forties originally come from old popular (*sha'bi*) quarters. They often express an outspokenly Alexandrian identity in juxtaposition to recent rural-urban migrants. They generally master a bohemian, cool habitus that makes them appear connected with the world better than with some parts of Alexandria and Egypt. Occasionally entire symposia were held in English. This resulted in a class difference that Mukhtar, son of a fisherman who grew up in a village, sharply felt although he, too, had over the years successfully adapted a habitus similar to theirs. In intellectual and literary terms he found these circles inspiring. They encouraged experimentation in style and themes, critical reflection, and recognised few social and cultural taboos. Without regular contact with these circles over the years, Mukhtar's own writing might have remained constrained by the conservative aesthetics of the more provincial literary circles to which he had previously had access. But he was of two minds: how can one be so open towards new ideas and aesthetics, and at the same time maintain social closure?

Another regular site of our fieldwork was in many ways the opposite of the Downtown scene. At the Writers' Union, authors mostly past their middle ages cultivated the art of the laudatory speech, and celebrated each other as great poets and authors. The Downtown circles are busy with critical exploration, questioning and pushing literary aesthetics yet another step further. The Writers' Union, in contrast, is firmly committed to a conservative, canonised version of 20th century Egyptian modernism where authenticity, progress and national liberation are expected to go hand in hand, and artist and writers ought to act as a top-down »conscience of the nation« (see Armbrust 1996; Jacquemond 2008). Testing of limits is less encouraged here. The genre of the prose poem that is well established in the Downtown scene, is considered not real poetry by most regulars at the Writers Union. Otherwise, all established poetic and prose genres are represented. Themes vary from subjective to socially critical and patriotic, and narrative approaches from subtle to straightforward. But »offensive words« (that is, sexually explicit language) are explicitly unwelcome in the meetings. Politically, the Union is able to bring together a mixture of regime supporters, old generation leftists who in 2013 had become supporters of Sisi's new regime, and supporters of the revolution with Islamist sympathies. They are united by their literary aesthetics and, importantly, a shared generational experience. The Writer's Union is welcoming towards anybody who wishes to recite her or his work. In the spirit of a pluralism of talent,

even the weakest of writers receive an encouraging applause.

Inspired by the one scene but troubled by its tendency towards social closure, and having a good time in the other but uninspired by its aesthetics and politics, Mukhtar addressed this dilemma to Samuli, and we began to think more systematically about the paradox of literary milieus.

### 3. Lines of division

The aesthetic line of division between experimental, globally connected styles and socially controversial themes on the one hand, and the commitment to a conservative selection of the 20th century canon<sup>9</sup> of national and world literature and a morally constructive ideal of literature's social role, on the other, is linked with multiple other lines of division that could be depicted along an axis of conservative and avant-garde milieus.

The literary circles we frequented in our fieldwork are part of a wider literary field of Egypt, Arabic speakers worldwide, and partly also the imagined global community of world literature. They exist in a position of dependency towards the centralist power of Cairo where most publishing houses are located, and where many writers and cultural producers move to find work and recognition. The »cultural milieu/middle« (*al-wasat al-thaqafi*) of Cairo, imaginatively and in part also geographically located in Downtown Cairo (see Jacquemond 2008) is more prominent, more competitive, and more powerful than anything Alexandria can offer.

The struggles between different circles and authors within Alexandria's literary landscape can partly be analysed along the lines of struggle for symbolic capital as offered by Pierre Bourdieu (1998). But unlike in Bourdieu's model, economic capital plays only a limited role in the struggle. Very few writers are actually able to gain financial profit from literature, and those few who are, almost invariably live and work in Cairo. Even established writers in Alexandria usually write to limited audiences of literature enthusiasts, and most have a very small readership.<sup>10</sup> Fame and mass appeal are an issue of contention though. Most writers understandably do search for fame

<sup>9</sup> 20th-century Egyptian literature included some very experimental and controversial works, and much of it was in close contact with international literary currents. But the way the heritage of the 20th century is reproduced and recognised in places like the Writers' Union tends to highlight uncontroversial writing and nationalist commitment. Experiments are recognised once they have become established as part of the mainstream – as happened with the novel in the early 20th century and blank-verse poetry in the second half of the 20th century.

<sup>10</sup> Typical print runs for works of literature run between 500 and 1000 copies, and for most works (with the exception of prominent authors), the most important channel of distribution remain authors themselves, who buy copies from the publisher and give them to friends and peers free of charge.

and recognition. At the same time, writers we have met are often critical of populist literature for (comparably) large audiences. Poets we met usually considered Hesham El-Jakh (whose talent lies in the ability to touch his audiences with simple verse and theatrical performance)<sup>11</sup> a bad poet, and some refused to consider him a poet at all. Such denigration of populist writing is quite compatible with Bourdieu's analysis. And yet the main line of competition among literates in Alexandria runs not between what Bourdieu calls the »legitimate field« of autonomous literary production for a restricted audience on the one hand, and the wider field of mass production, on the other. Rather, competition within the literary landscape of Alexandria is mainly one between people who write to different small circles, and who claim that they, rather than others, are the legitimate field of autonomous literary production.

Often, the lines of recognition and contestation are more complex than in Bourdieu's model. Mustafa Ibrahim, another young superstar of popular colloquial poetry from Cairo, is appreciated also by readers in the avant-gardist circles, partly because they consider his poetry more interesting, but largely also because of his revolutionary political commitment in 2011 (see Ibrahim 2012).<sup>12</sup> This is explicitly appreciated by many of his readers we spoke with. Writers who see themselves as experimental and willing to break taboos, have argued to us that the highly lucrative literary prizes of the Arab Gulf states favour socially and religiously uncontroversial writing and thus reproduce a conservative mainstream taste in Arabic literature. But the shortlists of major prizes do include also writers like the Iraqi-American Sinan Antoon, who would hardly qualify as conservative in either his style or stances. And hardly anybody would contest the national canon of major 20th century writers and the larger Arabic canon of moderns and classics. Alexandrian novelists who have gained national and international recognition – such as Edward Kharrat (1926-2015), Ibrahim Abdel Meguid (1946-) or Haggag Adoul (1944-) – are generally recognised and respected across the literary spectrum.

**11** Hesham El-Jakh, originally from Upper Egypt and living and working in Cairo, grew to a young superstar of colloquial poetry in the years before 2011 but his fame began to recede after 2011. For his performances, see <https://www.youtube.com/user/hishamelgakh>.

**12** Unlike El-Jakh who presented a revolutionary poem at a competition in the United Arab Emirates, Mustafa Ibrahim participated in demonstrations and clashes in the square in 2011. In 2013, Mustafa Ibrahim fell silent for a long period, after a short moment of initial enthusiasm for the military overthrow of Morsi. El-Jakh had his honeymoon with military rule as well, but in a performance we attended in 2014, he was trying to occupy a third space critical of military and Islamists alike.

The tensions that mark the literary landscape in Alexandria bear striking similarities to those among Afghan poets in Mashhad, Iran, studied by Zuzanna Olszewska (2015). The poets in Mashhad were embedded in a productive tension of different forms of class, power, and symbolic capital, but seldom polarised along the opposites of literary autonomy and commercial production. Rather, there was a generational shift from politically committed poetry of first generation refugees to different styles in a continuum from committed to post-modern writing among Afghans born and raised in Iran. The societal and political situation is in many ways different in Alexandria (and most Alexandrian writers do not experience a condition of exile, although Nubians, Syrians and Libyans living and writing in Alexandria today may have a shared ground also in that regard – see, e.g. al-Ahmad 2014). And yet Olszewska's work draws attention to the ways in which politics (something that does not fit well into Bourdieu's model), relation with the state, gender, and generation interact with class relations and symbolic capital.

The »independent« or avant-garde scene of downtown Alexandria is a protected area where ideas and aesthetics are encouraged that might not be appreciated by relatives of the writers, that would not be recognised as having literary value in more conservative scenes, and that might run counter to the moral sensibilities of the society at large. This scene has a strong female presence (which is in line with the general increase of women writers in Egypt's literary field) – but it is a presence that relies on specifically bourgeois, socially exclusive forms of mixed-gender socialising (see Anouk de Koning 2009). Some (few) young women from Mukhtar's village are interested in literature. The likelihood that they would actually frequent a place like El Cabina or Fabrica of their own accord, however, is low, requiring as it would a long trail of higher education, bourgeois socialisation, family support, and an exceptional set of readings, inspirations, desires, and personal idiosyncrasies – all of which is largely unavailable in rural society.<sup>13</sup> The more populist the style of writing, and the more conservative the literary scene, the more likely it would be for them to participate – and even then it is difficult. Places like the Writers' Union, in contrast, can be more open to society because they are closer to the hegemonic social mores and tastes, and can therefore also more easily include radically different political stances.

Politics marks a more complex line of division in the literary landscape. The 20th century mod-

**13** Mukhtar in fact did suggest to two of his nieces who had moved to Alexandria to study that he could introduce them to Fabrica. But they were not comfortable with the idea, because they were too busy with their studies and unfamiliar with the city.

ernist ideal of autonomy and commitment meant that writers commonly saw themselves as a critical, oftentimes also oppositional power vis-a-vis the government, yet at the same time were committed to the nationalist project of independence and development (Jacquemond 2008; Klemm 1998). Their literary (and often also their professional) lives were shaped by the socialist public sector institutions of the Nasser era. Especially the Writers' Union stands out as a gathering of people whose life and fantasy are marked by the Nasserist state. Even after the decline of the public sector institutions, the Writers' Union remains embedded in a logic of statist power that in Egypt is referred to as *al-mu'assasa* »the institution«. In this framework, one can be a fierce, even revolutionary critic of the government and at the same time a dedicated supporter of the institutions of the nation-state (Mehrez 2010: 78-82). After 2013, many senior writers previously known for their oppositional stances have rallied support for the new regime and the military leadership (Lindsey 2013; Azimi 2014). This move can partly be attributed to the long-standing antagonism between the secular-minded literary intelligentsia and Islamist movements. But only partly, for the Islamist-secularist divide does not explain the ongoing participation of writers with Islamist and revolutionary leanings in the Writers' Union, nor does it explain the way much of popular culture travels freely across the divide. It also does not explain the way in which younger writers in the independent scene tend to posit themselves against both the regime as well as Islamists (many did support the 30 June counter-revolution, but have since then turned critical of the military leadership again). In addition to the secular-Islamist divide, the politics of literature is related, among other things, to the proximity or distance from state institutions and post-colonial militant nationalism. It is also related to paths of personal and literary formation in either independent or public sector institutions, to religious commitments, and, importantly, to age and generation.

Sometimes the institutional and generational paths of literary formation (and the networks of friendship that emerged along those paths) can be more important than aesthetics and politics. The Writers' Union has its own avant-garde minority of writers who try to introduce more experimental aesthetics. Those few we know are men in their late forties working as civil servants. Politically they see themselves as pro-revolution, but do not express the kind of antagonism towards Islamist politics that so many in the avant-garde scene do. They also stand in contrast to many among the more prominent writers who have pushed for experimental aesthetics and since 2013 are politically pro-regime. They are young enough to have shared in the shift of the literary avant-garde of

the 1990's from nationalist commitment towards a focus on ordinary life and the self (and the associated aesthetic shift towards prose poetry), and at the same time old enough to find themselves very much at home in the public sector literary institutions. In contrast, for many young writers from middle-income and bourgeois urban families who have come of age in a time of corrupt economic liberalisation and crumbling state institutions – and many of whom gained a formative generational experience in the utopian moment of the January 25 uprising – the public sector no longer provides a self-evident framework for their literary strivings.

The generational formation of working careers and social experience is paralleled by generational layers of intertextuality. Regarding Arabic literature from the classics until the end of 20th century, there is a largely (albeit not entirely) shared canon, but less so in regard to translated literature. In all literary circles we frequented, world literature featured highly on the lists of authors' influential or favourite readings. Even the most outspoken literary nationalists in the Writers' Union would take pride in their knowledge of translated literature and literary theory. But they would most likely have read late 19th and early 20th century European prose (Russian classics featured prominently, thanks to the outstanding translation work of the Soviet Cultural Centres during the Cold War). Younger writers, in contrast, were influenced by more recent authors of global circulation (Haruki Murakami, Elif Shafak, and Orhan Pamuk were among the prominent names mentioned to us in conversations). Only few translated works are popular across generations, the most important of them being Marquez's *Hundred Years of Solitude* (2005).

In this nexus of class, gender, generation, politics, and aesthetics, the tension between public-sector and independent institutions has become constitutive for the differentiation of various circles and pockets in the literary field of Alexandria and Egypt. Experimental and socially controversial literature is today most at home in internationally, privately or self-funded spaces, while more conservative writing is typically more closely aligned with public sector institutions. Until the 1990's, this tension existed within a single state-dominated literary field (see Jacquemond 2008). It only became tangible as a distinctive marker of institutions with the onset of the NGO-isation of the cultural sector at the turn of the millenium (for its beginnings in the art scene, see Winegar 2006: 275-314). With a flow of international and national funding that bypassed the machinery of Egypt's large but inefficient Ministry of Culture, new cultural spaces mushroomed, many of them very short-lived but some of them fairly stable. Many independent institutions are currently under pressure because of an ongoing government clamp-



down on internationally funded NGOs (Hamama 2016), but for the time being, most of them remain active and able to draw good audiences. In the field of publishing, major public-sector publishers like the General Egyptian Book Organisation and the Organisation of Cultural Palaces remain the first address to writers connected in the public sector cultural institutions – and also to writers who lack the funds to pay for a private publisher. They also remain the most important publishers for translated literature. Aspiring writers who have sufficient material means more often publish with the many private publishers of varying professional quality that have mushroomed since the 1990's. This development of an »independent scene« along with private sector publishers has in turn corresponded with a generational split. Almost all writers in their 30's or older have had at least some contact with the Writers' Union and other public-sector literary institutions. But for many writers born after 1990, the only public sector institutions they frequent are the Alexandria Library and the Hurriya Cultural Palace with their good funding and high-profile programming closer to youthful tastes. In consequence, the Writers' Union in particular has become dominated by older writers, increasingly disconnected from recent developments in the »independent scene«.

The emerging split of aesthetics and scenes is thus grounded in a split of what we call milieus: the productive coming together of aesthetics, institutions, politics, generations and class trajectories. The shared formative ideals and experiences of a milieu provide a common ground for communication and mutual recognition. They also produce lines of division against others who can be critiqued and ridiculed for being old-fashioned, vulgar, unpatriotic, immodest, or otherwise not real literates. In the specific historical circumstances of Alexandria's literary landscape after 2011, these lines of division often merge to produce the binary between what we in a preliminary fashion have called a conservative and an avant-garde literary milieu.

#### 4. Shared margins

Yet like all binaries in social science, this, too, is a false binary – or more precisely, it only tells a partial truth about the differentiation of literary milieus. Far from being divided into two separate camps, the literary landscape of Alexandria consists of a much greater number of literary pockets which at the same time all share in a wider field of cultural production. Literary circles are often highly person-centred, combining friendship and patronage. In consequence, competition and conflicts often take a personal and intimate dimension. People with otherwise very similar literary takes may fiercely reject each other's work for reasons of personal rivalry, and support work that is

quite different from theirs if they are bound to the author by ties of friendship or patronage.

Furthermore, many of the most thriving literary circles of the city are located rather in-between than at the ends of the conservative vs. avant-garde polarity. Especially in the field of prose, there is a wide aesthetic common ground. There are things that can be only said in a place like El Cabina or Fabrica, and others that are characteristic of places like the Writers' Union, and yet the shape and rituals of the literary symposium are largely shared, and some attendees might well feel at home in both spaces. Some writers wander from one milieu to the other in the course of their literary formation, with the result that writers over thirty are often well-connected across the literary field.



A lecture in El Cabina (Amr Abrelrahman on Karl Marx), 30 October 2014. Photo by Samuli Schielke



A symposium in the Writers' Union (dedicated to the novelist Saadiya Khalifa, second from left on podium), 15 March 2015. Photo by Samuli Schielke

The very categories »conservative« and »avant-garde« are unstable, subject to a constant generational transformation. Genres and aesthetics that are conventional today, once were avant-garde – such as the blank-verse metred poetics of *taf'ila*.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> *Taf'ila* (literally meaning a poetic foot), also known as *al-shi'r al-hurr* (»free poetry«), follows a metre or changing metres, but is not bound by the monorhyme and the fixed verse structure of classical poetry. It may or may not have a rhyme. Originally developed in the early 20th century by

The careers of successful senior authors are often marked by a move towards the centre of institutional power with growing age and influence. State-affiliated cultural institutions have a long history of co-opting the critical and creative energy of avant-gardes. The Alexandria Library is quite successful in this regard. And the independent scene can never do fully without the extensive infrastructure of the public sector. Well-funded cultural flagships like the Hurriya Cultural Palace and the Alexandria Library draw audience across the cultural spectrum. They are also important providers of jobs for people otherwise active in independent spaces. All major book fairs are state-sponsored. When the poet Omar Hazek, an employee of the Alexandria Library, was sentenced to two years in prison for participation in an unlicensed demonstration in 2013 (*Pen International* 2014), many people from the independent scene began to boycott the Library because it fired Hazek instead of standing by him. Yet some of them did attend the Alexandria Library Book Fair in spring 2015, because no independent institution has the infrastructure to organise a book fair and an accompanying cultural programme of such scale.

Importantly, there are many initiatives and groups that cannot be clearly located within this binary. For example, the *Mukhtabar al-Sardiyat* (the narratives laboratory) debating club which meets weekly at the Alexandria Library, has been designed by its founder Mounir Oteiba as a space that may bring together different literary groups and tastes. While the regular crowd of *al-Sardiyat* is dominated by middle-aged and older people whose taste and style of critique and debate come closer to that in the Writers' Union, *al-Sardiyat* has been also able to attract younger participants who had their first literary socialisation in writing workshops close to the avant-gardist milieu. *Al-Sardiyat* has been also able to attract many young women writers, a reminder that the increasing role of women in Egypt's literary life is by no means the prerogative of a single milieu. This is partly because Mounir Oteiba actively encourages their participation. And importantly, *Al-Sardiyat* is located in a recognised state institution and embedded in a more formal, thus also morally more respectable form of mixed-gender sociality than many independent spaces. It thus allows women writers to

Levantine and Iraqi poets (see Moreh 1976; Jayyusi 1977), taf'ila poetry was quite scandalous when it was first introduced in Egypt in the 1950's and 60's (Moussa-Mahmoud 1996). Today, it is the most common style of poetry in Egypt. Some poets and literary critics distinguish *al-shi'r al-hurr* from taf'ila, the first not being bound to one single metre in a poem, the latter following the same metre throughout the poem. Others consider them variations of one and the same genre.

balance between conservative social mores and the development of a public literary voice.

Last but not least, writers of conservative and avant-gardist leanings alike frequently experience a shared tension between a search for being heard, a search for distinction, and an experience of marginalisation. This sentiment was well voiced by the poet Hamdy Zidan who in the 1990's and 2000's was active in *al-Kull* («everybody», see Abdel Gabbar et al. 2004), a small literary group that cultivated, among other things, prose poetry in colloquial Egyptian Arabic, a poetic style that until today remains limited to avant-garde circles. «The typical poet character in cinema», Hamdy pointed out to Samuli in a conversation that took place in 2012, «looks like me.» (At that time, Hamdy sported a long hair and a Bohemian appearance.) «He is a somewhat ridiculous figure, not somebody to be taken seriously.» Many writers even intentionally marginalise themselves from the general public, and neither expect nor search for recognition from their neighbours or family – often due to actual experiences of disapproval or lack of interest. Hamdy tells that when he was younger, his mother, who was proud of his son being a writer, gave a book of his to a neighbour, a carpenter. One day Hamdy walked on the alley of his native quarter and the carpenter told him how much he enjoyed and appreciated his poetry. «I was surprised because a neighbour would read my work, and embarrassed because I hadn't even thought about giving it to him myself.» Nothing in the content or style of the book was sensitive or controversial, but Hamdy simply hadn't thought of the carpenter as a potential reader of his poetry.

Such marginality is not simply negative, however. It is the productive condition of literary lives and the formation of literary voices.

## 5. The symposium as life

At 7 p.m. on 9 November 2014, we attended the weekly symposium of the Writers' Union located in a ground-floor apartment in the Sidi Bishr district in eastern Alexandria. Often the weekly symposium is devoted to an individual writer and their work, but this meeting was an open poetry evening where everybody in attendance was invited to present their work. The audience consisted of some 15 people, all but one of them male. Most people present were over fifty. It was an intimate and friendly event where almost all people in attendance knew each other well. And yet the evening proceeded with great formality. Each speaker was formally introduced, and greeted the audience in a polite and eloquent way, often using classical Arabic expressions such as *uhayyikum* (I salute you) that would never be used in an informal setting. Most of the poetry presented was in Egyptian colloquial Arabic, reflecting a general tendency towards writing in the colloquial in Egyptian

poetry. Most of it followed the modernist style of *taf'ila*, poetry that follows a metre or changing metres and has a free verse structure. Gaber Sultan, the most senior poet in attendance, gave comments and greetings to the participants in colloquial verse. There was a clear hierarchy of seniority and importance expressed in the order of appearance: the poets with the highest standing were the first to recite their work. All people in attendance got their turn on the stage, and each speaker received a friendly applause, regardless of how strong or weak their poetry was. There was no requirement to present new work. Some poets were asked by the audience to recite specific poems from their oeuvre.

Each poet received some greetings and comments from the audience, but there was no effort at systematic literary critique beyond issues of grammar. This was partly due to the format of the open poetry evening; other symposia featured discussants offering a (usually charitable) critical reading of the work presented. Even in evenings where literary critique occupied a more central place, it was often dominated by recognition and prize. And even when explicit critical discourse was largely absent, literary critique was a great marker of distinction. Much attention was given the fact that somebody's work had received a critical academic study (*dirasa*). More subtle forms of critique were of course constantly at work, be it in the way certain qualities of works and authors received praise, in the way some writers were given and others denied privileged attention, or in gestures and tones of voice. In other words, a shared canon of ideal literary style was established and reproduced largely by means of affirmation, praise and formal recognition. Great emphasis was also given to literary prizes. Egypt has a rich landscape of public-sector literary prizes that, even if low in monetary value, are an important part of the making of a literate in the conservative milieu. Prizes from the Arab Gulf states that come with substantial money and fame were highly appreciated by the writers in this gathering but largely out of their reach.

Writers in all milieus usually distribute their works from hand to hand. Also at this symposium, many of the participants had brought copies of their (often self-published) books which they distributed to friends and colleagues. These copies would always be accompanied by a personal dedication that typically combined expressions of formal recognition and friendship. For example, the copy of a novel by Abdelfattah Morsi which Samuli was given that evening carries the dedication (in Arabic):

Prof. Dr. Samuli Schielke.  
I dedicate this novel to you to be a bridge for  
friendship between us.  
Abdelfattah Morsi  
March 2015

We always returned from symposia with a signed book or two. Printed books are crucial status symbols of authorship across the literary spectrum – although especially younger Egyptians today read and write mainly via electronic media, although most books only find a handful of readers, and although anyone who has at their disposal the capital of 5000-10,000 Egyptian pounds (ca. 250-300 euros), can publish a book at one of the many private publishing houses. It takes no talent to publish a book, and yet the material shape of the printed book – preferably accompanied by a hand-written dedication – carries an unbroken power of status. A book marks a person as an intellectual in the tradition of Egyptian modernism since the colonial era (Jacquemond 2008). At the same time, the economic liberalisation since the 1970's has made that status something that can be bought since many private publishers publish anything as long as the author pays for it.

Three characteristics distinguish this and other gatherings in the Writers' Union: an aesthetic and ideological commitment to the established repertoire of 20th century modernism, a preoccupation with formal gestures of mutual recognition, and – formality notwithstanding – a friendly and intimate atmosphere.<sup>15</sup> A fourth, less immediately visible characteristic is a shared socialisation in public-sector institutions with their emphasis on formal hierarchies and rituals.

The friendly atmosphere notwithstanding, there is much competition between the authors, which becomes especially visible in times of the biannual elections of the board of the Union. But at most symposia, competition is consciously downplayed. We see three reasons for this. The first is related to the 20th century modernist vision of the author as an exceptional, ideal human being who expresses and exemplifies morals and commitment for others to learn from. This vision is grounded in an older Arabic heritage where *adab* means the cultivation of fine manners as well as literature. Being an author (*adib*) has for a long time meant to command both dimensions of *adab* (Pepe 2015). The symposium is a prime occasion to live out that ideal. On other occasions, writers often interact in ways that contradict that ideal – but this does not diminish the performative validity of the symposium as its enactment. Second, access and success in literary milieus is based to a large degree on personal connections, and especially aspiring, not yet established writers owe a debt of gratitude to more experienced writers with whom they have a master-apprentice relation (*ustaziya*; see also Olszewska 2015) and with whom they would rarely want to provoke open conflicts. Third, it is impor-

<sup>15</sup> Not all gatherings are as friendly and intimate. There are other symposia where critique plays a greater role and where the atmosphere is more formal and distanced.

tant to recognise that the symposium is not simply a means to the end of symbolic capital. It is an end in itself, one of the moments when writers most fully live a literary life. There is inherent pleasure involved in reciting and listening to poetry. There is also inherent pleasure involved in the intimate, cultivated gathering of like-minded people who mutually recognise and appreciate each other's mastery in that pleasure.

Marginality and exceptionality are not at odds with the idealism and pleasure of the symposium. On the contrary, for most writers in Egypt (in any milieu), literature is a parallel, separate life which they often consciously distinguish from their private and professional lives. For much of their lives, they are not primarily writers but busy with other things. Married people with children – women much more than men – often experience an acute competition of time and attention between symposia, meetings in a café, reading, debating and writing on the one hand, and work and family responsibilities. It is no coincidence that youth and retirement are the most common ages for literary activity. Some – fewer – people try and succeed to combine their literary and other lives, be it by working in the cultural sector, marrying a partner active in the same cultural circles, or cultivating a bohemian, alternative lifestyle.

The relation of writing and life is thus often not about life in general. Rather, it involves the crafting of a specific persona and the accumulation of experiences, skills and relations that are consciously marked as literary. The writing of literary texts and the crafting of a literary career in the social space of a milieu come together in what we call the *writing of lives*. Writing, in this sense, is a technology of the self as suggested by Michel Foucault in his later work on sexuality:

Technologies of the self [...] permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (Foucault 1988: 18)

Foucault was interested in how the obligation to tell the truth in Christian confession contributed to a specific formation of the self, truth and knowledge. Literary writing is usually quite different from Christian confession. And fiction has by definition a more complex relation with the question of truth. Also, in our ethnography writing has emerged as a fundamentally relational undertaking, and relationality is not at the focus of Foucault's attention. That said, the writing of fiction does share with Foucault's technologies of the self the ability to produce personae and trajectories –

both fictional as well as materially enacted. But to what extent and with what consequences writers are able to craft those personae and trajectories, is an open question. What relations do writers establish between the fictional and enacted lives which they produce and act out? What understandings of authorship and literary text do they pursue? What consequences do their pursuits have? The question of consequences and efficacy (and the possibility of unintended consequences and inefficacy) was not central for Foucault. And yet it is crucially important for understanding a field like literature where success is an exception.

Some authors we interviewed told us that engagement with literature had been part of a wider personal formation and transformation (or they had hoped that it might be so), but also a cause of tensions, frustrations, and misunderstandings with family, colleagues and friends. Others saw their literary engagement as naturally different from other important things in their lives (such as work and marriage). Yet others saw literary imagination as the possibility to claim and keep alive a part of themselves that did not fit into conventional social expectations.

The boundary between literary and other lives is productive in creating marginal spaces within which the work of writing of lives can take place. And yet that boundary is never complete, and often it is very fragile.

Sometimes the intersection of different fields of life can have disturbing consequences. At a symposium at a book fair in 2016, a young female author's reading was interrupted when a woman entered the tent with her two children and loudly accused the writer on stage of seducing her husband and leaving her children fatherless. Apparently, her husband had entered a second marriage with the writer. A public scandal can be extremely damaging for a woman's reputation in Egypt, and the first wife exploited this vulnerability.

A male author active in the downtown avant-garde scene distributed his volume of poetry to colleagues at the school where he worked. Using the experimental style of prose poetry without a visible verse structure, his poems offer an imaginative retelling of key events and characters from the Qur'an and the Bible, featuring the interactions, ambiguities and (inner) struggles of the heroes and anti-heroes of the religious Scriptures. For the author, the volume was a deeply spiritual work. But for many of his colleagues, it was tantamount to unbelief. In result, he faced such pressure at his workplace that he had to get transferred to another school where nobody knew that he was a poet. Even after that, he continued receiving threats in the neighbourhood where he lives.

At other times, people consciously and even successfully work towards crossing the boundary.

Among the people we have met, success as a writer often comes along with the possibility to live out the persona of the writer and intellectual to a greater extent. Their stories tell of a more productive intersection.

## 6. Being Abdelfattah Morsi

After the symposium in the Writers' Union on 9 November 2014, a handful of men moved on to a nearby café. Among them was Abdelfattah Morsi, the author of at least 26 published novels as well as a number of other books (not counting unpublished works of which he has at least ten). Abdelfattah Morsi is a well-known figure in Alexandria's literary circles although he has not gained wider fame. His novels are either self-published or distributed by public-sector presses. Although he is stunningly productive, it is difficult to find his books in bookstores. He makes print runs of 500 copies and distributes them to friends and peers.

Born in 1942 and widowed some years ago, Abdelfattah Morsi lives the life of a retired civil servant and a prolific author in relative material comfort between his two apartments in Alexandria and Cairo. Like so many other writers of his generation, he thinks well of the Nasserist national project, is fiercely opposed to Islamist movements, and enthusiastically supports the current president Abdelfattah El-Sisi. Born to a family of migrants from Upper Egypt in the popular district of Bakkous, he belongs to the generation of Egyptians who most profited from the social mobility of the Nasser era. He started as a worker in a sweets company while still going to school. University education allowed him to move upward to administrative positions. In the following decades, interrupted by a period of migrant work in Iraq in the 1980's, he made a successful career in a public sector industrial company where he rose to leading managerial positions until his retirement. In the 1960's and 70's he was active in a communist group and spent two years in prison in the early 70's for political reasons. His literary career started relatively late. During the political years of his youth he had been writing short stories and theatre plays, but he only began writing novels in his late thirties. It took him more than ten years to find a way to publish his works. From 1993 on, however, he has published at least one book every year. In 1995, he became a member of the Writers' Union. He frequents literary gatherings in Alexandria and Cairo alike. He clearly enjoys living the life of a literate, although he told us that he dislikes the literary circles for being so much more competitive and dishonest than the world of underground political activism that he had known in his youth.

His novels draw upon personal experiences and are set in streets and districts where he has lived. He is a talented story-teller and observer of social

interactions. His style of writing is that of classic modernist realism, depicting personal and societal tensions and conflicts and often (but not always) providing moral resolutions and happy ends to them. In that, his work bears the mark of the modernist ideal where the writer should be both committed to the national cause, and an autonomous explorer of social and human conditions (Jacquemon 2008). Unlike some of his peers at the Writers' Union, he seldom slips to a straightforwardly didactic and moralising form of writing. But many of his novels are opened by an introduction where he explains some of the intentions and aims of the text (Morsi 2008; 2009).

His novel *The Taste of Ash* (Morsi 2008, written in the mid-1990's) which we received from him on that evening is the coming-of-age story of a young man who grows up in a well-off trader's family, discovers that he is an adopted son,<sup>16</sup> joins a leftist movement at university at the time between the 1967 and 1973 wars, falls in love, studies the history of the city in a way that relates to the current events he lives through, enters a friendship with a politically committed poet that is disturbed by a secret police informer from their social circle, and in the end successfully completes his studies and marries the girl he loves. For the tastes of the downtown scene, *Taste of Ash* would strike as old-school and rather too straightforward in its hero-villain characterisations. Abdelfattah Morsi does not consider it one of his best works either. He told that it is too short, lacking the space to develop the characters in a more complex manner. Other works of his fit better to the vast middle ground of contemporary prose. His short story »Reading the sand« (unpublished; reproduced in the appendix in full length), which he suggested to us as an example of his work, is a more subjective account of a father compelled to join an outing at the beach with his family, but in his mind immersed in metaphysical and scientific meditations about the universe. »Reading the sand« might well be presented also at a symposium or workshop of the avant-garde milieu without standing out as different from its standards. The basic literary conventions of the novel and the short story remain largely consensual, and lines of division are marked by other issues: the themes, the moral and political stances, and the use or avoidance of explicit sexual language. In regard to these issues,

**16** Islamic law does not recognise adoption, which is why finding out about adoption can have devastating consequences. For example, an adopted son would be a non-relative of his adoptive mother, and should therefore not live together with her. The novel opens with this dilemma, but in the following course of the narrative, it is left unsolved and in the end, the hero's relationship with his adoptive parents is fully reaffirmed.

Abdelfattah Morsi is firmly a part of the conservative modernism of the Writers' Union.

And yet he is also a unique character who breaks many of the tacit lines of division that writers otherwise are busy drawing. As we sat in the café, Abdelfattah Morsi began to entertain us with a wealth of stories and anecdotes from his life. In Egypt, men gathering in a café usually talk about everything – except their wives, families and private lives. This division between the café and the home is even more pronounced among writers for whom their literary life is a special time set apart from their ordinary lives and obligations. Abdelfattah Morsi, however, showed very little hesitation to talk about his wife and children, his marriage, and his sex life – to the degree that one of the men in the circle was clearly embarrassed.

During the evening, he presented to us different personae of himself: In his stories and anecdotes, he was Abdelfattah Morsi the libertine hedonist who nevertheless knows to do the right thing. In his novels, in contrast, he is Abdelfattah Morsi the morally constructive modernist writer. Both personae, he stated to us, tell the true story of his life: «All my novels are from my life.»

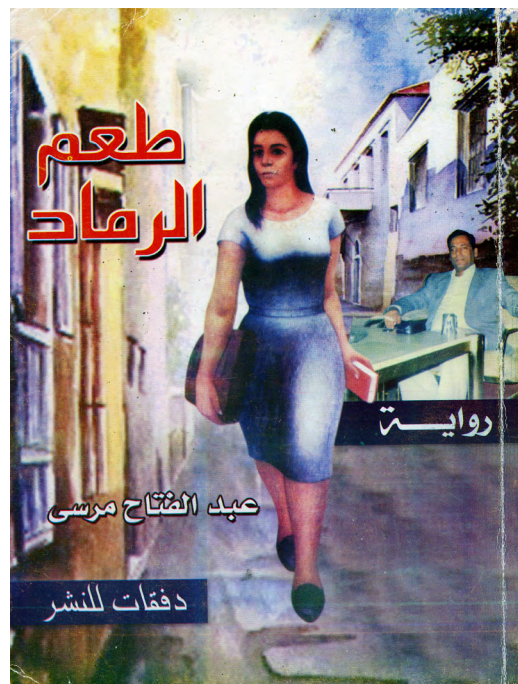
In April 2016, we met him again in the same café with the intention of conducting a more formal interview about his professional and literary career. But he immediately took charge of the meeting and turned it into a three-hours' long session of entertaining anecdotes from his life and his novels, weaving them together in a way that made us afterwards wonder whether we should treat what he told us as an account of his life or as a piece of masterful storytelling. The two are never separate, of course (Holstein and Gubrium 2000), and Abdelfattah Morsi is a virtuoso in playing with the ambiguities of life and fiction – and the ambiguities of different lives.

A good characterisation of this productive ambiguity is the cover of *The Taste of Ash*. Designed by the author, the cover shows the drawing of a woman dressed in the style of the 1960's walking along the street, and in the background is a photo of Abdelfattah Morsi himself sitting at a café table and glancing at her.

Abdelfattah Morsi is outspoken, even proud about living out different roles in his life:

I started to live as many personae (*shakhsiyat*): the son of the Upper Egyptian, the worker, the student, the political activist, and later the novelist. All people live out many personae but they don't notice it.

By introducing us to more than one of his personae at once in the course of a literary-theatrical interview performance, he also showed that at least for him, the conservative aesthetics of the Writers' Union is not simply a straightjacket. Rather, it is



Cover of *The Taste of Ash* by Abdelfattah Morsi

a productive means through which he can channel his immensely productive story-telling talent and his extroverted character into an institutional form that was socially respected (literature), into a narrative genre that marked his stories as different from his private life (fiction), and into an aesthetic style that can be appreciated by a conservative readership whose aesthetics is grounded in the binary of moral beauty and immoral ugliness.

Abdelfattah Morsi also makes explicit two related but different ways of crafting lives and literary texts. On one level, he is involved in the *writing of lives* in a very explicit sense, weaving together the crafting of his social life – as an author and in other roles – with the telling and writing of stories largely based on his life. It is a success story, insofar that in his retirement age he is able to live an enjoyable, perhaps even bohemian life as a man of letters in material comfort and recognised by his peers and friends. He has been able to transform the marginality of literature in regard to ordinary life from a margin in the sense of that which is left out, into a margin in the sense of surplus or profit. As a productive margin, writing has allowed him to turn his life experience, extrovertedness and storytelling talent into an element of his success in life. This may be the reason for the remarkable fact that he is one of the very few authors we have encountered who expressed no sense of alienation or isolation, but instead seemed to quite enjoy the playful combination of different lives. On another level, however, he has also produced an extensive oeuvre of literary texts that stand on their own. This oeuvre is not fully fictional. Rather, it can be seen as what we call a *written life*: a text that remains connected to the author in an explicit but

selective way, yet at the same time carries the independence of a literary work.

The *written life* is a specific outcome of the **writing of lives** that draws attention to the way authorship and text are connected in much of contemporary Egyptian writing. This connection is reflected in the way participants in some symposia we attended used the term »realism« to refer to subjective and autobiographic writing. »Realism« in this non-standard sense should not be confused with the tradition of realism in Egyptian modernist literature. Realism in the latter sense is a mode of writing and usually not autobiographic. Egyptian critics do not search for the alter egos of Naguib Mahfouz or Yussuf Idris in their works. But in our fieldwork we have noticed a strong tendency towards subjective-autobiographic writing especially among beginning writers (especially those who start writing at old age) where the author's life and persona and the literary text are closely intertwined. This tendency allows some writers to strengthen their own public personae in and through their association with the heroes of their stories. It adds a question mark, however, to the capacity of literature to produce works of imagination that exceed the author's own experience, views and stances. This is not an issue of concern for Abdelfattah Morsi, but it certainly is one in some other circles.

### **7. How to become a writer in many difficult steps**

One of the sites of the independent scene we frequented in our fieldwork was the private cultural space of Fabrica. It was established in 2013 in the old bourgeois to middle-income district of Sporting south of downtown Alexandria as a private enterprise of its founders, the writer Al Shimaa Hamed and the graphic designer Ahmed Salem. Unlike some of the more established spaces in downtown Alexandria that rely on long-term international funding, Fabrica is a self-funding company, and since its establishment, it was surviving on the brink of bankruptcy. Like many others of its kind, Fabrica was short-lived as a cultural space. Al Shimaa Hamed left Fabrica in summer 2015, and the space was definitely closed later the same year, when Ahmed Salem moved to Cairo to run Fabrica as a publishing house dedicated to comics.

During our fieldwork in Fabrica in 2014 and 2015, Al Shimaa Hamed ran a successful programme of literary events and writing workshops in the space, and turned it into the meeting point of a small circle of people with similar interests and attitudes. From autumn 2014 until spring 2015, we participated in her writing workshop *Intasir li-l-hikaya* (»Support the story«). Writing workshops are a recent phenomenon in Egypt, but have quickly become a popular if not uncontested way to learn or improve the skills of literary

writing.<sup>17</sup> Al Shimaa Hamed was among the first in Alexandria to run a writing workshop in 2011. Additionally to her experience as a writer, her success as a workshop trainer relies on her personal charisma. The personal dimension also made Fabrica a literary space associated with an intimate circle of friends that gathered around her.

Born in Alexandria in 1980 and author of three collections of short stories, Al Shimaa Hamed comes from an old urban family devoted to Sufi Islam. Through a family arranged marriage at young age, she lived three years in Australia in her late teens until she was divorced from her Australian-Egyptian husband and returned to Egypt where she entered university and started writing short stories. She had her first literary socialisation in the Writers' Union but then moved towards more avant-gardist circles.

Mother of a daughter from her second marriage, Al Shimaa Hamed brings together her private and literary lives more comprehensively than most writers do. But she does not write about her own life. Her short stories tell of estranged individuals who enter dubious adventures – often of an erotic kind – that end with neither a narrative resolution nor a moral message (Hamed 2014). She is a decided secularist and feminist, supporting women to take off the headscarf and encouraging people in her circle to write about sexuality, desire and non-normative ways of life without judgement. But she clearly distances herself from the ideal of literature with a message. In a discussion in spring 2015, Al Shimaa told Samuli that she does not believe that there can be great collective movements anymore. All the movements are individual, she insisted, also the January 25 revolution that only brought together countless individual demands. Rather than commitment to a greater cause, she claims that all she aims for is to »touch the reader lightly«.

From the point of view of radical leftist literary critique Al Shimaa Hamed's take on literature might be seen as conservative, not sufficiently critical of the neoliberal process of individualisation. In the context of Egypt, however, her work is part of a general development of the literary avant-garde that since the 1990's (a decade that marked the definitive collapse of the socialist and Arab nationalist utopias) turned to the self, to ordinary life, and to intimacy as fields that might still be worth a literary engagement (al-Dab' 2016). The post-1990's literary avant-garde has produced some consciously experimental writing that breaks with

<sup>17</sup> Writing workshops have been criticised by some for reproducing the specific bias of the workshop trainer. Some workshops are also run by writers with little experience of their own. But their popularity shows that there is a genuine demand for the skill of a literary writing that goes beyond recording one's own thoughts and experience.

conventional narrative forms (also among participants of Al Shimaa Hamed's workshops: Abbady 2013). Such experiments are not a total break with the past, however. Much of the writings of the early 21st-century literary avant-garde stand in continuity with the modernist tradition in terms of narrative techniques (in the field of poetry, the aesthetic split between different styles is more pronounced).<sup>18</sup> A perhaps more important shift concerns literature's moral and political framings. Many of the writers who have abandoned the idea of committed writing for the national cause, often also consciously break the code of polite speech that is held in such high esteem in the conservative milieu (Pepe 2015). In such writing, a search to engage, even provoke the reader comes together with moral-political stances that privilege difference and critique as virtues in their own right (Schielke 2015: 213-15). According to Teresa Pepe (2015), this is a reconfiguration rather than an abandonment of the figure of the *adib* and the tradition of commitment. But it does go against the grain of powerful societal sensibilities.<sup>19</sup> In 2016, the Cairine author Ahmed Nagui was sentenced to two years in prison for »offending public modesty« after he published in a literary journal a chapter from his newest novel that contained explicit sexual scenes and language (Nagui 2014; Jacquemond 2016).

Although critical of the 20th century version of literary commitment, circles like Fabrica are not unpolitical, nor are their writings. On the contrary, they are frequently gathering points of people who had the January 25 revolution as a formative political experience. Many of them are or were active in different revolutionary movements, and the general attitude of insubordination that was bred by the revolutionary experience is also present in their literary voices. But their politics of authorship, as it may be called, is often different from that of the 20th century tradition. For them, the ideal of the writer as the conscience of the nation

**18** This trend has also involved a search for an alternative literary tradition. The 1990's avant-garde in Alexandria was busy rediscovering non-Arab Alexandrian authors like Cavafy and Ungaretti. The early 21st century witnesses a sort of revival of some 20th century writers who were excluded from the national canon, most notably Waguih Ghaly (1927?-1969) who wrote in English, narrated the early Nasser years from the critical point of view of an alienated cosmopolitan leftist (Ghaly 1964; 2013), and visited Israel in 1968. This made him an unperson for committed nationalist literature. But for many of today's readers – especially those with cosmopolitan pro-revolution stances – Ghaly's critical depiction of the 1950's after the revolution of the Free Officers strikes as extremely timely and closer to their sensibilities than committedly nationalist work from the same period.

**19** With this style of theirs, writers from this literary pocket stand little chance of ever winning any of the prestigious literary prizes from the Gulf. In contrast to writers in conservative circles, they are also generally critical of prizes (at least until they start winning some).

who critiques and guides the masses and elites alike has less credibility than it had for earlier generations of writers. Instead, the author as envisioned by the turn-of-the-millennium avant-garde appears as a more subjective and alienated figure – or, in the case of authors whose work is more directly linked with their political stances like the above-mentioned poet Mustafa Ibrahim, as somebody speaking from within the crowd of demonstrators, authenticated by participation rather than leadership.

Al Shimaa Hamed's workshop did not simply break with the tradition of modernist literary aesthetics. Rather, it worked towards a different articulation of that tradition. In one of the meetings she let the participants read a short story by Yusuf Idris (1927-1991), »the uncontested master of the realist short story« (Jacquemond 2008: 259; see also Allen 1994) and also a prime case of a nationalist pro-regime intellectual. The story »Did you have to turn on the light, Lily?« (Idris 1998 [1954]; 1978) tells of the sheikh of a mosque falling for Lily, an ill-reputed girl from a popular neighbourhood. The task Al Shimaa Hamed gave to the par-



*Al Shimaa Hamed (on the right) at one of the workshop meetings in 2015. Photo by Samuli Schielke*

participants was to retell the story from Lily's point of view. The task was difficult especially for some of the female participants. They found it hard to adopt the perspective of a woman who was morally in many ways the opposite of what they had spent most of their lives learning to be. The message of the exercise was clear: to learn from the mastery of Yusuf Idris, but also to free oneself from the moral-literary superego that compels the author to write her own ideal of public personhood into the characters and the narrative.

This was a repeating theme in the workshop sessions we attended. In line with her own style of writing, Al Shimaa put emphasis on the skill to create fictional characters that are different from – even opposed to – how the writers see themselves, and to do justice to those fictional characters within the logic of the narrative, without becoming judgemental. (Yet the aim of not being judgemental in writing of course did contain a feminist moral message about female public voice and presence.) The



workshop was an exercise in creating autonomous fictional text rather than *written life*. The outcome of such exercises is a more complex one, however.

The writing workshops and the circle of friends that gathered around Al Shimaa Hamed overlapped to a large extent. The workshop itself was attended by a dozen people. Between half and two-thirds of them were women. Most participants were students between 18 and their early twenties. Only few were in their thirties. If we sometimes were among the youngest participants in symposia at the Writers' Union, in the workshop we were always the oldest. With few exceptions, the participants came from the bourgeois classes of the city. Many of them had spent their childhoods in the Arab Gulf States where their parents lived, and returned to Egypt to study. Their socialisation between urban Egyptian social mores and a global Anglophone bourgeoisie provided them with means to desire beyond the cultural and moral horizon of their families (see Peterson 2011). Fabrica was a space well suited to express and develop that desire. Such spaces have a double seclusion as their condition of existence: a seclusion from the popular classes with their more conservative forms of socialisation (which would make mixed-gender friendships more difficult, for example; see de Koning 2009), and a seclusion from the mainstream of the bourgeois classes themselves. No wonder, then, that some participants found it difficult to write from the point of view of Idris' Lily. She was opposed to their painstakingly cultivated social persona not only in terms of gendered modesty but also in terms of class habitus.

The kind of *writing of lives* that the workshops at Fabrica encouraged most was about creating a space for expressions and ways of living that are seen by mainstream bourgeois society as immoral, useless, or marginal. The semi-private setting and the largely shared age and class position provided a degree of seclusion that was necessary to cultivate such expressions. Just like in the conservative milieu of the Writers' Union, avant-garde spaces like Fabrica also require walls that separate literary life from ordinary life. The principle of separation is similar, but the habitus that is being learned and reproduced is different in the two milieus. The conservative milieu is busy with formal mutual recognition as authors and concern with wholesome moralistic beauty of language – even if some writers' lives are more bohemian and counter-normative than their writings. Al Shimaa Hamed's circle, in contrast, was a relatively protected<sup>20</sup> space of exchange where visions of alternative lifestyles

<sup>20</sup> Relatively but not entirely protected, for Al Shimaa and the workshop participants were a critical audience and this did make some participants hesitant to expose their writings to debate. Our presence as researchers added another layer of exposure.

and ways of writing could mutually enforce each other, and where the participants could experiment with a safer version of public exposure.

But the separation is never complete, and a few among the workshop participants worked towards at least partially transcending it. Being a writer is an exposed, public role par excellence, and many families are not entirely happy about their daughters developing literary inclinations. Women writers are more likely than men to be identified with the characters of their texts, which adds another layer of moral pressure. For women, developing a literary voice is therefore often linked with a more general cultivation of an assertive stance. For example, some women in the circle told us about their stance on marriage and the ability to gain a better negotiating position with their parents in choosing or resisting a suitor.

This work of developing an assertive voice might be easily misread in terms of a liberal celebration of authentic self-expression and liberation in spite of social constraints. Some of the participants might indeed subscribe to such a reading. And yet at a closer look, the case of Fabrica shows that the search for an assertive voice and alternative lifestyles is not natural and instinctive. On the contrary, it requires learning, practice, training, a supportive milieu that provides one with the techniques of pursuing them, and a partially protected space of expression and experimentation. Learning to be a writer who tells stories without judgement and embarrassment is structurally not so different from the work of learning to be a God-fearing pious Muslim that has been described by anthropologists studying the Islamic revival (Mahmood 2005; Fadil 2011; Abenante 2015). In fact, many of the people attending the workshop had experience in both forms of cultivation.

Self-determination is always a fiction insofar that it requires the strengthening of some bonds of support in order to challenge or overcome others. Most importantly, like all forms of striving and self-making, it is an inherently partial process that often does not result in what one strove for. Rather than liberating its practitioners, the alternative literary life in Al Shimaa Hamed's circle adds a layer of complexity and tension to more complex lives structured by strands of class, respect, work, gender roles, and different moral and spiritual ideals.

### 8. »It's a piece of me«

The intertwining of literary training with other strivings in a space of friendship also had paradoxical consequences for the workshop's goal to produce autonomous literary text. Al Shimaa Hamed's workshops have not simply reproduced her own take on literature – which probably wasn't her aim anyway. Some writers emerging from her workshops have produced technically innovative texts clearly distinct from both the current tenden-

cy towards subjective-autobiographic writing as well as the 20th century realist tradition (Abbadly 2013; Salem 2014). Others have narrated autonomous characters distinct from the writer's ego but in a framework closer to the realist tradition (Farouq 2016). These workshop participants have also been successful in crafting the public persona of the author in symposia and conferences. Others, in contrast, have been encouraged to produce a more intimate kind of writing. Their work fits less neatly with the ideal of autonomous text and the public persona of the author.

In spring 2015, we interviewed one of the participants in the workshop. She felt that she was profiting from the workshop enormously, yet she was far from confident about seeing herself as a writer. One of the oldest participants in the workshop, she was born in 1980 to a well-off urban family. Her father is a judge sympathetic of the Islamist current, an intellectual with vast readings and a conservative vision of life. She spent much of her youth in the Gulf where her father was working. She is the mother of a daughter in primary school. During our fieldwork, she worked as a dentist in Alexandria. In the first interview we had with her, she told us that she had started writing very recently, after the revolution. Her writings were usually very personal, recounting childhood memories and intimate feelings. In 2010, she was divorced from her husband. She told that the traumatic and conflictual process of her divorce was underneath all of her writings, yet until today she was unable to write about it.

Instead, the workshop inspired her to write about desire.

Another thing I found out in the workshop is that my imagination is a bit lustful. I was very embarrassed that I write these things. How come do you write these lustful things? So after the workshop I took the courage and started to write them. At least for myself. [...] I have a problem, you know, with what the society will think. What will it say? To the degree that I have thought of adopting a pen name.

This turn was not unique, nor was her sense of embarrassment. Many young authors have a keen interest to write about desire and sexuality, and Al Shima'a Hamed's appreciation of erotic writing made Fabrica a good place to pursue that path. But doing so runs counter Egyptian moral sensibilities of respectable mixed-gender interaction according to which talk about sexuality and explicit sexual language should be limited to either homosocial gatherings (see Kreil 2012) or intimate situations.

At the interview, she told us that we should not use her real name in our article. She had not published any of the texts she showed to us. She would not even publish parts of them on her Facebook

page because it was frequented by her colleagues and relatives. In her family, the very idea of her going public with any kind of literary writing met with resistance. Her most recent writings, which she characterised as »adults only«, would be scandalous. Her texts actually do not exceed the fairly conservative limits of what is considered an acceptable way to write about intimacy and sex in Egyptian literature. But she was referring to the sensibilities of her family and colleagues, not those of literary critics.

During the interview, she read to us three texts she had recently written. She told that she had written each of them at once, in the moment when the idea struck her mind. (One of them is reproduced in translation at the end of this article. She told that she got the idea for it while putting on makeup.) In contrast to the intended aim of the workshop, she had not produced autonomous fictional text. Her writing remained so much part of her that she would not distinguish between herself and her texts - which made the idea of staging herself as an author even more difficult. Because of this, she was uncomfortable with exposing her writings to literary critique even in the protected space of the workshop:

The problem is that when I write a piece, it's a piece of me. [...] as if it were my arm. Imagine somebody putting my arm on the table and critiquing it: it's too long, there's too much, that hair should be removed. It's my arm! I like it as it is, with its length and hair and all.

Her writing remained *written life* in the most immediate sense: an expressive dimension of her self, almost indistinguishable from her. This is not inherent to the texts she produces (see her short story in the Appendix), which do lend themselves to a reading as autonomous literary fiction that can be appreciated for its combination of erotic imagination, inner dialogue and a societal context established by intertextual references. Rather, it was the effect of the way she hesitated to release the texts into circulation and to embody the public persona of the author. She did not expect to become a professional writer, and she indicated that writing may be a passing stage in her life - as it in fact is for the great majority of writers (see Jacquemond 2008).

However, as we worked on the first draft of this article, we wrote to her asking whether she had already chosen a pen name so that we could use it in our article. She replied:

I agree with the publication of my full name. I'm proud that you have chosen me. My joy reaches the sky. Publish what you wish with my full name, I'm proud of the experiment and will not be ashamed of it.

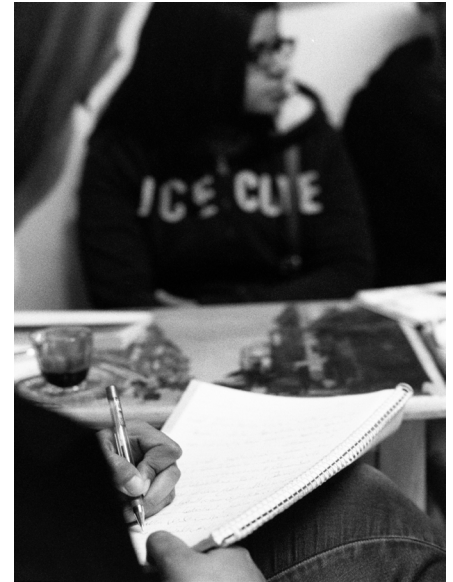
Why did Eman Salah change her mind about associating her work with her name? The fact that we write about her in an international academic article was probably a major motivation. It is a recognition of Eman Salah as a writer, and of her writing as worth taking seriously. The fact that we write in English also maintains a protective layer towards her family and colleagues. But our recognition alone would not be enough. Rather, it was part of a network of support that she sought and found in her striving to gain an independent stance in the difficult predicament of a divorced woman. And independence, as said, is never absolute: in practice, it means changing some forms of dependence for others. The writing workshop and the supportive circle around Al Shimaa Hamed formed one part of that striving. The experience of the January 25 revolution was another important part. According to Eman Salah, it changed the way she understood her own life dramatically. Most importantly perhaps, she was trying to emigrate from Egypt when we met her. In summer 2016, she eventually managed to move abroad. Many young Egyptians from her generation and social class currently try to leave Egypt because they experience their homeland as unliveable in so many ways. Perhaps the hope and preparation for a new start abroad also provided a stronger motivation to experiment with the difficult stance of a public voice.

This process has also changed her relation with Al Shimaa Hamed. It began as one between a charismatic teacher and an enthusiastic student. In autumn 2015, Eman told Mukhtar that she is no longer afraid of the literary critique offered by Al Shimaa, and that they now enter discussions about texts on a more equal footing. This is, of course, the very aim of the training Al Shimaa Hamed provides. But paradoxically, it also destabilises the power relation of the trainer and the trainee. The dynamic of friendship-power relations is key to the way literary circles form – and split.

It remains to be seen, however, what the consequences of Eman Salah's literary and other strivings will be, and whether her vision of independence is possible also beyond the privileges of Egypt's class society and the protected space of Al Shimaa's circle. Literary writing in the sense of *writing of lives* is an aspirational project of self-making. And the problem of all aspirational projects of self-making is that they often do not result in that which they aim for. Yet this is not simply a matter of their failure and success. They are productive – but of what, cannot be known beforehand.

## 9. Conclusion

In his partly autobiographic study on writers and writing, Michael Jackson argues that literary writing fundamentally involves a search for wider horizons and other shores:



*Eman Salah writing in her notebook at one of the workshop meetings in 2015. Photo by Samuli Schielke*

Regardless of what we write, the very act of writing signifies a refusal to be bound by conceptual categories, social norms, political orders, linguistic limits, historical divides, cultural bias, identity thinking, and conventional wisdom that circumscribe our everyday lives. [... W]hat moves us to write (and read what others have written) is an impulse to broaden our horizons, to reincarnate ourselves, and ›satisfy our perpetual longing to be another‹. (Jackson 2013: 2-3)

Something of this impulse was indeed present throughout our encounters with writers in Alexandria. But it did not result in writers freely gazing across open waters for other shores. Developing a wider horizon of fantasy requires resources, training, and support. No less work is required to limit and direct one's fantasy to make it fit with the moral-aesthetic horizon of a social-literary milieu. We found writers thinking beyond some forms of conventions and bias while reinforcing others. We found that the search for imaginative freedom in arts and literature can be entirely compatible with the support of repressive military regimes – Egyptians writers have a remarkable record on this point. Likewise, we found that cultivating an openness for new ideas and tastes did not mean openness to different social classes – in fact it often even required their exclusion. And we recognised that it would be a fallacy to mistake literary writers for voices of their society. Their voices are structured by the specific social milieus they hail from, and at the same time depend on a productive position of marginality and idiosyncrasy. A more fitting description would be to consider literary writing – along with other forms of cultural production – as a productive surplus of imagination in a wider social milieu. It may exceed the

taken-for-granted of the societal mainstream, but is never unlimited.

Literary imagination and literary careers are guided and made possible by forms of socialisation, shared experiences and relations of power – or what we call *the milieu*. In our ethnography, key formative contexts have been aesthetics and intertextuality, friendship and conflicts, class, urban landscape, religion, gender, and shared generational experiences. Through them – and against them – do writers develop their specific literary voice and author persona. The power of such milieus is fourfold. First, they encourage and make possible certain expressions, aesthetics and ways of relating to society and state. Second, they restrict movement beyond their productive limits. Third, they divide the literary landscape into specific scenes and circles that emerge as the result of political, aesthetic, generational, institutional, and personal differences. Fourth, by providing divisive lines of exclusion and distinction, they also encourage the crafting and cultivation of specific styles and traditions of living and writing that are marked by both what they are and what they are not.

There is no outside of power even in the most non-conformist circles. But the effect of relations of power is not deterministic. Literary and cultural scenes are frequented by people who in a quantitative survey would likely figure as »odd guys out«, that is, the minority in a statistical sample that does not behave the way the statistically significant majority does. In Bourdieu's ground-breaking work on class and aesthetics, the correlations he establishes between socio-economic position and judgement of taste are accompanied by a statistical shadow of workers and farmers with bourgeois tastes and vice versa (Bourdieu 1984: 36-38). In our fieldwork, we have encountered tangible correlations of generation, class, education, and institutional context with literary aesthetics and socialisation (although lacking statistical data, we are not able to make quantitative statements). But throughout our fieldwork, we have also constantly encountered people who were in many ways peculiar in comparison to the (non-literary) people around them, and who made use of the institutional, class and generational means of a specific literary milieu to cultivate and develop their idiosyncrasy in the public persona of the writer. Idiosyncrasy is not a privilege of writers, of course. What from one point of view can be presented as traditions, classes and generations produced by shared structuring practices and experiences, from a different point of view appear as gatherings of people who all are somehow peculiar despite their efforts to be like others. Arts and literature are among the societally more respected and sanctioned ways to

cultivate and celebrate one's specific way of being peculiar, or what we call idiosyncrasy.

In the historical moment of our fieldwork, the productivity of literature as a space of legitimate idiosyncrasy is especially visible in regard to gender relations. A senior male author like Abdelfattah Morsi can move comfortably and playfully within spaces provided to him by the patriarchal and class privileges of senior, well-off men. Female authors, in contrast, have until recently had to struggle with the marginalised position given to them as writers of »women's literature«. Also today, the embodiment of the public voice of an author by a woman remains a significant accomplishment – and an especially difficult one for women who do not enjoy the privileges of urban careers and bourgeois education and habitus (Shehata 2015). And yet it has become visibly more accessible and possible than it was a generation or two earlier (Jacquemond 2008). We have encountered several young women who with some success and recognition embody the public persona of the author (and not just that of a female author)<sup>21</sup> along with a more far-reaching assertive stance in their lives. They show that writing as a technology of the self does have the power to build trajectories of life that otherwise may not be available. However, writing can only contribute to such trajectories in the framework of a supportive aesthetic, generational and class milieu. And its long-term consequences remain beyond the reach of our ethnography.

This is what the writing of lives is all about: the productive coming together of socialisation and idiosyncrasy, experience and imagination, obsession and resources, and life and text in an aspirational path of becoming – with unpredictable results. The problem of writing and life concerns thus neither the possibility of an original, authentic voice, nor the predetermination of that voice by discursive registers. Rather, it concerns the inter-subjective relations that enable specific expressions of a writer's voice in a dialectic process between the milieu and the writer.

**21** An important aspect of this development is the degree to which some women writers have been able to occupy the unmarked (implicitly masculine) category of an author rather than the marked and marginalised category of a woman writer of women's literature. Because of the importance they give to being recognised simply as authors, women writers we have encountered are mostly critical of the idea of *al-kitaba al-nisawiya* which depending on context can mean both »women's writing« as well as »feminist writing«. This is also the case with many writers who express strong feminist stances.

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## Appendix: Texts by Abdelfattah Morsi and Eman Salah

(Translations by Samuli Schielke)

*Abdelfattah Morsi*: »Reading the Sand«<sup>22</sup>

(Short story, written in the mid-1980's as part of a series of short stories on Alexandria, unpublished)

Between the end of the summer and the beginning of the autumn, my wife reminds me accusingly of the summer – the last one – which passed away before we got to know it properly. She means that we didn't go to the beach, although we live nearby it. I say to her:

»Who can remember his own arm all the time.«

Our house is nearby the beach. Yet we turned our faces southward – as usually. We only remember the summer by the time the summer guests leave the city. And my young son demands:

»We must go to the beach, father.«

Throughout the narrow band that bridges sunset and sunrise, I think of our deserts bare of vegetation. They once were forests with intertwining branches, abundant with life. Now life there has transformed into an escaping energy, making itself a predicament of the weak in face of the strong.

»No condition is permanent,« I sigh to escape the pain.

And when the cold wind touches my face and the humidity fogs my glasses, it comes to my mind that glass comes from sand, and that with concave and convex lenses we can see distant things, and extremely small ones. And as I dwelt in reflection, my prayers were extended and profound: a prayer unites me with the supplications of the dawn prayer, and I recall the finest gear in the production machinery of the factory. I feel like writing something. »I'm upset about forgetting the pen and paper.«

... Meanwhile, my wife keeps telling her usual stories. I lend my ear to the whispering of the air and water. Suddenly I think of thousands of words, hanging in the ether. They are spread from distant places, from beyond the line of the horizon, and rise to the satellites. And thus those many space stations spread out over our world and cover most of the surface of our planet that hasn't come of age yet.

I see those words inviting me either to the face of Earth or to the edge of space. It shall be upon me alone to choose. So I feel the vast weight and misfortune of »freedom«, and anxious silence covers my face. My wife observes the shattered colour of my face, and interrupts her talk about the family and the neighbours and the child. She grows restless. Then she demands from me if I would like to return. I turn to her with a false cheerful smile on my face. She says:

- Thus you are not up to the sea!

Compelled, I go with them. The boy runs on the beach. I relax on a chair and dwell in reflection about the works I left behind me.

But as the rolling waves caress the feet of the child, and a wave retreats and another flows over it, I think about moving my chair to the line where the waves end. And yet I stay on my spot, staring at the horizon. I follow the white bird that rises and descends above the waves, and that distant departing ship. I bury my bare foot into the millions of little particles. »Once they were the spines of things that pulsed with life...«

22 Literally »The science/knowledge of the sand«, meaning divination.

بين نهاية الصيف وبداية الخريف ، تذكرني زوجتي فى عتاب، بالصيف – الآخر – الذى رحل دون التعرف عليه معرفة وثيقة ..تقصد أننا لم نذهب الى الشاطئ..ونحن نسكن بجواره..أقول لها: "من يتذكر ذراعه فى كل وقت.."

بيتنا قريب من شاطئ البحر.. لذلك ولينا وجوهنا نحو الجنوب – كما هى العادة..

– لا نتذكر الصيف إلا إذا رحل ضيوف المدينة.. ويسألنى أبني الصبى..

– ضرورة الذهاب إلى الشاطئ يا أبى ..

وعبر خيط رفيع يصل بين الغروب والشروق. أفكر فى صحارينا الجردا.

كانت يوما غابات متشابكة الأغصان، تفيض بالحياة، لقد استحالت الحياة

إلى طاقة سائلة.. صارت من مصائب الضعفاء أمام الأقوياء.

"لا شئ يبقى على حاله .." أتشهد لأفلى من الأسى..

وإذا ما لامس النسيم البارد صفحة وجهى. وغبش بخار الماء زجاج نظارتى.. خطر لى أن الزجاج

من الرمل.. وبالزجاج المقعر والمحدب نرى الأشياء البعيدة.. والمتناهية فى الصغر.. وإذا ما توغلت

فى التأمل. كانت صلاتى.. ممتدة ومتألقة – صلاة تأخذنى لأندمج مع أبتهالات الفجر وأستعيد

أصغر ترس فى آلة الإنتاج بالمصنع. .. يخطر لى كتابة شئ "يضايقنى نسيان القلم والورق.."

بينما زوجتى كانت لا تزال تحكى لى حكاياتها المعتادة.. أسلم أذنى لوشوشة الهواء..

والماء.. فإذا بي أفكر فى ملايين الكلمات، محمولة فى الأثير.. تبتث من الأماكن البعيدة..

خلف خط الأفق.. تصعد إلى الأقمار الصناعية. لتفتش الدنيا، تغطى أكبر مساحة

من كوكبنا الذى لم يبلغ سن الرشد بعد .. بتلك المحطات الفضائية العديدة..

أراها تدعونى إلى حضيض الأرض.. أو تخوم السماء.. ويكون على وحدى أن أختار..

فأشعر بمدى ثقل وفداحة "الحرية" يكسو وجهى الوجوم.. وتلاحظ الزوجة لون وجهى

المهيب.. فتكف عن حديثها عن البيت والجيران والطفل.. تتملل.. ثم

تقترح إن كنت أرغب فى العودة .. أواجهها بوجه بشوش زائف .. تقول:

– هكذا أنت لا تطيق البحر..!

مرغماً أذهب معهما.. الصبى يجرى فوق الرمال. وأنا استرخى على

مقعد، ويستغرقنى التأمل.. فيما تركته خلفى من أعمال!!

لكن عندما تداعب الموجات الهادرة أقدام الصغير، تنحسر موجة لتعلوها أخرى.

أفكر فى نقل مقعدى إلى حد الموج .. ومع ذلك أبقى مكانى شاخصاً إلى الأفق. أتابع

الطائر الأبيض الذى يعلو ويهبط فوق الأمواج. وتلك السفينة البعيدة المسافرة.. أوس

"قدمى العارية فى ملايين الأجزاء" كانت يوماً فقريات لأشياء تنبض بالحياة.."

She opened the box of eyeshade which she had left unused since a while. She chose a shining brown colour to suit her olive green winter clothes. She looked at the remaining dry fragments. She pressed firmly with the tip of her ring finger on one of the pieces, and it fell apart into a fine dust. With a slow and deliberate circular motion she let the knuckle of her ring finger absorb the colour, enjoying its exquisite softness as it clung on her finger. She lifted her finger up into the air under the exposing light of the bathroom, and looked carefully at the shining colour. How beautiful.

She imagined it covering her body with a shining brass layer while she reclines naked on the bed. The lighting is low and reflects only the shining of that colour on her long arms, the shoulder on which she leans head and long braided hair, what can be seen of her breast resting on her other breast in gentle surrender, the navel that almost disappears in darkness, and the upper part of her moist thigh. She cherished the thought of that colour also taking over her face as if it were sweating from the strong heat of the room, to make her look like a ripe and delicious African girl whom no one has tasted yet.

She spread the eyeshade with her finger on her upper eyelid, and took the decision to spread it on her eyelid. She gave the mirror many fleeting glances. The mirror knows her well. It knows those glances. She had grown used to test her looks at the mirror first before her eyes would glance at real eyes. After several attempts, she was content with the shape of the eyeshade. With some the remains on her finger, she began to spread it slowly on her lips, until it covered them with a layer of lustre to make her lips look exactly like she planned. Now came the turn of the mascara. She will cover her long eyelashes with that black stuff, directing the brush well from a certain, calculated angle to make the eyelashes line up in the same direction. How much she loves when others' eyes praise the beauty of her eyes. Inside her, the voice of Fairuz swings to and fro: *The pretty girl has almond eyes, I love you from my heart and you are the light of my eyes.*

She throws an examining glance into the mirror while she presses her lips on each other in a circular motion to be sure that the lipstick covers them completely. She looks at her shining lips for a moment. How much time has passed with no lover kissing them? How much time will pass until she can cherish the taste of a kiss that will bring her back to life?

She asks herself if the mirror: will this night be warmer with my eyeshades? She smiles enjoying the scent of her pretty lips.

The voice of Majida El Roumi runs inside her mind:

*So it's for him? So it's for him that you make yourself beautiful?*<sup>23</sup>

- For whom?

»Who do you mean? There is nobody. Are you crazy?«

- I'm just wondering. There is no need for premature attack.

»Just him... Just him...«

- So it's him?

»Who is he? I don't care. I'm just trying to find an answer to your sick mind.«

- If I'm not wrong, that is the dialogue that runs between us every time you fall in love.

*Every time, every time we return from the journey with a wound.*<sup>24</sup>

»Spare me your pessimism and let destiny see about both of us, once for the sake of experiment!«

إيمان صلاح

(نص لم تعط له الكاتبة عنواناً)

فتحت غطاء علبة ظل الجفون الذي قد هجرته منذ زمن.. اختارت لوناً بنياً لامعاً.. لكي يليق بملابسها الشتوية زيتية الألوان.. تأملت قطعه المتحجرة المتبقية.. ضغطت بطرف بنصرها على إحدى القطع ضغطة محسوبة.. فتفتت مسحوقاً ناعماً.. بحركة دائرية متمهلة جعلت عقلة بنصرها تتشرب اللون.. تستمتع بنعومته الفائقة وهو يعلق بإصبعها.. رفعت إصبعها في الهواء تحت ضوء الحمام الكاشف..

<sup>23</sup> From the song »The Jasmine Necklace« (*Tawq al-yasmin*)

<sup>24</sup> From the song by Abdel Halim Hafez »Promise« (*Maw'ud*)

تأملت اللون اللامع .. ما أجمله..

تخيلته يكسو جسدها بطبقة برونزية لامعة وهي متكئة عارية على السرير.. الإضاءة الخافتة تعكس فقط ما يلعب من ذلك اللون على ذراعيها الطويلتين.. الكتف المستندة عليه برأسها ذي الضفائر الرفيعة.. ما ظهر من ثديها المستلقي على الثدي الآخر في دعة واستسلام.. السرّة الغائرة في الظلام وأعلى فخذها الرطب.. استطابت فكرة أن يكسو ذلك اللون أيضًا وجهها فيبدو متعرقًا من شدة الحر في الغرفة، فتبدو كفتاة إفريقية شهية لم تقضم بعد..

فرشته بإصبعها على جفنها العلوي.. اتقنت رسمه على جفونها.. نظرت للمرأة عدة نظرات معبرة.. تعرفها جيدًا المرأة.. تعرف تلك النظرات.. فقد اعتادت أن تختبر نظراتها على المرأة قبل أن ترمي بها عيونًا حقيقية.. رضيت بعد عدة محاولات عن شكل ظلال الجفون.. بما تبقى من بقايا على إصبعها.. جعلت تفرد برؤية على شفثيها؛ فتكسوه لاحقًا بطبقة من ملمع الشفافة.. لكي يبدو لون شفثاها تمامًا كما خطت.. الآن جاء دور فرشاة الرموش.. سوف تكسو أهدابها الطويلة بتلك المادة السوداء، اتجاه الفرشاة

بزاوية معينة محسوبة جيدًا لكي يجعل الرموش تتراص في نفس الاتجاه.. كم تحب إطراء العيون على جمال عيونها.. تهادي بداخلها صوت فيروز "البنت الشلبية عيونها لوزية.. حبك من قلبي يا قلبي وانتي عينه.."

تلقي نظرة منفضة في المرأة بينما تقوم بفرك شفثيها ببعضهما في حركة دائرية.. كي تتأكد من توزيع أحمر الشفافة عليهما تمامًا.. تتأمل جمال شفثيها وهما مطلبتان لوهلة من الزمن.. كم مضى من الزمن لم يقبلهما حبيب..؟ كم سيمضي من الزمن قبل أن تتذوق قبلة تعيدها للحياة..؟ تتساءل في المرأة.. أتراها ليلة أدفء بظلال جفوني؟ تبتمس مستمتعة برائحة شفثيها الزكية.. يسري صوت ماجدة الرومي بداخل عقلها..

"أله إذن؟ أله إذن تتجملين؟"

– لمن يا ترى؟

= لمن ماذا؟ لا أحد.. أجننت؟

– أنا فقط أتساءل.. لا داع لهجوم استباقي..

= هو فقط.. هو فقط..

– إذن هو؟!!

= من هو؟! لا يعنيني في شيء.. أنا فقط أحاول إيجاد إجابة لعقلك المريض..

– إن لم اكن مخطئة فذلك هو الحوار الذي يدور بيننا كل مرة تقعين فيها في الحب..!

"كل مرة.. كل مرة.. نرجع المشوار بجرح.."

= ارحميني من تشاؤمك ودعي الأقدار تقرر لكلتنا.. مرة واحدة على سبيل التجربة..!



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