# Arab Feminism and Islamic History: The Transnational Life and Work of Lebanese-Syrian Writer Widad Sakakini (1913-1991)
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Manfred Sing

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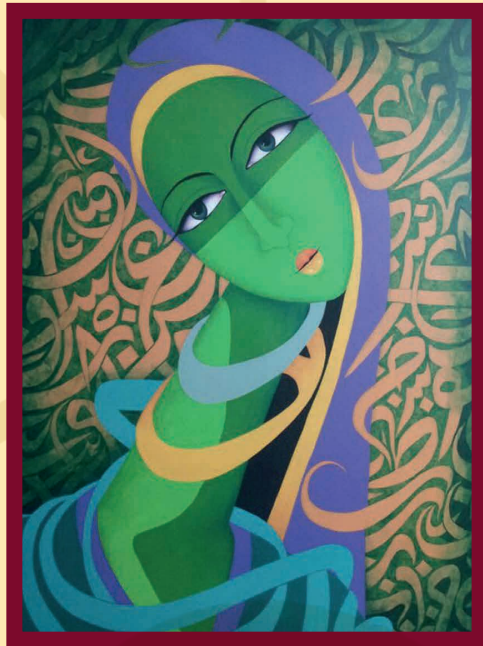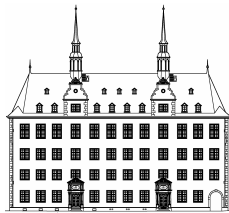
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# Arab Feminism and Islamic History

The Transnational Life and Work of Lebanese-Syrian Writer
Widad Sakakini (1913–1991)

by

Manfred Sing

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For Deema,
Inana,
and Aram

صورة للأديبة مع زوجها الدكتور زكي المحا سني

Fig. 1    Portrait of Widad Sakakini (1913–1991) and her husband Zaki al-Mahasini (1909–1972).
        Source: Printing permission by Samaʾ al-Mahasini.

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# Preface

Books have a life of their own, before and after their creation. This one took a long time before it saw the light of day. I started researching for it as part of my doctoral thesis in 2001, and in 2003 I collected texts in Syria and spoke to people who still knew Widad Sakakini or had written about her. However, it soon became clear to me that the material was far too extensive for my PhD thesis and deserved its own study. Later, in an online article I summarised the controversy between Sakakini and Bint al-Shati' in German. Nevertheless, it still did not feel as if I had already said everything necessary about Widad Sakakini. Ultimately, it was the dramatic events that have taken hold of Syria since 2011 that pushed me to complete this study. I had the feeling that with the war a piece of Syria had been lost, which I had the opportunity to get to know and learned to appreciate and love despite all the adversities. I thought that I owed it to the country of »Syria« and its people that a different, literary, and less warlike image be associated with them. Even though Syria is not the focus of this work, I would never have written the following pages without my visits and my research there over a period of nearly 20 years. Moreover, I also felt obliged to finish this work because I owe it to my interlocutors, who supported me so much in my research. Special thanks go to Widad's daughters, Dhuka' and Sama', who told me about their mother and father and provided me with valuable information and material. Sama' al-Mahasini also sent me the photos of her mother that decorate this volume and give a better visual impression of her. I am also grateful to the researchers Majida Hammud, ʿIsa Fattuh, Suhayl al-Maladhi, Muhammad Kamil al-Khatib, and Hasan Hamid, who shared their knowledge with me. Some of my interlocutors, like ʿAbd al-Karim al-Ashtar, unfortunately did not live to see the publication of this book.

This study would have been impossible to write without the institutional support I was lucky to receive from the University of Freiburg, the Hans-Boeckler-Stiftung, the French Institute in Damascus, the American University in Beirut, the Orient-Institut in Beirut, the Asad Library in Damascus, Harvard Liberary, and the Leibniz-Institute of European History in Mainz. Moreover, this book would have turned out differently, if I had written it ten years earlier. The interdisciplinary reading and study groups in which I participated with my colleagues in Mainz in the last years helped me to see Widad Sakakini's life and work with different eyes. In this context, it was easy for me to discuss her biography as an example of a transnational life and her ideas as an entanglement of religious and secular views. I also benefited from progress in the digital humanities in recent years. Although I had collected most of Widad Sakakini's books, it was only with the help of search engines that I

understood that most of what was printed in these books had already earlier been published as articles in various journals. Very helpful in this respect was the Arabic online tool URL: <http://archive.alsharekh.org> that helped me to find 180 articles written by Widad Sakakini or about her in literary journals from various countries. This discovery changed my perception of Sakakini's way of writing and publishing.

I am thankful for the help that I got from my colleagues Syrinx von Hees, Ines Weinrich, Fatima Guiliano-Arnout, and Rainer Brunner, all of whom gave me critical feedback on my thoughts about Widad Sakakini's work. Werner Ende, the supervisor of my doctoral dissertation, deserves credit for having introduced me to the work of Widad Sakakini and Zaki al-Mahasini. I am grateful for the careful proofreading done by Peter Kuras and Anne Heumann. Vanessa Weber, Christiane Bacher, and Sabine Mischner from the IEG watched over the whole publication process and gave me good advice whenever needed. Rafaat Thimer kindly allowed me to use a painting by his father, the Syrian artist Aeich Thimer, who died in exile in Saudi Arabia in 2018. The painting is the eye-catcher on the cover that was designed by my dear friend Margit Rupp.

I am also thankful to have had the privilege to read Astrid Ottosson Bitar's literary study on Widad Sakakini before writing my own book and I have to apologize in advance for my critical remarks about her study on the following pages. In spite of my critique, her work has been a valuable and irreplaceable companion for my own journey through Widad Sakakini's worlds. The mistakes and errors that have creeped into the following pages in spite of so much support and advice are entirely mine.

Finally, I am more than grateful for all the distraction, support, and patience I have experienced, while working on this manuscript, from my wonderful family and wife, Deema Al Shoufi.

Mainz, March 2021

Manfred Sing

# Introduction

## 1.    Research Questions and State of the Field

Widad Sakakini's literary estate contains an unpublished short story entitled *al-Sajjāda* (*The Prayer Rug*, 1986)[1] about the revenge of a shaykh's wife. Reviewing her life, the woman realizes that she spent most of her time with pregnancies, child rearing, and housework. As she had to take care of the family and accept poor living conditions as a consequence, she now realizes how annoyed she is that her husband, with whom she no longer communicates, wholly dedicates himself to religion and prayers. In an inner monologue, she articulates her growing anger about his beard, prayer-chain, and prayer mat until she finally sets fire to the chain and the mat, though the beard remains unshorn. The short story ends with the same image with which it began: a description of the praying shaykh. Yet, now left alone in his empty house, the narrator lets us know that »he no longer finds the old passion that he felt, when he was praying on his beautiful, old prayer rug«[2].

This short story gives us a concise hint at Widad Sakakini's feminist project as a novelist. Sakakini points at the structural asymmetries between female and male life plans, sketches the psychological sides of this asymmetry and a possible female reaction to it. In this case, the woman attacks two symbols of »masculine domination«[3], which also happen to be religious symbols. This attack should not be mistaken as an anti-religious act, but as an attack against the use of religious symbols for the sake of masculine domination. In the same sense, Widad Sakakini was not an anti-religious writer; she was a Muslim writer who cherished the idea that female figures of early Islamic times had something to say to contemporary concerns of emancipation and equality, as will be shown on the following pages.

Widad Sakakini was among the most prominent female Arab authors of the twentieth century and she has been credited with being one of the founders of the Arab short story[4] as well as »the author of the first narrative literary work by a

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1   The short story is part of a collection of short stories that has not been released for publication by the Syrian Ministry of Culture. It was printed for the first time in the appendix of Astrid OTTOSSON BITAR's study, »I Can Do Nothing against the Wish of the Pen«. Studies in the Short Stories of Widād Sakākīnī, Uppsala 2005, pp. 221–224. On the background and the contents also see ibid., pp. 112–118.

2   Quoted after ibid., p. 118.

3   Pierre BOURDIEU, Männliche Herrschaft, Frankfurt a.M. 2005.

4   Radwa ASHOUR et al. (eds.), Arab Women Writers. A Critical Reference Guide 1873–1999, Cairo/New York 2008, p. 478; Jūzīf ZAYDĀN, Maṣādir al-adab al-nisāʾī fī l-ʿalam al-ʿarabī l-ḥadīth, Beirut 1999, pp. 350–353; Robert B. CAMPBELL, Widād al-Sakākīnī, in: Idem, Aʿlām al-adab al-ʿarabī

woman that can truly be called a novel«[5]. Writing from the 1920s to the 1980s, she published 22 books—five volumes of short stories[6], two novels[7], three volumes of essays[8], three volumes of literary criticism[9], four biographical portraits of contemporary and historical women[10], two lexica on women pioneers[11], and three biographical portraits of men[12]. Moreover, she wrote numerous articles for various journals located in different Arab countries[13]. The books—especially the volumes of short stories, essays, and literary criticism—were mostly collections of what she had previously published in journals. Her work has been acknowledged in popular cultural, literary, and religious journals from Maghreb to Mashreq and is still commemorated now and then, especially in Syria[14], with the help of her friends and

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l-muʿāṣir. Siyar wa-siyar dhātiyya, Beirut 1996, vol. II, pp. 736–738; Muḥammad Ramaḍān Yūsuf/ ʿUmar Riḍā Kaḥḥāla, Widād Sakākīnī, in: Idem, Takmilat aʿlām al-nisāʾ. Wafayāt 1977–1995, Beirut 1996, pp. 106–108; ʿĪsā Fattūḥ, Widād Sakākīnī (1913–1991), in: Idem, Adībāt ʿarabiyyāt. Siyar wa-dirāsāt, Damascus 1994, pp. 237–247.

5  Subhi Hadidi/Imam al-Qadi, Syria, in: Ashour et al. (eds.), Arab Women Writers, pp. 60–97, here: p. 61.

6  Widād Sakākīnī, Marāyā l-nās, Cairo 1944; eadem, Bayna l-Nīl wa-l-nakhīl, Cairo 1948; eadem, al-Sitār al-marfūʿ, Cairo 1955; eadem, Nufūs tatakallam, Cairo 1962; eadem, Aqwā min al-sinīn, Damascus 1978.

7  Eadem, Arwā bint al-khutūb, Cairo 1952; eadem, al-Ḥubb al-muḥarram, Cairo 1954.

8  Eadem, al-Khaṭarāt. Kitāb adab wa-akhlāq wa-jtimāʿ, Beirut 1932; eadem, Inṣāf al-marʾa, Damascus 1950; eadem, Sawād fī bayāḍ, Damascus 1959.

9  Eadem, Niqāṭ ʿalā l-ḥurūf. Naqd wa-taʿqīb, Cairo 1962; eadem, Shawk fī l-ḥaṣīd, Fī l-adab wa-naqdihi. Taṣwīb wa-taʿqīb, Damascus 1981; eadem, Suṭūr tatajawwab. Maqālāt fī l-adab wa-l-naqd, Damascus 1987.

10 Eadem, Ummahāt al-muʾminīn wa-akhawāt al-shuhadāʾ, Cairo 1947; eadem, al-ʿĀshiqa al-mutaṣawwifa. Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya, Cairo 1955; eadem, Ummahāt al-muʾminīn wa-banāt al-rasūl, Cairo 1962; eadem, Mayy Ziyāda fī ḥayātihā wa-āthārihā, Cairo 1969.

11 Eadem/Tumāḍir Tawfīq, Nisāʾ shahīrāt fī l-sharq wa-l-gharb, Cairo 1959; Widād Sakākīnī, Sābiqāt al-ʿaṣr waʿyan wa-saʿyan wa-fannan, Damascus 1986.

12 Widād Sakākīnī, Qāsim Amīn 1863–1908, Cairo 1965; eadem, ʿUmar Fākhūrī. Adīb al-ibdāʿ wa-l-jamāhīr, Cairo 1970; eadem, Wujūh ʿarabiyya ʿalā ḍifāf al-Nīl, Cairo 2000 (posthumously).

13 In her wide-ranging, yet still incomplete overview, Ottosson-Bitar lists close to 170 articles, see Ottosson-Bitar, I Can Do Nothing, pp. 201–211.

14 For example, appraisals appeared in the Syrian literary journal *al-Usbūʿ al-Adabī* in 1989, the Moroccan journal *Daʿwat al-Ḥaqq* in 1972, the Syrian *Majallat Juhīna* in 2006, the Jordanian journal *al-Waṭan* in 2014, and in the Emirati journal *Khalīj* in 2015, the last one written by the Mauritanian novelist Muḥammad walad Muḥammad Sālim (b. 1969). See al-Usbūʿ al-Adabī 6 (al-Mulḥaq al-Shahrī, June 1989); Daʿwat al-Ḥaqq, Widād Sakākīnī, No. 149 (1972), URL: <http://www. habous.gov.ma/daouat-alhaq/item/3766> (28.04.2020); Majallat Juhīna, Widād Sakākīnī, No. 12 (01 May 2006), URL: <http://jouhina.com/ magazine/archive_article.php?id=1039> (29.04.2020); al-Waṭan, Widād Sakākīnī … al-kātibat allatī anṣafat al-marʾa, (11 May 2014), URL: <http://alwatan. com/details/16393> (29.04.2020); Muḥammad walad Muḥammad Sālim, Zakī al-Maḥāsinī wa-

family. Her daughter Samaʾ al-Mahasini (Samāʾ al-Maḥasinī), herself a writer, translator, librarian, and expert on manuscripts, has been especially active in cultivating Sakakini's legacy, she has lectured about her mother and wrote an article about her as well as a book about Sakakini's husband, Zaki al-Mahasini (Zakī al-Maḥāsinī, 1909–1972)[15]. The Syrian state also seems to have discovered that the author can be used for propaganda purposes. In 2011, a street in Damascus was named after her, and the Ministry of Culture organized a conference on Sakakini's legacy in 2018 and published a book in honour of her[16]. Also in 2018, Radio Damascus dedicated one episode of a series of audio plays on female writers to Sakakini[17].

In spite of her widely acknowledged role as pioneer of short story writing and her prominent role as one of the first accomplished female writers in the Arab countries, Sakakini's books do not form part of the literary canon in Syria or Lebanon. To the best of my knowledge, there is no comprehensive study of her work in Arabic, excepting an unpublished master thesis by an Egyptian student[18]. Her importance as a pioneering feminist author is rarely stated explicitly; the exceptions are texts by the Syrian author Bouthaina Shaaban (Buthayna Shaʿbān),[19] who also wrote the 1989 introduction to the second edition of Sakakini's collection of feminist essays *Inṣāf al-marʾa* ([1]1950, [2]1989), and a chapter by the Syrian literary scholar Mājida Ḥammūd in her study of women's narrative discourse in the twentieth century[20].

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Widād Sakākīnī…ijtimāʿ ʿalā l-kitāba wa-l-ḥubb, in: al-Khalīj (1 June 2015), URL: <https://www.alkhaleej.ae/ملحقزكيالمحاسنيوودادسكاكينياجتماععلىالكتابةوالحب> (30.11.2020).

15  She was director of the department for printed books at the Ẓāhiriyya Liberary and worked for the Arab Academy in Damascus. Her article on Sakakini is Samāʾ Zakī AL-MAḤĀSINĪ, Widād Sakākīnī. Rāʾida min rawwād al-adab al-ʿarabī l-muʿāṣir, n.p. n.d., available online at: URL: <https://www.startimes.com/f.aspx?t=8422453> (11.12.2020). For her work on her father, see Samāʾ Zakī AL-MAḤĀSINĪ, Zakī al-Maḥāsinī. 1909–1972. al-Murabbī l-adīb wa-l-shāʿir al-nāqid, Damascus 2004.

16  See the webpage of the Ministry of Culture (Wizārat al-Thaqāfa, 29.11.2018), the newspaper JARĪDAT AL-BAʿTH, Widād Sakākīnī rāʾidat al-adab wa-l-ibdāʿ (03.12.2018) and the publication by Mālik ṢUQŪR/Nazīh AL-KHŪRĪ (eds.), Widād Sakākīnī bayna l-baḥth wa-l-ibdāʿ, Damascus 2019.

17  ʿAffāf SHABB, Nisāʾ adībāt. Ḥalqat al-adība al-ʿarabiyya Widād Sakākīnī, directed by Nuʿaym Sālim (01.10.2018), URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fXrcghJSW6U> (28.04.2020).

18  ʿAbd al-Fatāḥ M.ʾA. SHUʿAYB, Widād Sakākīnī (ḥayātuhā wa-adabuhā), Cairo 1987.

19  Buthayna SHAʿBĀN, Muqaddima, in: Widād SAKĀKĪNĪ, Inṣāf al-marʾa, Damascus [2]1989, pp. 15–18; Buthayna SHAʿBĀN, Fī adab Widād Sakākīnī, in: al-Usbūʿ al-Adabī 6 (al-Mulḥaq al-Shahrī, June 1989), p. 4; eadem, Qirāʾa fī adab Widād Sakākīnī, in: al-Nāshir al-ʿArabī (Libya) 12 (1988), pp. 111–139. Today, Shaaban (b. 1953) is primarily known as the face of the Syrian regime to the outside world. Born in Homs, she was educated in Britain and obtained a Ph.D. in English literature from the University of Warwick. From 1985 to 2003, she was professor at the English Department of Damascus University. Since then, she has worked as an interpreter and adviser for the Syrian Presidents Hafez and Bashar al-Asad.

20  Mājida ḤAMMŪD, al-Khiṭāb al-qiṣaṣī l-nasawī. Namādhij min Sūriyya, Beirut 2002, pp. 14–23.

The only full-length study in a Western language is a literary analysis of Sakakini's short story style, in which the author Astrid Ottosson Bitar argues that »many misogynic themes and images«[21] can be found in her work. In a similar vein, Subhi Hadidi and Imam al-Qadi take offence at the fact that men often appear as the center of women's lives in Sakakini's as well as in other female authors' work of her generation: »If women rebel, they rebel against the customs and traditions that prevent them from finding and meeting their great love«[22]. According to Hadidi and al-Qadi, Sakakini's second novel *al-Ḥubb al-muḥarram* (*Forbidden Love*, 1954) constitutes a striking example of this phenomenon: »In this novel it is as if Sakakini is confirming the very accusations against women she earlier sought to refute«[23].

I find such readings rather one-sided and reductive. My aim here is to make the feminist voice in Widad Sakakini's work, which is under-represented in most portraits of her, more audible. In 1947, Sakakini became the first author to publish a modern book-length study of the wives and daughters of the Prophet Muhammad, as well as other women of early Islam. She also published the already mentioned collection of feminist essays pleading for »the just treatment of women«, *inṣāf al-mar'a*, in 1950 in which she emphasized the contributions of Arab and Muslim women in various social fields and condemned the male systematic neglect or derision of these contributions. Both these works form milestones of the Arab women's literature and feminist critique—although they have mostly fallen into oblivion in the Arab world and been ignored by Western observers.

Since the Prophet Muhammad, after the death of his first wife Khadija (Khadīja), lived together with a growing number[24] of wives, Muhammad's nuptial relationships form a central aspect of Muslim self-perception. They are also a crucial component of the often odd perception of the religion by non-Muslims[25]. Muhammad's *ḥaram* (»harem«) is the central place for the cultural production of gender difference in Islam. Sakakini's feminist re-reading is a courageous attack at the symbolic power of the Prophet's harem and the traditional way of producing the difference between men and women.

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21  OTTOSSON BITAR, I Can Do Nothing, p. 16 and also pp. 54f., 81, 118.

22  HADIDI/AL-QADI, Syria, pp. 79f.

23  Ibid., p. 78.

24  The figures vary between twelve and seventeen. Usually, Muslim biographers of Muhammad's life give a number of thirteen wives and concubines, although »there is some dispute as to the identity of the thirteen« (Barbara Freyer STOWASSER, Wives of the Prophet, in: Jane Dammen MCAULIFFE (ed.), Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān V, Leiden/Boston 2004, p. 506). Another point of contention concerns whether some of these women may be considered legitimate wives or only concubines. This question often concerns Maryia (Māriya) of Christian faith and Rayḥāna of Jewish origin (ibid., pp. 508f.).

25  See for example Derek HOPWOOD, Sexual Encounters in the Middle East. The British, the French and the Arabs, Reading 1999.

Therefore, it is necessary to state the obvious at the beginning: that being a feminist and a Muslima went together well for Widad Sakakini. Analytically, one could further stress, for the purpose of clarification, the seeming paradox that she was a secular feminist and a Muslima at the same time. As a novelist, she was primarily engaged in a secular social field, literature; using religious motifs to drive her feminist point home, she acted as a Muslima, yet she differed from writers who worked more directly within religious field, and who were concerned with the religious order of things and opposed to feminist interpretations of Islamic history. The dispute between Widad Sakakini and the Qur'anic scholar 'A'isha 'Abd al-Rahman ('Ā'isha 'Abd al-Raḥmān, pen name: Bint al-Shāti'), in which the main question was whether the Prophet's wives could be seen as emancipated role models for contemporary women, will be used to illuminate this difference. Contrary to the books of her conservative opponent 'A'isha 'Abd al-Rahman on the same subject, which were reprinted several times, Sakakini's ground-breaking take on the Prophet's wives is mostly unknown to the wider public.

The following study is also a story of adoption, adaptation, and authentication. I will trace how Widad Sakakini appropriated the practice of short story writing and the concept of feminism and translated them into her Arab contexts. Through her stories, biographies, and essays, she sought to root feminist concerns in her contemporary contexts as well as in the Arab past.

The following pages mainly aim to shed new light on four points:

(1) Widad Sakakini's feminist voice;
(2) her debate with 'A'isha 'Abd al-Rahman about the Prophet's wives;
(3) the question of how her literature reflects gender based social problems;
(4) the specific historical location and context of her work.

These four main concerns are further analysed through the prisms of the meaning of religion, secularism, and transnationalism in her life and work. The fact that these concerns are obviously in need of further clarification is an additional justification of the present study. A few more words about each of these points seem therefore in order before I explain the sequence of the chapters in the following book.

(1) With regard to the previously cited short story about the shaykh's wife, Ottosson Bitar concedes that Sakakini »accentuates in quite a bold way the anger of the woman against a way of life that has kept women in an ignorant state and has also kept women and men apart from one another«[26]. Yet, Ottosson Bitar also

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26 OTTOSSON BITAR, I Can Do Nothing, p. 118.

believes that Sakakini uses the misogynist motif of an uneducated woman who takes revenge on her husband by destroying his favorite toy and attacking the core of his existence. This undecided interpretation—of a »bold« as well as »misogynist« narrative—cannot do justice to Sakakini's approach. Especially in this short story, she tries to sketch how a woman can turn her practical knowledge—the awareness of masculine domination and her own lifelong complicity to it—into action and transgress to a state in which she criticizes the seemingly »natural« order of things and openly offers resistance. To my mind, there is nothing misogynist in this narrative. It can be read as a tale of empowerment. However, Ottosson Bitar even goes one step further and opines that Sakakini generally bought her way into the literary establishment by adopting misogynist themes and images[27]. My biographical sketch of Sakakini's life and my interpretation of her work will come to a different conclusion. I aim to show that she consistently fought against misogyny and was herself a subject of discrimination and stereotypes throughout her lifetime, mainly by male critics of her work. Sakakini's place in the literary field was certainly dependent on her consecration by the dominant male writers of her time, which had ambivalent effects on her role as a female writer. However, this ambivalent consecration followed the rules of the field, rewarding the new and daring over worn-out clichés, and offered her the possibility to speak up. I call her an »Arab feminist«, based on Badran's and Cooke's working definition for feminists: »Women who recognize injustice done to them because they are women and for no other reason, who reject such behavior without counting the cost, and who may then do something to put an end to such behavior and stake their claim to gender justice and rights act as feminists«[28]. How Sakakini envisioned female self-definition and self-empowerment will be further explained in this study and critically discussed in the final chapter against the background of recent debates in the field of women's studies. Maybe Ottosson Bitar's misreading of presumably misogynist images in Sakakini's work stems from the fact that Sakakini does not idealize women in her work; they rather appear in various roles and constellations. Sakakini accords women the right to appear in many different ways, just as she allows herself the privilege of depicting them as they appear to her. Sakakini's quest for a truthful representation of women and interpersonal relations gives credit to Catharine MacKinnon's worry that such a quest might entail the accusation of being condescending towards women, while it only aims to show the ways in which women are objects of condescension[29].

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27  Ibid., p. 200.

28  Margot Badran/Miriam Cooke (eds.), Opening the Gates. An Anthology of Arab Feminist Writing, Bloomington [2]2004, p. xv.

29  Quoted after Bourdieu, Männliche Herrschaft, p. 196.

(2) The debate between Widad Sakakini and ʿAʾisha ʿAbd al-Rahman has not been thoroughly studied, except for my own article in German[30], whose conclusions will be integrated into the much broader investigation in this chapter of my study. In Arabic, there is no study of this debate to the best of my knowledge. Ottosson Bitar has only a brief sketch of it without an interpretation[31], mainly because it falls outside of her concern for Sakakini's short stories. Yet, it is telling that she insinuates that the controversy can be explained by Sakakini's individual tendency to »rivalry«[32] and her »feminist misogyny«[33], thus assuming that Sakakini was overly critical of women who did not fulfil her literary standards. This view is certainly problematic since rivalry is not a personal trait, but a requirement every writer subscribes to and reproduces when s/he enters the literary field and takes part in its competitions. Sakakini was very clear about this point in her reflections on literary criticism, as will be shown. A controversy does not merely reflect individual tastes; rather, controversies are part of ongoing negotiations of central points, the structures, and the rules of the literary field as a whole, all of which can come under fire and are re-negotiated in such controversies. In this special case, the Prophet's harem is the central place for the symbolic production of gender differences in Islam. Narratives about female figures in early Islam serve as Muslim role models and have normative functions promoting the ideal woman[34]. Sakakini's re-reading of these early Muslim women is remarkable since she uses them to argue for an alternative emancipatory conception. She was not the first Arab feminist writer to make use of early Muslim women, but she did it in a conscious, systematic, and comprehensive manner. Her work not only challenged the traditional monopoly of mainly male and religious interpreters, the controversy also reflects that the changing gender relations of the twentieth century went hand in hand with a struggle over the interpretation of gender relations in the distant past. While Sakakini is once again accused of misogyny by Ottosson Bitar in this regard, studies that deal with Sakakini's opponent ʿAʾisha ʿAbd al-Rahman (Bint al-Shaṭiʾ) have tried to establish *her* pioneer character as well as *her* feminist—or at least female stance—without ever taking notice of Sakakini's interventions. For example, Hoda Elsadda tries to elucidate the emancipatory potential of cultural (anti-Western) resistance in

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30  Manfred Sing, Lässt sich der Harem Muḥammads feministisch deuten? Die Kontroverse zwischen Widād Sakākīnī und Bint aš-Šāṭiʾ, in: Rainer Brunner et al. (eds.), Deutscher Orientalistentag Freiburg, 24.–28. September 2007, URL: <http://menadoc.bibliothek.uni-halle.de/menalib/content/titleinfo/4090508> (07.04.2020).

31  Ottosson Bitar, I Can Do Nothing, pp. 62–65.

32  Ibid., p. 56.

33  Ibid., p. 55.

34  See for example Ruth Roded, Women in Islamic Biographical Collections. From Ibn Saʿd to Who's Who, Boulder 1994.

'Abd al-Rahman's Islamic discourse[35]. More sceptically, Ruth Roded states that 'Abd al-Rahman might have written »a more feminist biography of the Prophet than most of her male contemporaries«[36]. Yet, she has to concede that the literary voices of the Prophet's wives are rather used by her for »harmful ›feminine‹ purposes« than for »feminist principles«, thus »depicting them in almost misogynist stereotypes«[37]:

> The popularity of Bint al-Shati's stories of the women in the Prophet's life in the Arab world has an unfortunate outcome. The descriptions of the women's vices fit in with stereotypes and conventions that are all too prevalent in this society. The fact that these negative images of women are portrayed by a woman, and an Islamic scholar as well, provides added legitimacy to their validity[38].

Roded sums up that it would be left »for other Middle Eastern women to present overtly feminist versions of the life of the Prophet«[39], hinting at Assia Djebar's *Loin de Médine*[40] from 1991.

In a study of various modern biographies of Muhammad, Kecia Ali also takes no notice of Widad Sakakini. However, she once again treats 'Abd al-Rahman's works and sees them as a response not to Sakakini, but to a number of male authors[41] stating that

> her books were not full biographies of the women in his [Muhammad's] life. Instead she aimed to give another perspective on Muhammad through exploring his relationship with them. She was responding, too, to the work of her countrymen, staking a position on both Muhammad's nature and the appropriate way to engage with European literature about Muhammad[42].

It is worth noting that all of these studies confirm 'Abd al-Rahman's pioneering or representative role in women's writing on early Muslim women without ever taking

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35 Hoda Elsadda, Discourses on Women's Biographies and Cultural Identity. Twentieth-Century Representations of the Life of 'A'isha Bint Abi Bakr, in: Feminist Studies 27, 1 (2001), pp. 37–64.

36 Ruth Roded, Bint al-Shati's Wives of the Prophet. Feminist or Feminine?, in: British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies 33, 1 (2006), pp. 51–66, here: p. 65.

37 All quotes ibid., p. 65.

38 Ibid., p. 66.

39 Ibid.

40 On this work, also see eadem, Muslim Women Reclaim the Life-Story of the Prophet. 'A'isha 'Abd al-Raḥmān, Assia Djebar, and Nadia Yassine, in: The Muslim World 103, 3 (July 2013), pp. 334–346.

41 She names Muhammad Husayn Haykal, 'Abbas Mahmud al-'Aqqad, Taha Husain, Ahmad Amin, Tawfiq Hakim, and Naguib Mahfuz.

42 Kecia Ali, The Lives of Muhammad, Cambridge, MA 2014, p. 100.

notice of Sakakini[43]. Thus, the academic discourse has repeatedly discussed the same works, produced a canon, and failed to pinpoint the exact location of 'Abd al-Rahman's works while it is guilty, even if involuntarily, of silencing Sakakini. It is therefore finally time and more than justified to have a look at Sakakini's version of the story, not only because she is 'Abd al-Rahman's contemporary and even her predecessor with her own treatment of the Prophet's life, but also because she can be seen as an actual forerunner of a feminist take of early Islamic history.

(3) The following study is interested in the transformation of gender relations in Arab countries in the twentieth century. To explain the ruptures that occurred especially in the first decades of the last century, my analysis will take inspiration from Pierre Bourdieu's approach to explaining male domination throughout the centuries and across various societies. This approach takes a look at the rising cultural capital of women and, resulting from this, conflicting strategies on the marriage market pursued by parents, men, and women. Against this background, I follow the question of how feminist concerns and social problems are reflected in Widad Sakakini's short stories, novels, biographies, and essays. In many short stories, for example, various social obstacles that hinder creative women from leading a fulfilled life and finding an adequate husband are depicted. These problems do not so much reflect »the centrality of men«—pace Hadidi and al-Qadi—, but rather the situation of writing Arab women, who met with various prejudices and obstacles. Due to their growing cultural capital, educated and working women tried to lead a more self-determined life, but found it difficult to harmonize their desires with their social milieu and their partners. Thus, educated women were the bearers of social transformation and the victims of social mobility at the same time. Social barriers not only sharpened the feminists' consciousness of gender inequalities, they also formed a fundamental problem in the practical lives of feminist pioneers in the early twentieth century and afterwards. It is therefore interesting to see how much Sakakini sympathized with her prominent forerunner Mayy Ziyada (Mayy Ziyāda, 1886–1941), who was rumoured to have been mentally ill for quite some time. By writing a biography of Mayy Ziyada[44], Sakakini tried to do justice to her, do away with such prejudices, and put herself in the tradition of this pioneering intellectual. A recurrent motif in Sakakini's various plots of women's unfulfilled desires is their retreat from society. A model of this motif is the Muslim ascetic and mystic Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya (Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya, d. 801), who was famous for her unconditional love of God and to whom Sakakini also dedicated a monograph[45]. Additionally,

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43  Compare, for example, Stowasser, Wives of the Prophet, pp. 519–521.

44  Sakākīnī, Mayy Ziyāda, Cairo 1969.

45  Sakākīnī, al-'Āshiqa al-mutaṣawwifa, Cairo 1955.

Sakakini re-wrote the motif of platonic love (*al-ḥubb al-ʿudhrī*) in a feminist way so that the renunciation of the world transports a social criticism of patriarchal society. By using these motifs from Islamic tradition and Arabic literature in a new way, Sakakini found a genuine form of expression for contemporary concerns.

(4) The following study aims to shed light on the historical context of women's discourses on emancipation as well as on the transformation of these discourses. Sakakini's literary engagement ranges from the 1920s to the 1980s, from post-Ottoman and semi-colonial times to post-colonial times of national independence. She is part of a »middle cohort« that had to face the challenge of how the emancipatory promise of the pioneer generation of Arab feminists was to be fulfilled; at the same time, her controversy with ʿAbd al-Rahman already foreshadows the Islamist turn of intellectual debates. Thus, after the pioneer generation of Arab feminists from roughly 1880 to 1930, Sakakini can be counted among a second cohort of female authors bridging the era of pre- and post-independence in Arab countries (1930 to 1970). This middle phase is distinct from an emerging female Islamist discourse, which has become dominant since the 1970s. Elizabeth Thompson has described how the initial successes of women's movements in the Middle East met with gender anxiety, a political backlash and increasing social resistance by the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s[46]. In Lebanon and Syria, the political and legal forms of the gender relations were negotiated by the male—colonial, indigenous, and religious—elites. In this context, Thompson also describes how the space for feminist discussions became narrower from a certain point on. Arab feminist authors had to counter two prejudices at the same time: the notion that women were socially backward and the notion that they were culturally alienated (»Westernized«).

Sakakini's work tried to counter these prejudices by drawing on early Muslim women as role models of a self-determined life. By a creative re-reading of Arab-Islamic tradition, she tried to make a point for social progress, doing away with the accusation of backwardness as well as alienation.

## 2. Problem Statement, Theoretical Approach, and Contents Overview

This study is a reconstruction of Widad Sakakini's life and work that rests on scattered sources written by her or about her. Her literary work and her role as a pioneer of Arab women's literature have been acknowledged by various literary

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46 Elizabeth Thompson, Colonial Citizens. Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon, New York 2000.

critics both during her lifetime and after her death. Yet, her literary legacy is not easily accessible because it has been published in dozens of journals in several Arab countries over nearly seven decades and is often no longer available. The formats that she preferred—essays, portraits, short stories, and literary reviews—are characterized by their brevity and by their dependency on time and place. What she collected and published in her books, however, mostly bears no hint of the original time and place of publication and no explanation of the circumstances of its emergence. In contrast to current academic practice, she must have considered the art of footnoting as either unnecessary or useless. It borders on detective work to find out how some articles are related, what other texts or contexts they respond to and why they suddenly reappear; for ordinary readers, a large part of her work might appear eclectic or even worthless today. In several cases, she republished short stories and essays in different books, in a Syrian and Egyptian printing, sometimes with slight variations. Many reprints in her books, however, have been left unaltered, even decades after their first publication. As her books consist of texts written for various journals at different times, they are characterized by a repetitive and even tautological treatment of similar subjects, yet they often lack a clear thread or line of argumentation spanning the whole book. Due to their brevity, many articles give the impression of an erudite, yet superficial treatment of their subject-matter, often beginning with a sharp attack and a nuanced retreat in its middle parts. The reader is often left both astonished and unsatisfied. This is all the more surprising as the author grapples with serious issues—the interpretation of Arab-Islamic history, classical poetry and literature, the crisis of modern literature, the difficulty of women's progress, or the problems of higher education, to name but a few. Because of these features, Sakakini's work provides an interesting probe with which to analyze the conditions and difficulties of intellectual production in the Arab East during the twentieth century.

In this regard, the following study is strongly influenced by Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social fields, especially his theory of the literary field, and his understanding of symbolic power. It tries to apply Bourdieu's insights to the Arabic literary field and the Arab women's movement, while also trying to grasp the specificities and dynamics of the Arab conditions. This Bourdieu-inspired approach helps to analyze the case of Widad Sakakini by understanding her as a participant of the literary field and locating her in the social space.

Drawing on Bourdieu, the study of literature is generally of interest because it reflects social reality in a specific way. The struggles between dominant and minority groups inside the literary field involves the struggle for symbolic power and aims to change the power structures of the field. These struggles are connected to similar struggles for dominant positions in other social fields—Bourdieu speaks of »homology«; yet the various struggles are fought out according to the specific norms and rules of each field. The more fierce and fundamental a struggle is, the

more likely it is that the rules of the field will be put into question. The admission and the access of female writers to the literary field form such a fundamental conflict. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Islamic journals like *al-Manār* in Egypt offered writers a platform to discuss the question of whether women should learn to read and write at all or to what extent[47]. Although this question was decided by the time when Sakakini started publishing her texts, she still was part of a tiny minority of writing women. However, she was acknowledged as one of the few full-fledged female writers in her time by her male competitors in the field. As an accomplished writer with her own style excelling in short stories, novels, essays, and literary critique, she even exceeded the usual criteria for writers, who might be only talented in one or two genres. In this sense, the limited access of female writers to the literary field mirrors a broader social conflict as well as the debate about the obstacles and criteria for women's participation in other social fields.

A special trait of the Arabic literary field is its transnational extension. Transnationality can be defined in three different ways. It means that there were pan-Arab centers of publishing and printing, for example in Beirut and Cairo; with changing local conditions, political conflicts or censorship, authors could evade social pressures and print controversial texts in one of these centers. Transnationality also means that a place such as Cairo was strongly influenced by migrant journalists and intellectuals from other locations. The formation of the literary field in Egypt since the end of the nineteenth century, for example, was mainly due to writers stemming from a region that includes today's Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine (*bilād al-Shām*, »Greater Syria«). Finally, transnationality points at Middle Eastern and pan-Arab networks of writing, reading, and criticizing. Against this background, it comes as no surprise that Sakakini's life spanned Beirut, Damascus, and Cairo. Rather, her move to Cairo in 1944, leaving behind conflicts in Beirut and the narrowness of Damascus, opened new horizons for her and enabled her to pursue a literary career, as she later confessed. She was able to build up intimate connections to the vibrant literary scene and women's movement in Egypt and beyond.

It is worth mentioning in this context that writing was for Sakakini as well as for many male and female writers of her generation more of a vocation than a profession. Writing made no profit or, in other words, cultural capital could not easily be converted into economic capital. Many writers earned their living with other occupations; Sakakini, for example, taught girls and young women for many years, her husband worked as a diplomat or university lecturer. Writers often lacked the means to publish texts or the time to collect articles for a book publication.

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47 Werner ENDE, Sollen Frauen schreiben lernen? Eine innerislamische Debatte und ihre Widerspiegelung in Al-Manār, in: Dieter BELLMANN (ed.), Gedenkschrift Wolfgang Reuschel. Akten des III. Arabistischen Kolloquiums, Stuttgart 1994, pp. 49–57.

They were dependent on lucky circumstances to get their works published, as will be shown with the case of Sakakini. Because of this structural weakness, the emerging literary field was not well equipped against outside intervention. Many writers and especially women, who were completely underrepresented anyway, withdrew from writing when their works caused turmoil. The pressure on individual freedom of female authors was no exception. Rather, the struggle for the autonomy of the literary field generally is the result of the writers' collective effort, male or female. However, the female struggle for literary self-expression can be considered a central test case for the freedom of literature.

Bourdieu considers the foundation of an independent literary field to be a necessary condition for the emergence of a modern society, which is constituted by the separation of different social fields with their own rules. In its period of formation, the literary field constitutes itself by fighting off the intervention of political, religious, and social pressures and institutions. These foundational conflicts form the heroic struggles of the early days and they structure the field in the following decades. The experience and memory of these early struggles also help to fight against political and religious incursions in later times. As I have argued elsewhere[48], the Arabic literary field emerged through three foundational conflicts, concerning religious, political, and female autonomy. The famous cases of ʿAli ʿAbd al-Raziq (ʿAlī ʿAbd al-Rāziq, 1888–1966) and Taha Husayn (Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, 1889–1973) constituted struggles for intellectual freedom in the face of religious and political interventions[49]. The struggle for women's emancipation and gender equality represented the third foundational conflict, with proponents and opponents inside and outside the literary field. The transnational character of the Arabic literary field and the local rootedness of its players had ambivalent effects on these foundational conflicts and their later re-enactment. On the one hand, the transnationality of the field offered lines of escape for authors under pressure; on the other hand, local conflicts also had transnational repercussions. The struggle for women's rights was a universal, pan-Arab, and pan-Asian concern, fought by various individuals and organizations, which was also reflected by the conferences organized in various places in the first

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48  Manfred Sing, Progressiver Islam in Theorie und Praxis. Die interne »Kritik« am hegemonialen islamischen Diskurs durch den libanesischen Religionsgelehrten ʿAbdallāh al-ʿAlāyilī (1914–1996), Würzburg 2007; idem, Illiberal Metamorphoses of a Liberal Discourse. The Case of Syrian Intellectual Sami al-Kayyali (1898–1972), in: Christoph Schumann (ed.), Liberal Thought in the Eastern Mediterranean. Late 19th Century until the 1960s, Leiden 2008, pp. 293–322.

49  On Taha Husayn see Maria Elena Paniconi, Ḥusayn, Ṭāhā, in: Kate Fleet et al. (eds.), Encyclopaedia of Islam Three, URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_24415> (09.06.2020); Pierre Cachia, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn. His Place in the Egyptian Literary Renaissance, London 1956. On ʿAbd al-Raziq see Abdou Filali-Ansary, ʿAbd al-Rāziq, ʿAlī, in: Fleet et al. (eds.), Encyclopaedia of Islam Three; Hans Georg Ebert/Assem Hefny, Der Islam und die Grundlagen der Herrschaft. Übersetzung und Kommentar des Werkes von ʿAlī ʿAbd ar-Rāziq, Frankfurt a.M. 2010.

half of the twentieth century. In the Arabic literary field, the international character of this struggle was reflected in Arabic biographical collections that involved portraits of Arab and non-Arab, Muslim and non-Muslim women. Widad Sakakini participated in this struggle in person, but also by writing biographical sketches of women from past and present times as well as essays on the fair treatment of women.

Finally, it is worth noting that the power relations in the literary field are subject to transformations and the dynamics of change; yet, these changes also result in the reproduction of the field, according to Bourdieu. This paradox is especially visible in relation to feminist criticism. Although feminist critique aims to abolish gender asymmetry, it is soon incorporated into the literary field. Whereas feminist critique thus manages to help criticize and transform gender relations, gender asymmetry as such continues to exist under changed conditions. Social struggles in general tend to reproduce social hierarchies, even if they try to delegitimatize them. Against this background, the continuous existence of gender hierarchies and their simultaneous critique symbolize the relationality and the interaction of social forces. The continuity of gender asymmetries in spite of fundamental social ruptures is an example of the reproduction of social structures in spite of continuous transformations. The persistence of unjust structures cannot be blamed on feminist activists, who fight against them; it is a particularly drastic example that shows how difficult it is to *really* change social hierarchies and symbolic power, even if circumstances and social structures are continuously changing.

The life and work of Widad Sakakini are the lenses through which the following study approaches Arab gender relations. The transformation of these relations in the first half of the twentieth century influenced how women saw and interpreted past gender relations.

In the first chapter, I give an outline of Widad Sakakini's life in Beirut, Damascus, and Cairo, her literary career and her relation with her husband Zaki al-Mahasini. Central moments in her literary life were her victory in the short story competition of the Beirut journal *al-Makshūf* in 1937, the ensuing attacks on her by the editor of the same journal, and her move to Egypt in the early 1940s, where she achieved her literary breakthrough. Already in her first article, she argued against both exaggerated Westernization and stagnant traditionalism—a position that remained characteristic of her work throughout her life.

The second chapter treats her position as a woman in the literary field and the often ambivalent acknowledgment of her talents by men. I trace the literati who recognized her as novelist, essayist, and literary critic at first and quote what they had to say about her. I give an outline of the mutual relations between Sakakini and several other authors as well as the conflicts between her and prominent writers. In this regard, the focus is on her role as literary critic. One of the findings here is that she had relationships with self-proclaimed liberal and progressive authors as well as to conservative and Islamist writers. Here too, her intermediate position seems

to be due to her tendency to seek to harmonize opposing points of view, as far as possible. It is also possible to explain this harmonization by her attempt to portray women's emancipation as directed neither against national culture and politics nor against Islam. From here, I look at her definition of women's literature and show how she understood its specificities and tasks as well as its boundaries. I am further interested why and how she stylized herself as a successor to Mayy Ziyada. Finally, I highlight her relations to other women activists and writers from Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt.

The third chapter is dedicated to Sakakini's work as a short story writer and a novelist. I am not directly interested in a literary analysis, but try to find out how her work reflects social circumstances and transformations. My analysis draws on the difficulties that women encountered on the changing marriage market in twentieth century; against this background, it focusses on the reduction of women to bodies and the women's lines of escape from the male dominated patriarchal society. While the secondary literature has often ascribed man-hating, misogynist or illogical features to Sakakini's narrative work, I try to elaborate on the feminist standpoint in her defense. What I think she often shows in the inner monologues of her protagonists is the way women internalize and embody discriminatory structures through their education and environment.

Chapter four analyses the controversy between Widad Sakakini and Bint al-Shati'. I deal not only with the various stages of their debate, but also with its intertextual relations. Thematically, I focus on the opposing interpretations of Muhammad's polygyny in this controversy; Sakakini saw it as part of the political and religious mission of the Prophet, Bint al-Shati' related it to his being a man. After that, I analyse how both authors treat prominent female figures in their works. Here, I mainly focus on 'A'isha, the so-called favorite wife, and Fatima, the favorite daughter, as well as the relation between the both of them. 'A'isha's political involvement after Muhammad's death is generally considered controversial, whereas Fatima represents the Shiite standpoint. The characterization of these women in the sources as well as the traditional interpretation that these women represent the Sunni-Shi'a conflict in its earliest stage creates a certain challenge to an emancipatory re-reading. It is therefore interesting to analyse how Sakakini and Bint al-Shati' treat this challenge.

In the fifth chapter, I contextualize and analyse Sakakini's narrative of early Islam and its nationalist subtext. I am interested in how her text reflects the power structures between the various women in Muhammad's environment because these women represent certain tribal groups and their position in the Islamic community. Against this background, I show that Sakakini's stories about these women figures—wives and daughters of the Prophet—cannot avoid speaking of other subjects as well, such as conflicts of loyalty, tribalism, and the modern quest for Arab and Islamic unity. Against this background, I discuss the limits of a gendered historiography of early Islam through the lens of Sakakini's book. From here, I question

Margot Badran's call for a new »Islamic feminism«, arguing that it is neither totally new nor that it can avoid the pitfalls of earlier and »liberal« generations and that it is unclear whether it includes or excludes somebody like Widad Sakakini.

In the summaries of chapters III, IV and V, I critically discuss the state of research on the topics covered in these chapters. The sixth chapter constitutes a final and comprehensive evaluation of the previous discussions. I attempt to give a more nuanced interpretation of Sakakini's life and work through the lens of her mobility and her multiple belonging. Firstly, I show that her biography is a good example for a transnational life, its possibilities and risks. I argue that she cannot be reduced to one label or category—a »Syrian«, a »short story writer« or a »feminist«. Rather, the various forms of national, emotional, professional, and activist belonging found an expression in her intellectual mobility and her writing. Secondly, I try to show that secularity, feminism, and Islam go together well in her case. In this regard, I critically discuss the thesis of feminism as a secular movement that tends to exclude religion. I rather argue that women who understand and position themselves as secular or religious have an agency they use for different ends. In the case of Widad Sakakini, I hold that she belonged to the secular literary field as well as to the women's movement in a broad sense, but she also burned for Arab nationalism and Arab-Islamic history. The complexity of these simultaneous and changing forms of belonging should not allow us to reduce her and her work to easily knit categories such as liberal or conservative intellectual, secular or Islamic feminist with a Syrian or pan-Arab identity. Rather, her life trajectory defies such categorizations, not because I want to blur her image, but because I want to show its layers more clearly.

## 3. Technical Remarks

For the Arabic transcription, I follow in the main text a slightly modified version of the convention laid out by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*[50]. I largely renounce diacritics in proper names and give them only in brackets when a name is mentioned the first time. However, I retain *ʿayn* in general and *hamza* inside the word because they are meaningful. Thus, I write al-ʿAqqad instead of al-ʿAqqād, Aʾisha instead of ʿĀʾisha, Qurʾan instead of Qurʾān, and Muhammad instead of Muḥammad. By this way, I hope to make the text more accessible to readers, who are unfamiliar with Arabic and its transcription. For Arabic expressions and phrases as well as in the literature references in the footnotes and the bibliography,

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50 See the journal's official webpage, available online at: URL: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/jour-nals/ international-journal-of-middle-east-studies/information/author-resources/ijmes-translation-and-transliteration-guide>.

however, I apply all the diacritics for names and titles for reasons of clarity. For the names of persons and authors, I use a system of transliteration with *hamzat al-waṣl* (Zakī al-Maḥāsinī instead of Zakī l-Maḥāsinī); yet, I skip the *hamzat al-waṣl*, if the personal name is part of an Arabic expression or a whole sentence.

The bibliography of Widad Sakakini's works has become rather long due to the nature of her publications. I listed not only her books and journal articles separately, but also her book chapters. This has to do with the fact that many book chapters can be traced back to earlier published articles; because of that I came to the conviction that they can be seen as separate units. By listing the book chapters separately, I am able to indicate in the bibliography when and where a certain chapter has been printed previously in a literary journal. In this way, the bibliography is not only more representative of both the diversity and the different focuses of Sakakini's themes. It also more truly reflects the character of Sakakini's oeuvre, at the heart of which are not her approximately twenty books, but rather a number of separate or loosely connected texts that have been collected occasionally and then published in books.

Due to the wide range of older and newer translations of the Qur'an into English and their very different translation styles, I decided to use the online translation according to the website al-quran.info (URL: <https://al-quran.info/#home>). The independent project based in Copenhagen is easily accessible, seeks clarity in the translation, is committed to accuracy and fairness, offers a transliteration of the verses and differentiates between translation and comment[51].

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51  See The Quran. Online Translation and Commentary, URLs: <https://al-quran.info/pages/about> and <https://al-quran.info/pages/statement> (4 February 2021).

# I.  Biographical Sketch

In pictures, Widad Sakakini often appears with a scarf loosely bound or thrown over her head, leaving parts of her hair, face, and neck visible (see fig. 1). These photos indicate that Widad Sakakini belonged to a generation of women activists who had conquered the public spaces that had remained closed to women up to the beginning of the twentieth century. The seclusion of women's lives to the sphere of the *ḥaram*—the space of the house which male strangers could not enter—and the veiling of women who left this sphere had not wholly vanished, but they had become decreasing phenomena.

Since the early twentieth century, the debate about »veiling« (*ḥijāb*) and »unveiling« (*sufūr*) had become polarized between traditionalists—for whom the veil signaled modesty and honor—and modernists, for whom it stood for backwardness[1]. Egyptian activists Huda Shaʿrawi (Hudā Shaʿrāwī, 1879–1947) and Siza Nabarawi (Sīzā al-Nabarāwī, 1897–1985), upon returning from an international feminist congress in Rome, cast off their veils at Cairo Train Station in 1923—a »daring act« that »signalled the end of the harem system«[2], according to Margot Badran. Their act propelled the debate on »unveiling« in Arab and Muslim societies forward. Unveiling here refers primarily to the veil that covers the face. Most portraits of Shaʿrawi still show her with a headscarf. In the same process, in which veils became rarer in the public sphere, clothing, fashion, and make-up practices changed[3]. At the same time, headscarves turned into a fashion accessory expressing a kind of cultural reaffirmation. As was the case with Widad Sakakini, her accessory expressed a different understanding of both Islamic traditions and women's role in society. The presence of the scarf implicitly stated that women's emancipation and Islam could go together well; the affirmation of the Islamicity of women's emancipation made the presence of the scarf almost necessary. The scarf in Sakakini's portraits therefore

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1  Beth Baron, Unveiling in Early Twentieth Century Egypt. Practical and Symbolic Considerations, in: Middle Eastern Studies 25, 3 (1989), p. 370.

2  Margot Badran, Introduction, in: Huda Shaarawi, Harem Years. The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist, 1879–1924. Translated, edited and introduced by Margot Badran, New York 1987, p. 7. The »haremization« of Shaʿrawi's memories through Badran's translation and redaction has come under criticism, see Amal Amireh, Writing the Difference. Feminists' Invention of the »Arab Woman«, in: Bishnupriyah Gosh/Brinda Bose (eds.), Interventions. Feminist Dialogues on Third World Women's Literature and Film, New York/London 1996, pp. 185–211; Mohja Kahf, Packaging »Huda«. Shaʿrawi's Memoirs in the United States Reception Environment, in: Amal Amireh/Lisa Suhair Majaj (eds.), Going Global. The Transnational Reception of Third World Women Writers, New York/London 2000, pp. 148–172.

3  See Baron, Unveiling, pp. 372–375.

reflects not only an opening, but also a cultural reaffirmation and, implicitly, a sense of uncertainty about the image of women that had taken hold of Arab societies by the 1930s.

Women saw themselves confronted with contradictory demands that suggested that they should be good mothers, housewives, and modern individuals with respect for traditional and religious values at the same time. In the inaugural editorial of her journal *al-Marʾa* (*The Woman*), Nadima al-Munqari (Nadīma al-Munqārī, 1904–1992) wrote in 1930 that while Muslim women were in a state of backwardness most of the people who had studied their conditions were men, not women. Some of them thought that women should remain in their *fiṭra ṭabīʿiyya*, »natural condition«, without education, while others believed men and women should be equal in all things: »The Muslim women stands before these debates baffled and confused, not knowing which path to take«.[4] She ended her editorial by quoting the Qurʾan and pleading for God's »help, lead us the straight path«[5].

In this sense—and the portrait photos symbolize this ambivalence—, Sakakini lived a generation that, on the one hand, enjoyed emancipatory successes since the turn of the century. On the other hand, it had to deal with a cultural re-affirmation in the context of the anti-colonial struggle as well as with a neo-patriarchal counter-reaction, whose emergence took shape by the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s[6].

On the following pages, I briefly outline the social context and developments that made women's participation in the press and in the literary field more generally possible. Against this background, I sketch the most important events in Sakakini's life.

## 1.    Historical Context

Since the end of the nineteenth century, women's journals and literary salons had offered women the opportunity to participate in public debates without wholly entering the public sphere[7]. The pioneering female writer Zaynab Fawwaz (Zaynab

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4  Nadīma AL-MUNQĀRĪ, al-Kalima al-ūlā, in: al-Marʾa 1 (31 October 1930), p. 4; also quoted by THOMPSON, Colonial Citizens, p. 137.

5  AL-MUNQĀRĪ, al-Kalima al-ūlā, p. 4; an allusion to Qurʾanic verse 1:6.

6  For the background see THOMPSON, Colonial Citizens, pp. 113–154; Joseph T. ZEIDAN, Arab Women Novelists. The Formative Years and Beyond, New York 1995, pp. 89f.

7  Ellen L. FLEISCHMANN, The Other »Awakening«. The Emergence of Women's Movements in the Modern Middle East, 1900–1940, in: Margaret L. MERIWETHER/Judith E. TUCKER (eds.), Social History of Women and Gender in the Modern Middle East, Boulder 1999, pp. 89–139; Beth BARON, The Women's Awakening in Egypt. Culture, Society and the Press, New Haven/London 1994, pp. 13–57;

Fawwāz, 1860–1914), for example, founded a literary salon in which she actively took part without physically sharing the same room with the male participants or behind a curtail; her husband acted as a messenger between her and the other men in the salon[8]. The situation changed after World War I with the foundation of women's organizations that started to organize lectures for women. These organizations also mobilized women for anti-colonial and nationalist demonstrations and held transnational women's conferences, such as the first regional Arab women's conference in Damascus in 1930[9].

While women writers often limited themselves to »women's themes« such as poetry, education, and fashion in the press of the early twentieth century, the situation changed fundamentally when Arab women, such as Mayy Ziyada (Mayy Ziyāda, 1886–1941) in Cairo and Mary 'Ajami (Mary 'Ajamī, 1888–1969) in Damascus, opened literary salons before and after World War I, and more women issued women's journals[10]. Although more and more women started to speak out in matters beyond the classical »women's themes«, Widad Sakakini and 'A'isha 'Abd al-Rahman belonged, between the two wars, to a small group of a handful of women, who were acknowledged as accomplished female authors in the literature business and who were able to regularly publish articles in newspapers and journals.

Although the members of the Arabic literary field discussed the negligible presence of women in its own ranks, it did so not to address the subject of male domination, but rather of the low rates of educational attainment among girls and women—thus, it misattributed the limited presence of women to a different social problem. Until World War I, Arab intellectuals and religious scholars had still discussed whether women should learn to read and write at all[11]. The classical

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Marilyn Booth, Woman in Islam. Men and the »Women's Press« in Turn-of-the-20th-Century Egypt, in: International Journal of Middle East Studies 33, 2 (2001), pp. 171–201.

8  Fawwaz was a Lebanese of Shiite background. Since about 1891, she started publishing her various works in Egypt, where she mostly lived. She opened her literary salon in the Ḥawrān region during an intermezzo in Syria in 1895 due to a short-lived marriage, see Susanne Bräckelmann, »Wir sind die Hälfte der Welt!« Zaynab Fawwāz (1860–1914) und Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif (1886–1918) – zwei Publizistinnen der frühen ägyptischen Frauenbewegung, Würzburg 2004, pp. 42–44; see also eadem, Novelist, Biographer, Essayist. Zaynab Fawwāz (1860–1914) – Pioneer of Female Emancipation in the Egyptian Press, in: Horst Unbehaun (ed.), The Middle East Press as a Forum for Literature, Frankfurt a.M. 2004, pp. 151–165; Zeidan, Arab Women Novelists, pp. 65–67.

9  Zeidan, Arab Women Novelists, pp. 41–91; for Lebanon and Syria, see Thompson, Colonial Citizens, pp. 94–100. For women's conferences, see Charlotte Weber, Between Nationalism and Feminism. The Eastern Women's Congresses of 1930 and 1932, in: Journal of Middle East Women's Studies 4, 1 (2008), pp. 83–106.

10  For the journals and the salons, see Zeidan, Arab Women Novelists, pp. 46–49, 50–55, and 78–80; for Mayy Ziyada see Antje Ziegler, Al-Ḥaraka Baraka! The Late Rediscovery of Mayy Ziyāda's Works, in: Die Welt des Islams 39, 1 (1999), pp. 103–115.

11  Ende, Sollen Frauen schreiben lernen?, pp. 49–57.

counter-argument was that the mastery of writing would increase the dangers that women posed to men and the social order. Although these debates had waned by the 1920s, promoters of women's rights also understood their support of female writers as a kind of social service. Female writing was not primarily a contribution to literature as such, but a typically female »service for the other«, in this case for other (still uneducated) women[12]. »Women could not legitimize writing simply as an act of individual artistic expression,« as Beth Baron has argued, »Writing had to be presented as a service to others and linked to larger causes, such as the progress of women«[13], the struggle for independence or educating the nation. The need for social reform was the justification for the acceptance of female literary voices. That female literary voices should contribute to changing the dominant form of literature or the male social order was not the point of the debate.

To make matters worse, the first emancipatory successes were followed by a conservative backlash at the end of the 1920s. The growing gender anxiety in these years was encapsulated in the turmoil caused by the Lebanese writer Nazira Zayn al-Din (Naẓīra Zayn al-Dīn, 1908–1976) with her two books on unveiling and the equality of men and women, *al-Sufūr wa-l-ḥijāb* (*Unveiling and Veiling*, 1928) and *al-Fatāt wa-l-shuyūkh* (*The Girl and the Shaykhs*, 1929)[14]. In her first book, she even claimed partial superiority of women over men because men were but able to work physically hard, while God had created women, who cared for their offspring, with higher moral and mental powers[15]. She proved her position not only by examples from the animal kingdom, but also by Qurʾanic verses and statements of religious scholars; finally, she even asked the French High Commissioner in an open letter to liberate Muslim women from the dark abyss of slavery[16]. Even a Muslim reformer such as Mustafa al-Ghalayini (Muṣṭafā al-Ghalāyīnī, 1886–1944),

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12  Baron, The Women's Awakening in Egypt, pp. 40f.; Ottosson Bitar, I Can Do Nothing, pp. 50–53.

13  Baron, The Women's Awakening in Egypt, p. 40.

14  Stemming from a Druze family, she was the daughter of the first president of the Lebanese High Court of Appeals, Saʿīd Zayn al-Dīn. For more on her, see: Nādiyā al-Jardī Nuwayḥiḍ, Nisāʾ min bilādī, Beirut 1986, pp. 94–99; Zeidan, Arab Women Novelists, pp. 26–29; Thompson, Colonial Citizens, pp. 127–140; Nāzik Sābā Yārid, Naẓīra Zayn al-Dīn (1908–1976) bayna l-taḥaddī wa-l-iltizām, in: Tajammuʿ al-Bāḥithāt al-Lubnāniyyāt (Jīn Saʿīd al-Maqdisī et al.) (eds.), al-Nisāʾ al-ʿarabiyyāt fī l-ʿishrīnāt. Ḥuḍūran wa-huwiyyatan, Beirut 2001, pp. 243–261; Nazik Saba Yared, Secularism and the Arab World (1850–1939), London 2002, pp. 69–90 passim; Nikki R. Keddie, Women in the Middle East. Past and Present, Princeton/Oxford 2007, pp. 96f.; ʿĀida al-Jawharī, Ramziyyat al-ḥijāb. Mafāhīm wa-dalālāt, Beirut 2007; Miriam Cooke, Nazira Zeineddine. A Pioneer of Islamic Feminism, Oxford 2010.

15  The reason for her first work was that religious scholars and conservative politicians in Damascus had demanded that the government prohibit women to leave the house without a veil (*niqāb*) covering their faces according to Yārid, Naẓīra Zayn al-Dīn, p. 244.

16  Thompson, Colonial Citizens, p. 20.

President of the Islamic Council (al-Majlis al-Islāmī) in Beirut and a promoter of women's education, saw himself induced to distance himself from these positions because Nazira Zayn al-Din had quoted some of his statements as proofs of her position[17]. Ghalayini not only rejected her ideas, but also stated that Zayn al-Din had not written the book on her own, but with the help—or even at the order—of missionaries and atheists[18]. In turn, Zayn al-Din fiercely attacked Ghalayini in her second book[19]. In the course of the controversial debate, several religious scholars felt obliged to stress that unveiling and gender equality were not questions of personal choice, but of religion.

The debate was part of growing opposition to the movement for women's rights in the Middle East in this period[20]. The Egyptian Electoral Law (1924), as well as the Lebanese and Syrian constitutions, drafted in 1926 and 1930 respectively, included no provisions for female suffrage. When 27 Lebanese and Syrian women groups held their first conference in April 1928, shortly after Zayn al-Din's first book appeared, they adopted a cautious agenda[21], embraced »patriotic motherhood«[22], and were eager to show that women's rights were not opposed to religious traditions. The atmosphere around the first »Eastern Women's Congress« in Damascus in 1930 was hostile, as an observer of the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship—the leading international organization demanding female suffrage, founded in 1904—remarked. The opening session of the Congress was held in a university hall »before an audience composed primarily of men«[23]. Demands for unveiling and women's vote were not part of the resolutions adopted by the congress. The reasons for this backpedaling are not clear; they might be attributed to a growing opposition to women's rights, but also to the feminist leaders' shifting strategy. They

17 See Naẓīra Zayn al-Dīn, al-Marʾa aṣlaḥ min al-rajul fī l-fiṭra ʿaqlan, in: Muḥammad Kāmil al-Khaṭīb (ed.), Qaḍiyat al-marʾa, 3 volumes, Damascus 1999, vol. 1, pp. 167 and 173.

18 Muṣṭafā al-Ghalāyīnī, Naẓarāt fī l-kitāb al-Sufūr wa-l-ḥijāb mansūba ilā l-Ānisa Naẓira Zayn al-Dīn, Beirut 1928; idem, Fī kalām ʿalā ʿaql al-rajul wa-ʿaql al-marʾa (1928), in: Muḥammad Kāmil al-Khaṭīb (ed.), Qaḍiyat al-marʾa, 3 volumes, Damascus 1999, vol. 1, pp. 199–208; al-Jawharī, Ramziyyat al-ḥijāb, p. 260; Badran/Cooke (eds.), Opening the Gates, pp. 270f.

19 Zeidan, Arab Women Novelists, p. 29; Thompson, Colonial Citizens, pp. 134–136; Badran/Cooke (eds.), Opening the Gates, pp. 277f.

20 Thompson, Colonial Citizens, pp. 117–126.

21 See ibid., p. 141.

22 Weber, Between Nationalism and Feminism, pp. 86f.

23 Ibid., p. 87. The observer was the Greek women's rights activist and pianist Avra Theodoropoulou (1880–1964). See also, Manfred Sing, Damascus/Dimaschq, in: Joachim Berger et al. (eds.), On Site, in Time. Negotiating Differences in Europe, Mainz 2018/2016, URL: <https://en.ieg-differences.eu/on-site-in-time/manfred-sing-damascus/>.

may have wanted to attract a larger following by adopting a maternalistic ideology or by pragmatically accommodating the emerging nationalist atmosphere[24].

Sakakini's early justifications for girl's education are set against this background. In a series of articles in the Lebanese journal *al-ʿIrfān*, published between December 1930 and December 1932[25], she underlined that girls had the same right to education as boys because education made out of »minor girls of today righteous women of tomorrow«[26]. »Every mother should remember that her children are created for an epoch different than her own; so, if they were not shaped by the spirit of their age, they would live like blind people in a world of light«[27]. Most of these articles were collected in her first volume *al-Khaṭarāt* (*Ideas*, 1932), in which seven essays out of 37 directly addressed the need of female education, which she termed as a general contribution to »the improvement of women« (*Iṣlāḥ al-marʾa*)[28]; several other essays touched on the issue indirectly.

That there was a backlash against women's demands for equality is reflected in the emergence of ambivalent images of women in the press, which ranged from depictions of women as »backward« to depictions of women as »westernized«—both motifs had a negative subtext. The problem was that male Arab elites adopted the colonialist discourse on education, liberalism, and progress, but adapted it to local gender norms in a colonial situation, in which the education of good mothers was considered necessary for the preservation of the cultural—Arab or Muslim—identity[29]. Female authors thus faced a double challenge. They had to prove that they could remain true Arabs/Muslims while simultaneously becoming modern, leaving the socially backward or culturally alien in society behind them. »Women, to enter modernity, have to overcome masculinist symbolic representations of the female as antithetical to the modern«[30], as Marilyn Booth succinctly states.

Male authors pointed at the immoral consequences of »women's liberation« (*taḥrīr al-marʾa*), a term closely connected to Shayhk Qasim Amin's (Qāsim Amīn,

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24  WEBER, Between Nationalism and Feminism, pp. 86f.

25  Widād SAKĀKĪNĪ, Tarbiyat al-banat, in: al-ʿIrfān 20, 5 (December 1930), pp. 585–587; eadem, al-Aṭfāl wa-l-usra, in: al-ʿIrfān 21, 2 (February 1931), pp. 181–183; eadem, al-Tarbiya wa-atharuhā fī ḥayāt al-umma, in: al-ʿIrfān 21, 4/5 (April 1931), pp. 446–448; eadem, Mahammat al-madrasa, in: al-ʿIrfān 22, 2 (July 1931), pp. 347–348; eadem, Mustaqbal al-fatāt, in: al-ʿIrfān 22, 5 (December 1932), pp. 360f.

26  SAKĀKĪNĪ, Mustaqbal al-fatāt, p. 361.

27  Ibid.

28  Eadem, Iṣlāḥ al-marʾa, in: Eadem, al-Khaṭarāt, pp. 54–58.

29  On the educational discourse at the time, see: Omnia SHAKRY, Schooled Mothers and Structured Play. Child Rearing in Turn-of-the-Century Egypt, in: Lila ABU-LUGHOD (ed.), Remaking Women. Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East, Princeton 1998, pp. 126–170.

30  Marilyn BOOTH, May Her Likes Be Multiplied. Biography and Gender Politics in Egypt, Berkeley 2001, p. 285.

1863–1908) book of the same name from 1899[31]. In memory of the 35th anniversary of Amin's death, ʿAbbas Mahmud al-ʿAqqad (ʿAbbās Maḥmūd al-ʿAqqād, 1889–1964) felt obliged to point out that Qasim Amin's original call for women's liberation had nothing to do with the vices that had spread since. He attributed it to »the contagion of the society« (*ʿadwā l-mujtamaʿ*)[32] that what was once forbidden, then practiced in secret, had become public—like drinking, making love, and marrying without parental consent[33].

To these ambivalent images of contemporary Arab women, Orientalist and Muslim historiography added further polarized images of *historical* Arab women. Either Arab women in history were neglected or seen as oppressed beings; or their relatively high social position in comparison to other regions, cultures or religions was affirmed in an apologetic manner[34].

The emerging women's organizations—in Egypt since the mid-1920s and in Lebanon and Syria since the late 1920s—as well as Arab women's journals tried to counter such polarized images of Arab women, for example by drawing on prominent female figures in history, *shāhirāt al-nisāʾ*. Since the end of the nineteenth century, such portraits of prominent women fulfilled two aims. They underlined the, in principle, relatively high and respected position of Arab women in history, while offering a critique of prevailing forms of discrimination. These portraits of Muslim or Arab women were often accompanied by female examples from other cultures, often from the West[35]. In this way, the pioneers Maryam al-Nahhas (Maryam al-Naḥḥās, d. 1888) and Zaynab Fawwaz compiled biographical women's lexicons[36]. In the growing numbers of women's journals in the early twentieth century, regular columns on famous women had a firm place. The problem for women writers was, however, that they »remained mostly on the edges of the literary stage, where they developed the women's press«[37].

Sakakini's works—her biographies on Arab women pioneers as well her accounts of women in early Islam—were also tied in this tradition thematically. At the same time, she structurally broke away from this tradition, since she strictly avoided

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31  On Amin, see Hoda Elsadda, Amīn, Qāsim, in: Fleet et al. (eds.), Encyclopaedia of Islam Three.

32  ʿAbbās Maḥmūd al-ʿAqqād, Qāsim Amīn, in: al-Risāla 513 (1943), p. 342. On al-ʿAqqad as an influential and frank literary critic, who tended to hold provocative and conservative views, see R. Allen, al-ʿAḵḵād, in: P. Bearman et al. (eds.), Encyclopaedia of Islam [= EI²] XII, pp. 57f.

33  al-ʿAqqād, Qāsim Amīn, p. 343.

34  See, for example, Roded, Women in Islamic Biographical Collections; Gavin Hambly, Introduction, in: Idem (ed.), Women in the Medieval Islamic World. Power, Patronage, and Piety, Basingstoke 1998, pp. 3–27.

35  For a striking example see Marilyn Booth, The Egyptian Lives of Jeanne d'Arc, in: Lila Abu-Lughod (ed.), Remaking Women. Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East, Princeton 1998, pp. 171–211.

36  Zaydān, Maṣādir al-adab al-nisāʾī, pp. 571 and 687; Bräckelmann, Zaynab Fawwāz, pp. 153f.

37  Baron, The Women's Awakening in Egypt, p. 57.

publishing in women's magazines; she fled the cage of women's press that tied women's writing to literary marginality. To be acknowledged as a serious writer, Sakakini only wrote for literary and cultural journals, i.e. for a predominantly male audience and she aimed to achieve this goal by writing about historical and fictitious female figures, thus publicly mirroring the trials and tribulations of women in Arab societies.

## 2.   The Lifelines of Widad Sakakini
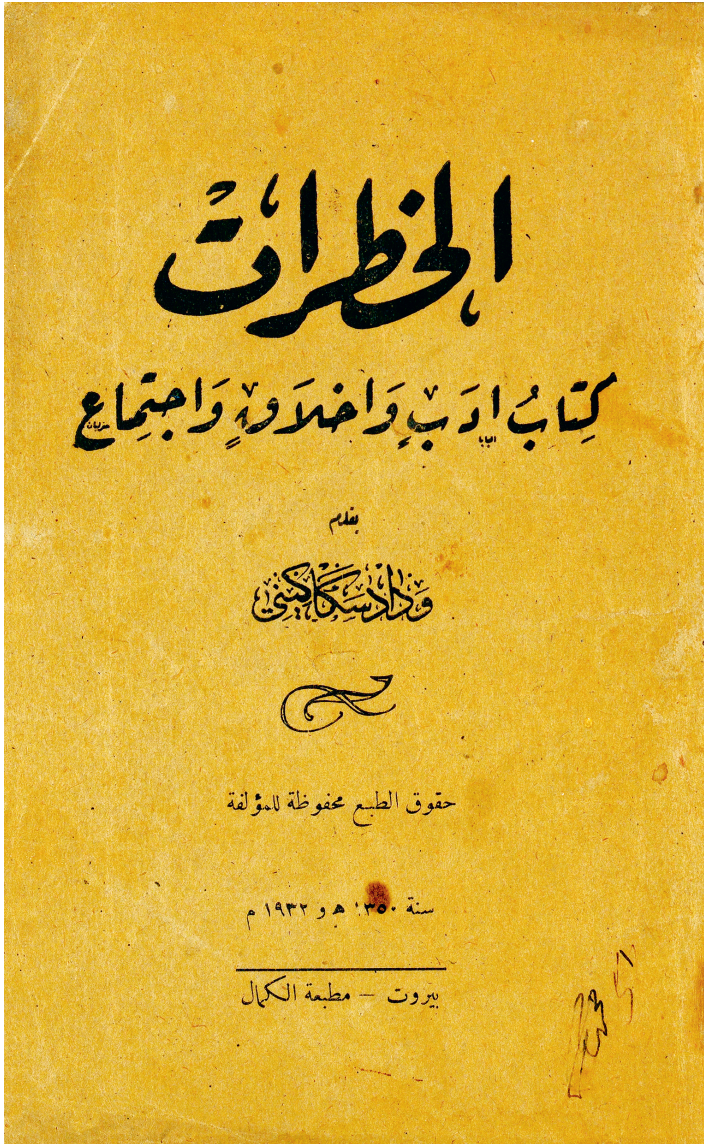


Fig. 2   Book cover: Widad Sakakini's first collection of essays *al-Khaṭarāt*
(*Thoughts*), published in Beirut in 1932.
Source: Printing permission by Samaʾ al-Mahasini.

Widad Sakakini was a prolific writer, who excelled in various literary genres. She not only invented fictitious characters, but also wrote biographical portraits, and, in her essays and journalistic articles, she articulated social as well as literary criticism. Neither her vocation as a writer nor her literary career were handed to her; her starting conditions were anything but rosy. When she showed the gifts of a talented writer, she surely found supporters and could take her first steps as an author. Yet, when she won a prestigious literary competition sponsored by the journal *al-Makshūf* in Beirut in 1936, still in her early twenties, she soon found herself fiercely attacked by critics. With a strong wind blowing in her face, she almost lost her confidence and abstained from publishing, according to her own account. Only when she moved with her husband to Egypt and built relations with feminist and literary circles there, was she encouraged to publish her first collections of shorts stories in 1944. She was then acknowledged as an accomplished writer by many colleagues, enjoyed the dubious fame of being a relentless critic, and entered her most creative phase in the 1950s and 1960s. When she moved to Syria with her husband in the final phase of her life, she did not feel sufficiently appreciated by the younger generation of writers or by her new (her husband's) home country Syria. Yet, a collection of new (Syrian) short stories could appear with the support of the Ittiḥād al-Kuttāb al-ʿArab, the Arab Writers' Association in Damascus, in 1978. After her husband's death in 1972, Sakakini gradually withdrew from public life, indulging in a certain kind of bitterness, as it were. This capsule version of her biography prepares us to examine various episodes in her life more closely[38].

Widad Sakakini's date of birth cannot be precisely determined. While most biographers mention 1913 as the year of her birth, she herself preferred 1915[39]. Born in Sidon (Ṣaydā) in the south of today's Lebanon, she was unable to determine how she was related to the well-known Palestinian family of the same name and to the pioneer of Arab nationalism, pedagogy, and literature Khalil Sakakini (Khalīl Sakākīnī, 1878–1853), of Greek-Orthodox background[40]. Her father Muhammad

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38  For biographical details about her life, see Sāmī AL-KAYYĀLĪ, Widād Sakākīnī, in: Idem, al-Adab al-ʿarabī l-muʿāṣir fī Sūriyya, Cairo 1968, pp. 410–414; SHUʿAYB, Widād Sakākīnī, pp. 1–19; OT- TOSSON BITAR, I Can Do Nothing, pp. 30–46; YŪSUF/KAḤḤĀLA, Widād Sakākīnī, pp. 106–108; Nāzik Sābā YĀRID/Nuhā BAIYŪMĪ, al-Kātibāt al-lubnāniyyāt. Bībliyūghrāfiyā 1850–1950, Beirut 2000, pp. 74–77; CAMPBELL, Widād al-Sakākīnī, pp. 736–738; ZAYDĀN, Maṣādir al-adab al-nisāī, pp. 350–353. A biography with erroneous details can be found in Sami MOUBAYED, Steel & Silk. Men and Women Who Shaped Syria 1900–2000, Seattle 2006, pp. 569–570.

39  Campbell, for example, gives the date 1913, but re-reprints Sakakini's self-portrayal, which mentions 1915 as the date of birth, see CAMPBELL, Widād al-Sakākīnī, p. 736. OTTOSSON BITAR, I Can Do Nothing, p. 30, writes that Sakakini claimed that her parents made her two years older so that she could support the family after her father's bankruptcy.

40  Widād SAKĀKĪNĪ, Khalīl al-Sakākīnī. Rāʾid mujaddid fī l-adab al-ʿarabī l-muʿāṣir 1878–1953, in: Eadem, Wujūh ʿarabiyya, pp. 30f.

Sakakini described himself as »Lebanese« and traced his descent back to Egyptian ancestors[41].

During her childhood, her father was struck by a financial catastrophe, which, in her words, »disconcerted him«[42]. When he came back to his senses, he sold his agricultural holding, parts of his landed property, and his villa, and left his family. As Widad's mother suddenly found herself without money, house, and husband, she decided to return to her family in Beirut, where they could not enjoy any kind of comfort or wealth. At about this time, Widad's elder sister died, which aggravated the familial suffering and caused Widad to fall into a depression[43].

When she joined one of the girls' schools of the Islamic Society of Benevolent Intentions (Maqāṣid), she soon showed that she was a gifted writer. Her teacher in Arabic, shaykh Mustafa al-Barudi (Muṣṭafā Wahba al-Bārūdī) recommended that she memorize the Qurʾan saying: »It is the lexicon of the poor, and we, my little daughter, belong to the poor«[44]. At the age of 14, she started to teach other girls because of her gifts and the financial difficulties of her family[45]. After finishing school, she became a teacher at one of the girls' schools of the Maqāṣid, called al-Zahrāʾ; she also worked in the administration of the Maʿhad al-ʿĀlī li-l-Banāt (Higher Institute for Girls) in Beirut[46].

An account of her difficult early years can be extracted from the autobiographical sketch *Shaqīqat nafsī*[47] (*My Soul Sister*) from her first collection of short stories *Marāyā l-nās* (*Mirrors of the People*, 1944, see fig. 10), in which Sakakini talks about

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41  Ibid., p. 30.

42  Eadem, Widād Sakākīnī. Sābiqa dāʾiba, in: Eadem, Sābiqāt al-ʿaṣr, p. 168. The historical background was the famine that raged in Greater Syria during World War I, see Linda Schatkowski Schilcher, The Famine of 1915–1918 in Greater Syria, in: John P. Spagnolo (ed.), Problems of the Modern Middle East in Historical Perspective. Essays in Honour of Albert Hourani, Reading 1992, pp. 229–258; Melanie S. Tanielian, The Charity of War. Famine, Humanitarian Aid, and World War I in the Middle East, Redwood City 2017.

43  Shuʿayb, Widād Sakākīnī, p. 5.

44  Raghdāʾ Mārdīnī, al-Adība Widād Sakākīnī rāʾidat al-qiṣṣa al-qaṣīra fī Sūriyya. al-Adab al-nisāʾī huwa llādhī yuʿabbiru ʿan al-ḥayāt al-khāṣṣa li-l-marʾa. Hājamtu l-ʿAqqād wa-l-Ḥakīm li-annahumā sakhirā min al-marʾa, in: Tishrīn (Damascus) 02.06.1990. In an article, she traced Egyptians' excellence in poetry and Qurʾanic commentary to their permanent reading of the Qurʾan in contrast to their Syrian counterparts, see Widād Sakākīnī, Thaqāfat al-Qurʾān, in: al-Thaqāfa 616 (1950), pp. 10f.

45  Author's interview with Widad's daughter Samāʾ al-Maḥāsinī, 23 August 2003.

46  See Samāʾ Maḥāsinī, Widād Sakākīnī. Rāʾida min rawwād al-adab al-ʿarabī l-muʿāṣir, n.p., ca. 1995; Fattūḥ, Widād Sakākīnī (1994), p. 239; Yārid/Baiyūmī, al-Kātibāt al-lubnāniyyāt, p. 74; Wadīʿ Filasṭīn, Widād Sakākīnī fī ḥayātihā wa-āthārihā, in: Banāt al-Ajyāl 13 (1995), pp. 86f.

47  Widād Sakākīnī, Shaqīqat nafsī, in: Eadem, Marāyā l-nās, pp. 127–135.

the life of an alter ego called Wiʾām[48]. Among other things, Sakakini describes here that Wiʾām works hard as a teacher throughout the day, immerses herself in books by night, hurries to pray by dawn, and then returns to her private study before the time for school lessons has come. In these pages, Sakakini compares immersion in books to a mystical experience. »When she was offered the opportunity to be all alone by night, she sank like the Sufis in their *zawāyā*, as the spirit carried her away to the heavens. And here, at the crest of thought, she found the direction of her life.«[49]

While she was an autodidact as a writer, Shaykh Mustafa al-Ghalayini—mentioned above as one of the critics of Naẓira Zayn al-Dīn in 1928—is often presented as the »discoverer« or supporter of her literary talents[50]. In 1927, she began sending articles to newspapers and journals. Probably her first published article appeared in the modernist Shīʿī journal *al-ʿIrfān* (Sidon, published from 1909 to 1996) under the title *Taṭawwur al-marʾa* (*Women's Development*), in 1927[51]. The article already anticipates many aspects of her thought that she would discuss later in more detail. She wrote that Arab women already held a relatively high position before Islam, which explained their fast progress in the first centuries of Islam up to the sixth century after the *hijra* (622 CE), when they preserved their Arabism (*ʿurūba*) and nationalism (*qawmiyya*). After that, a steady decline (*inḥiṭāṭ*) under non-Arab rule began, and women became »prisoners of their house, who did not see the light of free life and knew nothing of the things of the world«[52]. Men would have to correct their mistake and understand that the decline of women was the reason

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48  The form Wiʾām (meaning »harmony«) is built according to Widād (»love«). Her close friend Wadīʿ Filasṭīn has no doubts that she described herself on these pages, see Filasṭīn, Widād Sakākīnī, pp. 96–98.

49  Sakākīnī, Shaqīqat nafsī, p. 131.

50  Yūsuf/Kaḥḥāla, Widād Sakākīnī, p. 106; Zaydān, Maṣādir al-adab al-nisāʾī, pp. 350f.; Yārid/ Baiyūmī, al-Kātibāt al-lubnāniyyāt, p. 74.

51  Widād Sakākīnī, Taṭawwur al-marʾa, in: al-ʿIrfān 14, 4 (December 1927), pp. 399–402. She kept on writing for *al-ʿIrfān* in the following years, publishing 24 contributions until the 1960s, some of them in the 1930s, most of them in 1950s.

52  Ibid., p. 401. It is important to note the racial and social subtext with its anti-Turkish and possibly anti-ʿAbbasid slant here. The underlying idea is that the equality between the sexes among the Arabs was given as long as they married among each other. Since already the ʿAbbasid caliphs (CE 750–1258) started to father their offspring with enslaved women, the negative attribution to the mixing of ethnicities is connected to the slave status of women. Sakakini's argument here is mainly aimed against Turkish or Persian rulers, visible in the fact of how she dates the beginning of the decline. Yet, it can also be taken as an argument against the Abbasids, as is the case with admirers of the Umayyads (661–750) among modern Arab authors. Against this background, Sakakini's later writing about early Muslim women can also be understood as a treatment of the »pure« Arab women and their »equal« relation to men. About the notion of »decline« see Manfred Sing, The Decline of Islam and the Rise of Inḥiṭāṭ. The Discrete Charm of Decadence in 19th and 20th Century Language

for the decline of the entire *umma* (»Muslim community«), which could only be fought if knowledge was spread in all social classes and women regained their rights. The civilizational and cultural differences between nations could be measured by the situation of women. Finally, she directly criticized the state of affairs in Syria, writing that the Egyptian woman was ahead of her sister in Syria, but to this day, most Syrian women kept themselves busy with superficial things[53]. The basic line of this exonerating thought was that the reasons for women's miserable conditions were neither to be found in Islam nor in Arab history and that women's rights were Islamic rights that were lost under non-Arab rule in the course of centuries of decline. These ideas were very much in line with Egyptians feminists' approach to legitimate women's rights within an Islamic framework[54] (see below).

The editor Ahmad ʿArif al-Zayn (Aḥmad ʿĀrif al-Zayn, 1884–1960) appended to Sakakini's article the remark: »We are happy to see among the young women from Sidon someone who has such a mature style of writing, hoping that she will continue until the end unlike the others, who did not get beyond the beginning. Will the female teachers and pupils from Sidon follow the example of this outstanding teacher?«[55]

Especially Sami al-Kayyali (Sāmī al-Kayyālī, 1898–1972) from Aleppo promoted her as a young talent and regularly offered her the pages of his literary journal *al-Ḥadīth* (published from 1927 to 1959) as a platform to express her thoughts from 1929 onwards[56]. Her first attempt to write a short story also appeared in *al-Ḥadīth* in 1932; *Yaqẓat al-ḍamīr* (*The Awakening of the Conscience*) was about a pupil who takes revenge on her female teacher through a fake love letter[57].

Her early essayistic attempts were collected in the volume called *Khaṭarāt* (*Thoughts*, see fig. 2), published in 1932. How unusual this debut was for a woman under the age of 20, is shown by the fact that it was introduced by no less than nine forewords, eight of them written by male writers, publishers, and politicians who considered themselves promoters of women and expressed their joy at the appearance of the book[58]. The author Muhammad Jamil Bayhoum (Muḥammad

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Games, in: Syrinx von Hees (ed.), Inḥiṭāṭ – The Decline Paradigm. Its Influence and Persistence in the Writing of Arab Cultural History, Würzburg 2017, pp. 11–70.

53  Sakākīnī, Taṭawwur al-marʾa, p. 402.

54  Compare Rula B. Quawas, »A Sea Captain in Her Own Right«. Navigating the Feminist Thought of Huda Shaarawi, in: Journal of International Women's Studies 8, 1 (2006), pp. 225–230 passim.

55  Al-ʿIrfān 14, 4 (December 1927), p. 402.

56  All in all, Sakakini published 29 contributions in *al-Ḥadīth*. Six of these were during her early years, one contribution in 1929, four in 1931, and one in 1932.

57  Widād Sakākīnī, Yaqẓat al-ḍamīr, in: al-Ḥadīth 6, 2 (1932), pp. 154–156.

58  These writers were: Ibrahim al-Mundhir (1875–1950), member of the Arab Academy of Damascus; Bashir al-Kassar (Bashīr al-Qaṣṣār, ca. 1870–1935), physician, former director of the Ottoman Islamic School (al-Kulliyya al-ʿUthmāniyya al-Islāmiyya) in Beirut and of the Maqāṣid in Beirut; Béchara

Jamīl Bayhum, 1887–1978), who was well-known for his support of women's emancipation as well as for his marriage to the Syrian feminist activist Nazik al-ʿAbid (Nāzik al-ʿĀbid, 1887–1960), wrote: »Forwards, oh you woman of letters, forwards, we are in need of steadfast working women who prove that talent and genius have no gender, but are equally distributed between men and women.«[59] The only female voice who greeted the new work belonged to Anas Barakat Baz (Anas Barakāt Bāz, 1874–1949?), the first female physician of Lebanon who had studied at the University of Chicago at the beginning of the twentieth century before returning to Beirut in 1907[60]. In a skillful play on words, she compared a person's »thoughts« (khaṭarāt) to the choice of friends, claiming that they were an evidence of »the essential nature of his mentality« (jawhar nafsiyyatihi) and the aim in his life[61]. Thoughts were so »valuable« (nafīsa) that one would give all the »jewels« (jawāhir) in the world for them if one had to. Thus, she equated thoughts to the value of human life itself and underscored this idea by astonishingly referring to the high ransom that the Lindberghs were willing to pay to their baby's kidnapper[62]. This, she wrote, was proof of »the essence of the individual (jawhar al-fard), in which the Creator had made all men equal«[63].

Of special importance were the introductory remarks by Shaykh Ghalayini, because he ensured readers that Sakakini was »a good model (namūdhaj ṣāliḥ) for young Arab women«[64]. Whereas the other forewords were half a page or a full page long, Ghalayini's text consisted of three pages. He appraised her call for the

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Khoury (Bishāra al-Khūrī, 1890–1964), editor of the newspaper *al-Barq*, Lebanese Prime Minister (1928–1929) and the later President of the Republic of Lebanon (1943–1952); Ahmad ʿArif al-Zayn, founder of *al-ʿIrfān*; Muhammad al-Baqir (Muḥammad al-Bāqir), editor of the Beiruti newspapers *al-Fatāt* and *al-Balāgh*, for which Sakakini had also written articles; the poet Adib Farahat (Adīb Faraḥāt, 1895–1978), teacher from Saida and poet, who contributed a poem on Sakakini and her book.

59  Muḥammad Jamīl Bayhum, Kalimat al-adīb al-mufakkir al-ustādh Muḥammad Jamīl Bayhum, raʾis Jamʿiyyat al-Ittiḥād al-Shabība al-Islāmiyya, in: Sakākīnī, al-Khaṭarāt, p. ṭāʾ. On Bayhoum's commitment to women's rights see Fruma Zachs, Muḥammad Jamīl Bayhum and the Woman Question. Between Social and Political Rights, in: Die Welt des Islams 53, 1 (2013), pp. 50–75.

60  On her see Emilie Nasrallah, Anas Barakat Baz, in: al-Raida 23 (1983), p. 2.

61  Anas Barakāt Bāz, Kalimat al-sayyida al-mufakkira al-duktūra Anas Barakāt Bāz, in: Sakākīnī, al-Khaṭarāt, p. ḥāʾ.

62  Barakāt Bāz, however, does not correctly state the amount of the ransom (half a million instead of 50,000 dollars) and the age of the baby (ten months instead of 20). The son of aviators Charles and Anne Morrow Lindbergh was abducted on 1 March 1932 and found dead on 12 May 1932. It is not clear from the text when exactly Barakāt Bāz wrote it and whether the baby had already been found dead.

63  Barakāt Bāz, Kalimat al-sayyida, p. ḥāʾ.

64  Muṣṭafā al-Ghalāyīnī, Kalimat al-ʿālim al-lughawī wa-l-shāʿir al-kabīr al-ustādh al-shaykh Muṣṭafā l-Ghalāyīnī, ʿuḍw al-Majmaʿ al-ʿIlmī l-ʿArabī bi-Dimashq, in: Sakākīnī, al-Khaṭarāt, p. bāʾ.

public education of girls as »it is in harmony with the well-being of the *umma*, the country, and the customs of our heritage«[65].The essay *Dhikrā l-nabī*[66] (*Memory of the Prophet*) clearly showed that she carried »sincere religious feelings«[67] in her heart. Ghalayini claimed to have read most of the book with admiration, although its author was not infallible in every respect[68]. What he could say for sure was that she mastered language, style, and structure very well and that most men were unable to reach her[69]. He also shared her view that women should adapt to the spirit of the times and the circumstances »without excess and without renunciation« (*bi-lā afrāṭ wa-lā tafrīṭ*)[70] and appreciated that she criticized those who wanted to break all bonds and rules and plunge women into European civilization without any reservation[71]. He summarized her first article *Taṭawwur al-marʾa* (*The Women's Development*), reprinted in the volume, and approved of her view that the Arab decline and the backwardness of Arab women began »after they mixed with other peoples« (*baʿda an akhtalaṭū bi-ghayrihim min al-umam*)[72].

Against the wish of her mother[73], Sakakini married the Damascene teacher and student of law and literature Zaki al-Mahasini (Zakī al-Maḥāsinī, 1909–1972)[74] and moved to Damascus to be with him in 1934. After graduating from the prestigious Maktab ʿAnbar School[75] in 1927, he started studying law at the Syrian University

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65  Ibid.

66  Widād Sakākīnī, Dhikrā l-nabī, in: Eadem, al-Khaṭarāt, pp. 50–53. She takes the annual *mawlid* celebrations at the occasion of the Prophet's birthday as an opportunity to reflect on the historical importance of Muhammad and the ethical principles of Islam. In doing so, she mentions that the united Arabs became the mistress of the nations because of the power and heavenly rules of Islam.

67  al-Ghalāyīnī, Kalimat, p. hāʾ.

68  Ibid., p. bāʾ.

69  Ibid.

70  Ibid., p. hāʾ.

71  Ibid.

72  Ibid., p. jīm. On the social, anti-Turkish and pro-Umayyad subtext of this view see fn. 52 of this chapter.

73  Author's interview with Dhukāʾ al-Maḥāsinī, 20 August 2003. Accordingly, Sakakini came to Damascus to attend an event and got to know Zaki on this occasion.

74  For his biography see Yūsuf Asad Dāghir, al-Maḥāsini, Zakī, in: Idem, Maṣādir al-dirāsāt al-adabiyya, Beirut 1972, vol. 3, 2, pp. 1135–1138; Majmaʿ al-Lugha al-ʿArabiyya bi-Dimashq, al-Faqīd al-duktūr Zakī l-Maḥāsinī, in: Majallat al-Majmaʿ al-ʿIlmī l-ʿArabī fī Dimashq (RAAD) 47, 2 (1972), pp. 504–506; Badīʿ Ḥaqqī, Ustādhī l-duktūr Zakī l-Maḥāsinī, in: al-Adīb 1 (1973), pp. 34–36; Samāʾ al-Maḥāsinī, Zakī l-Maḥāsinī, pp. 19–49; Wadīʿ Filasṭīn, al-Duktūr Zakī l-Maḥāsinī, in: Samāʾ al-Maḥāsinī, Zakī l-Maḥāsinī, pp. 5–12.

75  It was founded in 1893 mainly for the children of notable families and taught traditional subjects (Arabic literature, Islamic studies) as well as modern subjects (maths, biology), see Thompson, Colonial Citizens, p. 75.

in Damascus[76]. At about this time, his mother Sāra al-Baḥrī died. Since he had already lost his father Shukrī at the age of two, he went to live at the house of his uncle Muhammad, who, like Zaki's father, was a lawyer. After the shock of his mother's death, he turned to Arabic literature, finishing his first university degree in law in 1936, called *ijāza fī l-ḥuqūq* (»licence en droit«)[77] and earning his second *ijāza fī l-adab* (»licence en lettres«) the same year[78]. Zaki al-Mahasini had already started working as an Arabic teacher in a secondary school (Madrasat al-tajhīz)[79] in Antakiya in 1932 and then moved to the newly established school of the same type in Damascus in 1935. This school was the successor of the Maktab ʿAnbar School. The *tajhīz* schools became a breeding ground for pan-Arab nationalism and »one of the principal centers of nationalist activity«[80], teaching the students classical and modern Arabic literature as well as Arab history and its contribution to the progress in world history.

When Sakakini and Mahasini married, they encouraged each other to follow their vocation in literature[81]. In 1936, 1939 and 1943, Widad gave birth to a son (Dhakwān) and two daughters (Dhukāʾ and Samāʾ)[82]. In 1936/37, the young couple caused a stir in the literary scene when both of them won the first price in a literary competition. Zaki al-Mahasini answered the question »Who is the Greatest Contemporary Arab Writer?«, which had been posed by Sami al-Kayyali and his literary journal *al-Ḥadīth* in 1936. Mahasini explained that Taha Husayn—later actually dubbed the »dean of Arabic literature«—earned the honour of being considered the greatest writer—a good choice in so far as al-Kayyali and *al-Ḥadīth*

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76  The university came into being in 1923, when the School of Medicine (founded in 1903) and the Institute of Law (founded in 1913) were merged. In 1929, the School of Higher Literary Studies (Madrasat al-Adāb al-ʿUlyā) was integrated. For an account of the birth pangs of the university and Kurd Ali's inglorious role, see: Sami M. Moubayed, The Founding of Damascus University 1903–1936. An Essay in Praise of the Pioneers, in: Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies 18, 2 (2018), pp. 179–200.

77  The *ijāza* is equivalent to a Bachelor. The naming of the degrees was inspired by the French university system with sequence *Licence – Master – Doctorat*.

78  Samāʾ al-Maḥāsinī, Zakī l-Maḥāsinī, p. 22. This information is the most reliable since it stems from his daughter. Other authors give different dates for Zaki's first university degree: Dāghir, al-Maḥāsinī, p. 1135, 1930 (ijāza fī l-ḥuqūq) and 1933 (ijāza fī l-adab); Filasṭīn, Zakī l-Maḥāsinī, p. 8, 1931 (ijāza fī l-ḥuqūq) and 1936 (ijāza fī l-adab).

79  The newly established Tajhīz schools were the training ground for later politicians and state officials in administration and military, see Philip S. Khoury, Syria and the French Mandate. The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920–1945, Princeton 1987, pp. 410–423 passim.

80  Ibid., p. 411.

81  al-Kayyālī, Widād Sakākīnī, p. 410. Also compare Sakakini's self-presentation in Sakākīnī, Widād Sakākīnī, p. 168, as well as al-Mahasini's self-protrait, reprinted by the Arab Academy in Damascus in its obituary, Majmaʿ al-Lugha al-ʿArabiyya bi-Dimashq, al-Faqīd, p. 505.

82  Ottosson Bitar, I Can Do Nothing, p. 38.

were supporters of Taha Husayn from early on[83]. Sakakini participated in a short story competition, advertised by the Beirut literary journal *al-Makshūf* [84] in 1936. At first, she sent in a short story called *Qāʾid* (*Leader*), but when she saw her text printed[85], she no longer liked it. Therefore, she decided to write a second one about »a daring, special subject« to win the competition[86]. Her second text *Shaykh Ḥamdī* (*Shaykh Hamdi*) was published in November 1936[87]. It dealt with the topic of *zawāj al-taḥlīl*, »legalizing marriage«: When a husband repudiates (*ṭalāq*) his wife three times according to Shariʿa rules, the couple cannot remarry before the woman has married someone else according to Qurʾan 2:230. Literature on trickery (*ḥiyal*) in Islamic jurisprudence therefore knows the »legalizing marriage« with another man, who immediately divorces the woman, so that the first husband can remarry her. In Sakakini's short story, a shaykh has cast an eye on the pretty wife of a husband, who has erroneously divorced her; the shaykh proposes to the husband a »legalizing marriage« between himself and the wife, but then refuses to divorce her.

On March 17, 1937, a jury of young and innovative writers and critics that the editor and self-proclaimed Lebanese »messenger of nudism« (*rasūl al-ʿury*), Sheikh Fouad Hobeiche (Fuʾād Ḥubaysh, 1904–1973), had assembled[88], convened and selected Sakakini's short story as the winning text among 59 submissions. Each judge selected his favorite short story and sealed his decision in an envelope. When

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83  On al-Kayyali see Manfred Sɪɴɢ, Between Lights and Hurricanes. Sāmī al-Kayyālī's Review *Al-Ḥadīt̲* as a Forum of Modern Arabic Literature and Liberal Islam, in: Horst Uɴʙᴇʜᴀᴜɴ (ed.), The Middle Eastern Press as a Forum for Literature, Frankfurt a.M. etal. 2004, pp. 119–141; idem, Illiberal Metamorphoses of a Liberal Discourse. The Case of Syrian Intellectual Sami al-Kayyali (1898–1972), in: Christoph Sᴄʜᴜᴍᴀɴɴ (ed.), Liberal Thought in the Eastern Mediterranean. Late 19ᵗʰ Century until the 1960s, Leiden 2008, pp. 293–322.

84  The journal, and later newspaper, was founded in 1935 and was published until 1950. On the origins and the history of the journal see Muḥammad Aʙī Sᴀᴍʀā, Riḥla fī munsiyyāt »al-Makshūf«, in: Mulḥaq Jarīdat al-Nahār (01.12.2012), URL: <https://mhamadabisamra.wordpress.com/category/%D9%81%D8%A4%D8%A7%D8% AF-%D8%AD%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%B4/> (11 December 2020); Jūzīf Aʙī Ḍāʜɪʀ, Fuʾād Hubaysh wa-zaman al-Makshūf, Louaize 2016.

85  The submitted short stories were continuously published in *al-Makshūf*.

86  See her statements published after the award ceremony in: al-Makshūf (07.04.1937), p. 5.

87  See Makshūf (18.11.1936), pp. 10 and 14.

88  In 1930, Fouad Hobeiche founded the League of Ten (ʿUṣbat al-ʿAshara) to fight everything old in literature. Among the members and symapthizers were Khalīl Taqī l-Dīn (1906–1987), Tawfīq Yūsuf ʿAwwād (1911–1989), Fuʾād Jaysh and Ilyas Abu Shabaka (Ilyās Abū Shabaka, 1903–1947), all of whom were part of the *Makshūf* jury in 1937; Abū Shabaka was absent when the final decision was taken. The other members of the jury were Buṭrus Bustānī (1898–1969), Fuʾād Afrām Bustānī (1904–1994), and ʿUmar Fākhūrī. On Hobeiche, his literary innovations and his fondness of nudism, see Hala Bɪᴢʀɪ, The Nudism of Sheikh Fouad Hobeiche, in: Octavian Esᴀɴᴜ (ed.), Art, Awakening, and Modernity in the Middle East. The Arab Nude, New York/London 2018; Aʙī Sᴀᴍʀā, Riḥla fī munsiyyāt »al-Makshūf«; Aʙī Ḍāʜɪʀ, Fuʾād Hubaysh.

the envelopes were opened and the decision—6 to 1 for Sakakini—was revealed, it must have surprised the judges that they had selected a woman! On April 7, *al-Makshūf* reported on the award ceremony and Widad Sakakini could express her views about the Arab short story in an interview. She explained that there was a lack of short stories in Syria in general although they could be a »true reflection of social life«[89]; as a female author, she was also able to write about subjects that were hidden to men.

However, the award not only boosted Sakakini's literary career; she also found herself the subject of a fierce personal attack by Fouad Hobeiche, the editor and jury member of *al-Makshūf*, the paper that just hailed—or was forced to hail—Sakakini as a talented female writer. The occasion for these attacks were two literary debates, in which Sakakini intervened, whereupon Hobeiche called her interventions unwanted and unqualified.

The first occasion was a debate between the writer Sheikh ʿAli al-Tantawi (ʿAlī al-Ṭanṭāwī, 1904–1999) and a group of letter-writers, which called itself al-Mukhliṣūn (»The Loyal Ones«). Between July and September 1937, the Mukhliṣūn attacked al-Tantawi three times and he replied twice[90]. The anonymous writers argued that al-Tantawi had plagiarized his new work *Aswāq al-ʿarab* (*The Arabs' Markets*) from older manuscripts, while maintaining that there existed neither literature nor authors in contemporary Damascus. In his answers, al-Tantawi insisted that were no influential authors with the exceptions of Muhammad Kurd ʿAli (Muḥammad Kurd ʿAlī, 1876–1953)[91], the president of the Arabic Academy in Damascus, and the writer Maʿruf Arnaʾwut (Maʿrūf Arnāʾwūṭ, 1892–1948), also a member of Arab Academy. While the Mukhliṣūn had invoked Mary ʿAjami (Mary ʿAjamī, 1888–1969) and her literary salon, al-Tantawi argued that she was surpassed by Mayy Ziyada, a Lebanese author who worked in Egypt[92].

At this point, Sakakini wrote a letter to the editor. Hobeiche published this relatively short text, embedding it into a nearly full-page commentary of his own[93]. The title assumed that Sakakini had intervened as a third person in the debate regarding the existence of literature and authors in Damascus[94]. In contrast to

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89  See al-Makshūf (07.04.1937), p. 5.

90  See al-Makshūf (28.07.1937), p. 1; al-Makshūf (04.08.1937), p. 8; al-Makshūf (18.08.1937), p. 5; al-Makshūf (08.09.1937), p. 8.

91  On Kurd ʿAli see Rainer Hermann, Kulturkrise und konservative Erneuerung. Muḥammad Kurd ʿAlī (1876–1953) und das geistige Leben in Damaskus zu Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts, Frankfurt a.M. 1990.

92  Ibid.

93  Al-Makshūf (15.09.1937), p. 2.

94  Fuʾād Ḥubaysh, al-Sayyida Sakākīnī bayna »Mukhliṣūn« wa-l-Ṭanṭāwī. al-Kātiba Sakākīnī Maḥāsinī tadkhul shakhṣan thālithan fī l-munāẓara. Hal fī Dimashq adab wa-udabāʾ?, in: al-Makshūf (15.09.1937), p. 2.

the title, however, Sakakini had not dealt with the debate in her letter, but instead criticized the bad habit of publishing anonymous letters to the editor—a habit that she found unworthy of a literary newspaper. She called the Mukhliṣūn »a group of disgruntled men«, getting excited at the coffeehouse tables in Damascus. She therefore wondered why a »progressive writer« such as the editor of *al-Makshūf* published such »drivel«, consisting of »envy, wickedness, and slander« (*al-ḥasad wa-l-danāʾ wal-buhtān*)[95]. Finally, she found the use of words such as »urine« not adequate to a literary debate—although she admitted that the publication of such articles might increase the circulation of the paper.

In his lengthy comment, Hobeiche wrote that whoever compared Sakakini's unqualified statements to al-Tantawi's replies to the Mukhliṣūn »recognizes immediately the substantial differences between men and women. His writing is guided by the judgment of his intellect, while she is guided by her emotions, so that they also speak from her pen«[96]. Actually, al-Tantawi would have had more right to indulge in emotions since he was attacked by the Mukhliṣūn directly; yet, his answer was calm. Sakakini, however, had fallen back to the »lexicon of insults«, thrown in the face of the Mukhliṣūn. »The bullets of her wrath« had also hit the editor of *al-Makshūf* and Mary ʿAjami, although they were her friends. Hobeiche wrote that he had expected this from other people, but not from Sakakini, whom he had supported so much. Yet, he promised that his journal would not stop making either positive or negative mention of her. While her short story had been awarded the first prize because of her daring and clear style, she now proposed to avoid the word »urine«, which belonged to life as much as other words.

The occasion for Hobeiche's second attack against Sakakini was another controversy between the Egyptian writer ʿAbdallah ʿInan (ʿAbdallāh ʿInān, 1898–1986) and the Lebanese poet Ilyas Abu Shabaka, a friend of Hobeiche's, a few weeks later[97]. That Sakakini directed criticism to both in the Egyptian paper *Ṣawt al-aḥrar*, was a sufficient reason for Hobeiche to print the headline: »Widad Sakakini is looking for a fight«[98]. Here he wrote:

> We absolutely have to come back to Widad Sakakini to address her chronic suffering from her mental deficiency (*sakhf muzmin*), which she was able to hide from the people for a

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95  Ibid.

96  Ḥubaysh, al-Sayyida Sakākīnī, p. 2.

97  On ʿInan, see Israel Gershoni, Eine Stimme der Vernunft. Muhammad Abdallah Inan und die Zeitschrift al-Risala, in: Nicolas Berg et al. (eds.), Konstellationen. Über Geschichte, Erfahrung und Erkenntnis. Festschrift für Dan Diner zum 65. Geburtstag, Göttingen 2011, pp. 105–124. On Abu Shabaka, see Salma K. Jayyusi, Abū Shabaka, Ilyās, in: Fleet et al. (eds.), Encyclopaedia of Islam Three.

98  Fuʾād Ḥubaysh, Widād Sakākīnī al-Maḥāsinī tataḥarrash bi-l-nās, in: al-Makshūf (08.12.1937), p. 9.

short period of time. […] She attacked us without reason months ago. Today she takes the opportunity to fight with us again, and once again she reveals her sick soul that is gnawed by envy and worn down by hate. […] How much we wished that she would not let her feelings run so carelessly since literature is the work of the mind, not of feelings.[99]

These comments clearly reveal the construction of gender—the woman as a fury who cannot keep her emotions in check. The opposition between man and woman is constructed as congruent with the opposition between mind and emotions[100]. The astonishing thing is that Hobeiche declares the mastery of feelings to be the yardstick for good literature. This construction of gender marks Sakakini as an emotional female and therefore unfit for debates in the literary field.

When the journal *al-Makshūf* ran a special issue about the cultural life in Lebanon and Syria in March 1939, it did not discuss a single literary work by a woman writer[101], but the introductory article promised a future special issue about women's literature and mentioned the names of some women writers, but not Widad Sakakini[102].

In retrospect, Sakakini saw her victory in the competition as a double-edged sword. She wrote that, on the one hand, the jury's appreciation of her short story strengthened her self-esteem and helped to open the door to literature for her. On the other hand, she perceived that the choice of her text and »a woman's superiority« caused a lot of envy among participants and observers of the competition. She kept coming back to this point at various occasions, as if it could not be mentioned often enough[103]. Without directly referring to Hobeiche or other authors[104], she explained:

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99 Ibid.

100 Hobeiche was not alone in this prejudice. Muhammad Kurd ʿAli stated that women were slaves to their emotions, when he dealt with French women's literature in the Egyptian literary journal *al-Risāla* in January 1936, see Ottosson Bitar, I Can Do Nothing, p. 51; Muḥammad Kurd ʿAlī, Tārīkh al-adab al-nasawī fī Fransā, in: al-Risāla 132 (1936), pp. 51–53 and 133 (1936), pp. 99–101.

101 Ottosson Bitar, I Can Do Nothing, p. 51.

102 Ibid.

103 See, for example, Widād Sakākīnī, ʿUmar Fākhūrī, Cairo 1970, p. 97; eadem, Li-l-ḥaqīqa wa-l-tārīkh, in: Eadem, Aqwā min al-sinīn, pp. 9f.; eadem, al-Najjār wa-l-jāʾiza, in: Eadem, Shawk fī l-ḥaṣīd, pp. 214f.; eadem, Adab al-niswa, in: Eadem, Inṣāf al-marʾa, pp. 98f.

104 Only once, she singled out the Syrian journalist Muḥammad al-Najjār, who claimed that one of his books had received a price in a competition. She refuted his claim because he had not won either of those competitions of the journals *al-Dhuhūr* and *al-Makshūf* and wrote »it seems he deemed the youth, in which I was, weak, regarded the prize as too much for someone like me and claimed it for himself«, see Sakākīnī, al-Najjār wa-l-jāʾiza, p. 215.

Apart from the fact that this remarkable victory in the great competition disappointed the participants, who were annoyed about the superiority (*tafawwuq*) of »the woman«, they also deceived themselves about this truth and ignored me at every opportunity. Yet, it was not in their calculation that the truth rewarded me with good things when I moved with my husband Dr. Zakī al-Maḥāsinī to Cairo in the years 1944/45, where literary life, literary production, and literary critique by scholars were in full bloom.[105]

Whereas she complained about the lack of support in Damascus, she pointed out the help of writers and new friends that she experienced in Cairo. With a short interruption, Widad Sakakini and Zaki al-Mahasini lived in Egypt for most of the period between 1944 and 1956 and for some years in the early 1960s before they returned to Damascus and settled there. The literary atmosphere in Cairo inspired and encouraged Sakakini[106] and it was there that she published her collection of short stories, which she brought with her from Damascus, under the title *Marāyā l-nās* (*Mirrors of the People*, 1944)—a collection which is considered the first »Syrian« short story collection.

The book was published by the Lajnat al-Nashr al-Jāmiʿīyīn (»Committee for Academics' Publishing«), which had just been founded in 1943 by young writers who were interested in creating a forum to offer publication to talented recent graduates, but also for already established writers. As the young committee were particularly looking for talented and award-winning writers, Sakakini's consecration by the six men of the Beirut jury certainly might have played a role in the adoption of her work in the newly established publication series. Among others, the committee consisted of ʿAbdel-Hamid Gouda Sahar (ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd Jūda Saḥḥār, 1913–1974), who was its founder, and Nagib Mahfouz (Najīb Maḥfūẓ, 1911–2006), the later Nobel Prize laureate, at the very beginning of their careers. As a prize winning author, Sakakini stood in a row with such famed authors as the novelist Ibrahim al-Mazini (Ibrāhīm ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Māzinī, 1889/90–1949), the short story writer Mahmud Taymur (Maḥmūd Taymūr, 1894–1973), or the journalist Wadiʿ Filastin (Wadīʿ Filasṭīn, b. 1923)[107]. Taymur wrote one of the forewords for Sakakini's book, and Wadiʿ Filastin would become a close friend. The help the committee provided to Sakakini was not a one-off, as it also helped with the publication of Sakakini's second

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105 Eadem, Li-l-ḥaqīqa wa-l-tārīkh (1978), pp. 9f.

106 She had praised the literary leadership of the Egyptians before coming to the country, see eadem, Zaʿāmat Miṣr al-adabiyya, in: al-ʿIrfān 4/5 (1939), pp. 447–449.

107 On Mazini, see Tania AL SAADI, al-Māzinī, Ibrāhīm, in: FLEET et al. (eds.), Encyclopaedia of Islam Three. On Taymur, see Rotraut WIELANDT, Das erzählerische Frühwerk Maḥmūd Taymūrs. Beitrag zu einem Archiv der modernen arabischen Literatur, Wiesbaden 1983. Filastin had translated *The Father* by Swedish playwright Johan August Strindberg into Arabic for the publication series.

Fig. 3   Widad Sakakini and Zaki al-Mahasini together with their friend Wadiʿ Filastin, an Egyptian
journalist and translator.
Source: Printing permission by Samaʾ al-Mahasini.

collection of short stories called *Bayna l-Nīl wa-l-nakhīl* (*Between Nile and Palms*)
in 1946. In her review of Nagib Mafouz's novel *Khan al-Khalīlī* about a popular
quarter in contemporary Cairo, Sakakini not only compared Mahfouz's style to
Victor Hugo's, she also explicitly mentioned in the last sentence that this »elegant«
(*ṭarīf*) work was one of the fruits of »Committee for Academics' Publishing«[108],
which can be understood as an expression of gratitude.

   The reason for the couple's move to Egypt was that Zaki al-Mahasini was chosen
by the Syrian Ministry of Education in 1943 to be sent to Cairo University, where he
was to write his doctoral thesis in literature. The School of Letters at the University
in Damascus had been closed by the French authorities in 1935/36[109], so that al-
Mahasini could not continue his studies in Arabic literature after he had acquired
his *licence*. Thus, moving to Egypt was an obvious option. He continued his studies

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108  Widād Sakākīnī, Khān al-Khalīlī li-l-ustādh Najīb Maḥfūẓ, in: al-Risāla 648 (November 1945),
p. 1230.

109  See, Shākir Muṣṭafā, Muḥāḍarāt ʿan al-qiṣṣā fī Sūriyya ḥatta l-ḥarb al-ʿālamiyya al-thāniya, Cairo
1957, p. 220. The French saw the expansion of higher learning, and especially of Arabic litera-
ture and history, with inquiety. They preferred to offer Syrian students the possibilty to study in
France to form loyal subjects out of them. Their numbers increased from 37 students until 1935 to
149 students between 1936 and 1939, see ibid. A faculty of letters at the university in Damascus
only reopened after independence in 1946.

in Arabic literature under the supervision of ‘Abd al-Wahhab ‘Azzam (‘Abd al-Wahhāb ‘Azzām, 1894–1959), professor for Arabic and Eastern languages at Cairo University[110]. ‘Azzam chose for him the subject of the master thesis—the Syrian philosopher Abū l-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī (d. 1057) »as a social critic«[111]. After that, al-Mahasini continued his studies and finished his doctoral thesis about Arabic war poetry in Umayyad and ‘Abbasid times[112] with the highest grade in 1947, again under ‘Azzam’s supervision; he thus became the first Syrian to earn a doctorate in literature in Egypt[113]. Sakakini not only helped her husband gather material for his doctoral thesis[114], she also wrote several articles about the relation between Arabic literature and war[115]. On the one hand, the theme obviously resonated with the context of the World War, as al-Mahasini later also admitted in his new introduction of 1961[116]. On the other hand, Widad’s interest in early Islamic-Arab female figures and Zaki’s interest in classical Arabic poetry were obviously mutually beneficial; she published *Ummahāt al-mu’minīn wa-akhawāt al-shuhadā’*, her portraits of early Muslim women, also in 1947 with the same publishing house, Dār al-Fikr al-‘Arabī[117], in which Zaki published his thesis.

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110  Zakī al-Maḥāsinī, Kayfa ‘araftu l-duktūr ‘Abd al-Wahhāb ‘Azzām, in: Idem, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb ‘Azzām fī ḥayātihi wa-āthārihi l-adabiyya, Cairo 1968, p. 8. ‘Azzam was also a writer and poet. He joined the diplomatic service in 1947 and became ambassador in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Yemen. There are parallels to Mahasini’s career, and Mahasini later even lectured on his supervisor, see idem, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb ‘Azzām fī ḥayātihi wa-āthārihi l-adabiyya, Cairo 1968; cf. Abū Ṭālib Zayyān, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb ‘Azzām fī hayātihi wa-āthārihi l-adabiyya. Ta’līf: al-Duktūr Zakī l-Maḥāsinī, in: Widād Sakākīnī (ed.), al-Duktūr Zakī l-Maḥāsinī, Damascus 1973, pp. 151–156.

111  His master’s thesis was printed as Zakī al-Maḥāsinī, Abū l-‘Alā’ nāqid al-mujtama‘, Cairo 1945, and reprinted in Beirut in 1963, see Samā’ al-Maḥāsinī, Zakī l-Maḥāsinī, p. 53. Neither Zaki al-Mahasini nor his biographers give an exact date, for either the submission of his master thesis or the awarding of his master’s degree. See Zaki al-Maḥāsinī, Kayfa ‘araftu l-duktūr ‘Abd al-Wahhāb ‘Azzām, p. 8; Samā’ al-Maḥāsinī, Zakī l-Maḥāsinī, p. 23; Filasṭīn, Zakī l-Maḥāsinī, p. 9.

112  It was published as Zakī al-Maḥāsinī, Shi‘r al-ḥarb fī adab al-‘arab fī al-‘aṣrayn al-umawī wa-l-‘abbāsī ilā ‘ahd Sayf al-Dawla, Cairo 1947 and reprinted in Beirut in 1961.

113  Samā’ al-Maḥāsinī, Zakī l-Maḥāsinī, p. 23.

114  Ottosson Bitar, I Can Do Nothing, p. 37.

115  Widād Sakākīnī, Udabā’unā fī l-ḥarb, in: al-Thaqāfa 199 (October 1942), pp. 14–16; eadem, Shu‘arā’ al-ḥarb ‘inda l-‘arab, in: al-Adīb 6 (1943), pp. 23f.; eadem, Ẓulm al-insān li-l-insān, in: al-Adīb 9 (1948), pp. 16f. There is, however, no direct political positioning or commentary on current events to find in these articles. In her much later biography on ‘Umar al-Fakhuri, Sakakini expresses some sympathy for his anti-fascist and pro-Soviet stance, see eadem, ‘Umar Fākhūrī, pp. 63–67. Of course, this does not allow us to draw any conclusions about her own views during the war.

116  al-Maḥāsinī, Shi‘r al-ḥarb, Beirut ²1961, p. 6.

117  The publishing house, which would become one of the greatest Arab publishers dedicated to the publication of academic and intellectual works, had been founded in 1946 by Muhammad Mahmud al-Khudari (Muḥammad Maḥmūd al-Khuḍarī). It grew out of a printing house established

After finishing his doctoral thesis, al-Mahasini kept working as a lawyer and temporarily taught Arabic literature as an associated professor at the University of Damascus in 1947. In 1951/52, he was sent back to Egypt, as he had been appointed cultural attaché at the Syrian Embassy in Egypt as well as representative for cultural affairs at the Arab League in Cairo. In spite of his diplomatic work, he kept on writing literary studies, poems, and articles for literary journals. He published 17 books during his lifetime and left several unpublished works[118]. His *dīwān*, a collection of his poems[119], was posthumously published in 2006 based on Widad Sakakini's archives.

During their stay in Egypt, Widad Sakakini worked as a teacher in the Maʿhad al-ʿĀlī li-l-Funūn al-Jamīla (Higher Institute for Fine Arts) in Cairo, approximately between 1950 and 1954. In this institute, young women were taught literature, music, acting, and painting after the baccalaureate. In one of her articles, published in 1950, Sakakini bemoaned the backwardness of young Syrian women in comparison to their Egyptian counterparts with regard to education in these disciplines as well as the restrictions imposed by social conditions and traditions[120]. For these reasons, talented female artists were forced to migrate to Egypt[121]. The extent to which Sakakini includes herself in these lines is unclear. Indicative of the importance she attaches to fine arts is the fact that she included the famous singer Umm Kalthoum (Umm Kalthūm) in one of her collections of biographies of famous women pioneers, adding that she succeeded in uniting the Arab countries with her emotional and patriotic songs more than politicians, ambassadors, or the Arab League[122].

In several essays and short studies, Sakakini gave an inspiring picture of social life in Cairo in the mid-twentieth century; she also called the time she spent in Egypt her »luckiest days«[123]. During this period, she was very productive and wrote many short stories, her two novels, and the first edition of *Ummahāt al-muʾminīn* as well as many literary critiques. Her articles were published in the most prestigious literary journals in the Arab East, such as *al-ʿIrfān* in Sidon (existing from 1909 to 1996), *al-Ḥadīth* in Aleppo (1927–1959), *al-Risāla* in Cairo (1932–1965), *al-Thaqāfa* in Cairo (1939–1952), *al-Adīb* in Beirut (1942–1983), and *al-Ādāb* in Beirut (1953–2012).

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in 1908 by his father and an uncle, see Dār al-Fikr al-ʿArabī, ʿAn al-Dār, URL: <http://www.darelfikrelarabi.com/daralfikralarabi.php> (04.02.2021).

118  Samāʾ al-Maḥāsinī, Zakī l-Maḥāsinī, pp. 53–60.

119  Zakī al-Maḥāsinī, Dīwān al-Maḥāsinī li-l-shāʿir Zakī l-Maḥāsinī, Damascus 2006.

120  Widād Sakākīnī, Thaqāfatunā l-fanniyya, in: Eadem, Inṣāf al-marʾa, Damascus ²1989, pp. 189–198. Also compare the above mentioned remarks in her first essay from 1927, eadem, Taṭawwur al-marʾa, p. 402.

121  Eadem, Thaqāfatunā l-fanniyya, pp. 192f.

122  Eadem, Umm Kalthūm, safīrat Miṣr ilā bilād al-ʿarabiyya, in: Eadem, Sābiqāt al-ʿaṣr, p. 84.

123  Eadem, Widād Sakākīnī, in: Eadem, Sābiqāt al-ʿaṣr, p. 167.

She was a regular guest of many literary, journalistic, and feminist circles—a fact that certainly influenced and shaped her work, dictating the choice of subjects and providing a feminist slant to many of her pieces. Her close friend, the writer and translator Wadiʿ Filastin once described the many different cultural events he attended with Zaki and Widad[124]. Filastin enumerated, for example, the meetings at the Academy of the Arabic Language in Cairo, the Union of the Muslim Youth, the Union of Writers, the Union of Modern Literature, the Journalists' Union, the Publication Committee of Academic Writers, and the Women's Association. In addition, there were the clubs of the cultural journals *al-Risāla*, *al-Thaqāfa*, and *al-Muqtaṭaf* and various literary circles, most famously the Nādī l-Qiṣṣa (»Story Club«), founded in 1955, among whose presidents were Taha Husayn and the novelist and playwright Tawfiq al-Hakim (Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm, 1898–1987)[125]; it was frequented by prominent writers such as ʿAbbas Mahmud al-ʿAqqad and Nagib Mahfouz. Sakakini proudly claimed that she was the only non-Egyptian participant in the club[126]. Her collection of (»Egyptian«) short stories *al-Sitār al-marfūʿ* (*The Lifted Curtain*) was published by the publishing house Rūz al-Yūsuf at the request of the Nādī l-Qiṣṣa in 1955. Another collection of short stories called *Nufūs tatakallam* (*Souls Talking to Each Other*, 1962) and the historical biography of the love mystic Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya (1955) appeared in the series Iqraʾ (»Read«), supervised by Taha Husayn. Sakakini also frequented Huda Shaʿrawi's house, which she called the meeting point of the most intelligent men and women in Egyptian society[127]. She mentioned that she would never forget how she met the »geniuses« Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid (Aḥmad Luṭfī al-Sayyid, 1872–1963) and Muhammad Husayn Haykal (Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal, 1888–1956) in person in Shaʿrawi's home[128].

When the family returned to Damascus in 1956, Zaki al-Mahasini worked in the Committee of Education in the Ministry of Education. During the unification of Syria and Egypt (1958–1961), Sakakini stood as a candidate for the unitary party al-Ittiḥād al-Qawmī (»National Unity«) and won a seat for the Damascene municipality al-Muhājirīn in 1959. She became a member of the Committee for Prose of the Supreme Council for the Advancement of Arts and Literature. She seems to have performed this function for about a year before withdrawing from

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124  Filasṭīn, Widād Sakākīnī, pp. 98f.

125  On Hakim, see Paul Starkey, al-Ḥakīm, Tawfīq, in: Fleet et al. (eds.), Encyclopaedia of Islam Three.

126  Widād Sakākīnī, al-Khuṣūma fī l-naqd al-ʿarabī l-muʿāṣir, in: Eadem, Suṭūr tatajāwab, Damascus 1987, p. 29.

127  Eadem, Majālis al-adab ʿinda nisāʾ al-ʿarab, in: Eadem, Inṣāf al-marʾa, Damascus ²1989, p. 52.

128  Ibid. On Lutfi al-Sayyid, see Israel Gershoni, Luṭfī al-Sayyid, Aḥmad, in: Fleet et al. (eds.), Encyclopaedia of Islam Three; on Haykal, see Charles D. Smith, Islam and the Search for Social Order in Modern Egypt. A Biography of Muhammad Husayn Haykal, Albany 1983.

Fig. 4  Widad Sakakini and Zaki al-Mahasini at a literati's meeting in Cairo, together with the Egyptian
poet Muhammad 'Abd al-Ghani Hasan (1907–1985, to the left) and 'Abd al-Hadi Hashim
(1912–1988, to the right), lecturer of literature and long-term member of the Syrian ministry
of culture.
Source: Printing permission by Sama' al-Mahasini.

politics[129]. Practically, her task was to participate in meetings with Egyptian writers,
among them her friend Suhayr al-Qalamawi (Suhayr al-Qalamāwī, 1911–1997) and
(her opponent) 'A'isha 'Abd al-Rahman. In an interview, she explained her political
mandate in the following way:

> In my opinion, it is not appropriate that the activities and the thinking of women are
> limited to activities in associations. They have to go on to show their talents. I was an
> advisor to the committee for the role of women in the Arab-national struggle. Arab
> nationalism was the main topic in my book *Sawād fī bayāḍ*[130], in which I recorded my
> ideas about literature, nationalism, and life.[131]

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129  Author's interview with Samā' al-Maḥāsinī, 23 August 2003.
130  Sakākīnī, Sawād fī bayāḍ, Damascus 1959.
131  Muḥammad Naṣr, Udabā' fī ṣuwar ṣuḥufiyya, Cairo 1965, pp. 289f.

As Zaki al-Mahasini was once again sent to Cairo, as a member of the Supreme Council of Culture[132], Sakakini also joined him with their two daughters, who started to study at Cairo University around 1959[133]. The family stayed in Egypt despite the break-up of the union, and the daughters finished their studies together in 1963[134]. After that, they returned to Damascus, where Sakakini's husband became director of the Office for Antiquities and Manuscripts (1961–1965). He accepted calls to teach Arabic at the University of Mecca (1965/66) and the Lebanese University in Beirut (1966–1969). He was appointed as a corresponding member of the Spanish Royal Academy of Literature in 1971 and the Academy of the Arabic Language in Cairo.

After his sudden death in 1972, Sakakini gradually withdrew from public life. She sporadically published articles in the Syrian state-owned cultural journals *al-Maʿrifa* and *Nahj al-Islām*. Some contributions, written by her on Arabic literature and literary critique in the twentieth century, though not on women, appeared on the women's page »Hunna« in the Saudi journal *al-Manhal*.

In a two-pages self-portrait of 1987, she clearly aimed to stylize herself as a woman of letters and claimed—in spite of the political intermezzo in the late 1950s—that she had never joined a political party, a union, or a governmental body[135]. Neither did she mention her activities in the context of literary and women's organizations in Damascus. She was a member of the state related Arab Writers' Union (Ittiḥād al-Kuttāb al-ʿArab) in Damascus, which bore the printing costs of her short story collection *Aqwā min al-sinīn* (1978) and also published her collection of literary critiques *Shawk fī l-ḥaṣīd* (1981) and her essays *Suṭūr tatajāwab* (1987). The still existing private Association of the Cultural Women's Club payed the printing costs for her collection of women's biographies, *Sābiqāt al-ʿaṣr* (1987).

In 1982, her study on the love mystic Rabiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya, originally from 1955, was translated into English by Nabil Safwat (Nabīl Ṣafwat)[136]. The novelist (and later Nobel laureate) Doris Lessing (1919–2013), well-known for the spiritual echoes in her novels, contributed the preface. The connection between Sakakini and Lessing came through the British-Afghan writer Idries Shah (1924–1996), who was the

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132 Dāghir, al-Maḥāsinī, p. 1136; Samāʾ al-Maḥāsinī, Zakī l-Maḥāsinī, p. 23.

133 See ʿĪsā Fattūḥ, Widād Sakākīnī. Adībāt min Sūriyya, in: al-Adīb 5 (1964), p. 22; Shaʿbān Khalīfa, Taqdīm, in: Sakākīnī, Wujūh ʿarabiyya, p. 11; Ottosson Bitar, I Can Do Nothing, p. 42.

134 Khalīfa, Taqdīm, p. 11.

135 Sakākīnī, Widād Sakākīnī, p. 168. This might be an indication of Sakakini's relative distance to mass organizations in Baʿthist Syria. The foundation of the state-lead General Union of Syrian Women (Al-Ittiḥād al-ʿĀm li-l-Marʾa al-Sūriyya, founded in 1967) alienated the women activists of Sakakini's generation; on this see Esther Meininghaus, Creating Consent in Baʿthist Syria. Women and Welfare in a Totalitarian State, London/New York 2016, pp. 103–105.

136 Widad Sakakini, First Among Sufis. The Life and Thought of Rabia al-Adawiyya, the Woman Saint of Basra, London 1982.

author of the bestselling book *The Way of the Sufi* (1969), as well as an intimate friend of Lessing's. He made contact to Zaki al-Mahasini to ask him about the situation of Sufis in various Arab countries while working on his research project »Sufi Studies East and West« in the 1970s[137]. In 1980, Idries Shah finally managed to visit the Mahasinis in Syria together with his daughter Amina Shah, who wanted to learn Arabic. In return, he invited Sakakini's daughter Samaʾ al-Mahasini to London and she visited Idries Shah at the Institute of Cultural Research in Kent and was able to spend some days with Amina Shah and Doris Lessing. On this occasion, she also showed Idries Shah her mother's work about Rabiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya, and Idries Shah convinced the Iraqi Nabil Safwat to translate the work and Doris Lessing contribute a foreword. In return, Samaʾ al-Mahasini translated Idries Shah's *The Way of the Sufi* into Arabic[138]. Sakakini's biography of Rabiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya has recently also been translated into Bahasa Indonesia[139]. Yārid/Baiyūmī and Ottosson Bitar mention that other parts of her work have also been translated into Russian, French, and English at various points[140].

Widad Sakakini fell ill with a nervous disorder that led to a partial paralysis in 1982. She could no longer leave her house and dictated texts to her granddaughter Huda (Hudā). She mentions her illness in her short self-description with the title *Widad Sakakini. A tireless pioneer* (*sābiqa dāʾiba*) in *Sābiqāt al-ʿaṣr* and continues: »In spite of this, she stays in touch with people. Those who are faithful in their friendship look for her and visit her from time to time. She is preparing manuscripts for publication in Damascus«[141]. She died of a heart attack on May 3, 1991.

Already during her lifetime, her literary work was praised, with the Beiruti literary journal *al-Adīb*, in which Widad Sakakini and Zaki al-Mahasini had regularly published articles since its foundation in 1942, standing out in particular. In every decade since the late 1950s, *al-Adīb* published an article in which a literary critic lauded her achievements as a writer[142]. The critics underlined her elegant style and empathy for women of different ages and backgrounds that no male writer

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137   The following information go back to the author's interview with Samaʾ AL-MAḤĀSINI, 23 August 2003, Damascus.

138   Samaʾ AL-MAḤĀSINI, Ṭarīqat al-ṣūfī, Damascus 1989.

139   Widad SAKAKINI, Dongeng cinta sang perawan. Biografi makrifat cinta Rabi'ah al-Adawiyyah, Jogjakarta 2007.

140   YĀRID/BAIYŪMĪ, al-Kātibāt al-lubnāniyyāt, p. 74; according to OTTOSSON BITAR, I Can Do Nothing, pp. 200f., three short stories have been translated into Russian and French. I was unable to verify this information. According to ʿĪsā FATTŪḤ, even »most parts« of the short story collection *al-Sitār al-marfūʿ* have been translated into Russian and French, see FATTŪḤ, Widād Sakākīnī (1964), p. 19.

141   SAKĀKĪNĪ, Widad Sakakini, p. 168.

142   Fāḍil AL-SIBĀʿĪ, Widād Sakākīnī wa-l-ibdāʿ al-fannī, in: al-Adīb 5 (1957), pp. 16–19; FATTŪḤ, Widād Sakākīnī (1964), pp. 18–22; Muḥsin JAMĀL AL-DĪN, al-Sayyida Widād Sakākīnī, in: al-Adīb 10 (1975), pp. 26f.; Manwar FAWWĀL, Widād Sakākīnī adībat al-quṭrayn, in: al-Adīb 3/4 (1983), pp. 24f.

could match[143]. They also highlighted that her stories featured common people and popular subjects[144]. Moreover, they emphasized that she took the liberty to choose her subjects without regard to any literary school, thus not imitating a certain trend or style, but creating her own[145]. They also singled out her »sincerity« (*ṣidq*)[146] as an author, both in her truthful depiction of Arab women's lives and in the sharpness of her essayistic or literary criticism, which knew no room for flattery.

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al-Sibāʿī's article is technically a review article of Sakakini's short story collection *al-Sitār al-marfūʿ*, but he writes his detailed critique with a view to an overall consideration of Sakakini's oeuvre.

143  AL-SIBĀʿĪ, Widād Sakākīnī, p. 16; FATTŪḤ, Widād Sakākīnī (1964), p. 18; FAWWĀL, Widād Sakākīnī, p. 24; JAMĀL AL-DĪN, al-Sayyida, p. 27.

144  AL-SIBĀʿĪ, Widād Sakākīnī, p. 18; FAWWĀL, Widād Sakākīnī, p. 24; FAWWĀL, Widād Sakākīnī, p. 24.

145  AL-SIBĀʿĪ, Widād Sakākīnī, p. 16; FATTŪḤ, Widād Sakākīnī (1964), p. 19; JAMĀL AL-DĪN, al-Sayyida, p. 26; FAWWĀL, Widād Sakākīnī, p. 24.

146  FATTŪḤ, Widād Sakākīnī (1964), pp. 18f. and 22; FAWWĀL, Widād Sakākīnī, p. 24.

## II.  Widad Sakakini's Position in the Literary Field



Fig. 5   Widad Sakakini together with the »Dean of Arabic literature«, Taha Husayn, Zaki al-Mahasini, and Mansur Fahmi, professor of philosophy at Cairo University (from right to left).
Source: Printing permission by Sama' al-Mahasini.

While all authors strive to accumulate cultural capital through their activities, Widad Sakakini had a rather exposed position. She was one of the very few women in the male-dominated transnational Arabic literary field; she also had no university degree in a field of activity that was dominated by a small set of elite academics[1]. Furthermore, her knowledge of foreign languages was rather limited[2]. Other promi-

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1  Muṣṭafā, Muḥāḍarāt, pp. 230–232. In 1931, the literacy rate in Syra was 28 percent, four percent of the population had a secondary school education, see Khouri, Syria and the French Mandate, p. 411.
2  Author's interview with ʿĪsā Fattūḥ, 31 May 2003, who knew Sakakini very well.

nent women writers—such as the Egyptians Bint al-Shati' or Suhayr al-Qalamawi (see below chapter II. 4)—were students when they started publishing, and went on to earn doctorates. The writing of a *qiṣṣa*, an unclearly defined term that at first covered the short story as well as the novel, was a cause for much debate among scholars; the practice of writing *qiṣaṣ* required learning and erudition, especially since the models came from European languages—French, English, Italian, German, and Russian—that were read, translated, discussed, and adapted[3].

In this context, Sakakini's position in the literary field was determined not only by her gender, but also by a lack of cultural capital, which meant that she was viewed differently and had to act differently. While she fought for women's right to free speech, she also demanded a cultivated women's literature; and while she came to embrace a rather critical attitude towards the dominant (male) culture, she was dependent on men's recognition of her talents and on their promotion of her critical work. As will be shown in this chapter, the male consecration of her work had ambivalent effects. Therefore, she did not exclusively have contact with other women and like-minded authors; her network of men and women rather cut across gender as well as ideological boundaries. This structural positioning is homologous to the contents of feminist criticism that also cuts across gender and ideologies. The in-between-position was simultaneously an opportunity and a problem. While Sakakini could build on various personal connections, she did not subscribe to a certain group spirit. This also offered her the possibility to act relatively independently and outspokenly as a critic—which could lead to irritation among the criticized.

Sakakini's structural position as a female writer was also clearly linked to the content of her criticism. As she demanded *inṣāf al-mar'a*, »the just treatment of women«, in her collection of feminist essays, her general point of view was that women were neglected or underestimated by men and that they should be accepted as »the other half of the world«, in the words of feminist pioneer Zaynab Fawwaz[4]. This view principally sought to overcome the opposition between man and woman that structures the social world as a whole. It re-interprets the opposition as a dualism and seeks for a harmonious equilibrium between the presumably opposed poles.

This approach was not limited to Sakakini's feminist criticism, but also inspired a similar form of critique in other areas of her thought and writing. It thus shaped her view on modernity, politics, and religion. Formulated in a very general manner, she argued that the new in literature should be based on the oft-neglected old.

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3  MuṣṬafā, Muḥāḍarāt, pp. 240–245.

4  See Zaynab Fawwāz, Rasā'il Zaynabiyya, Cairo 2014, p. 66, and Bräckelmann, »Wir sind die Hälfte der Welt!«.

She also complained that the rationality of modernity often excluded spirituality. While she was critical of a literary movement that neglected women and the Arabic written tradition, she was also not fond of women's literature that exclusively presented positive images of women and sceptical of a women's movement that neglected religion.

In this chapter, I start by having a look at the ambivalent consecration of Widad Sakakini's work by men in the literary field (II.1). In this context, I discuss the critical reception of her character and style, as well as her position regarding other writers in the field. I then try to highlight her multi-layered contacts. My aim is to show that she acted not as an isolated player, but as a socially embedded actor with various loyalties. Then, I unravel her views on women's and feminist literature (II.2). Her own role model was Mayy Ziyada, with whom she was compared both by herself and others.

The aim of the whole chapter is to show that Widad Sakakini is exemplary of the differentiation and specialization of women's role in the Arab public sphere since the 1920s. Sakakini had close contacts to the women's movement in Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon and was an intimate observer of their activities, yet she considered herself not an activist, but a writer. In spite of this, it would be wrong to understand her work as detached from women's activism. It was a part as well as a result of women's activism. Therefore, I finally depict the transnational network of women around her (II.3).

## 1. Circles of Consecration

### 1.1 Mutual Recognition

A foreword written by someone other than the primary author of a book is a site of acknowledgement that is usually integrated in wider circles of legitimatization. Forewords are not only essential parts of the players' investment in the literary field and provide information about their views on the criteria for good literature; they also show who shares literary tastes and who is connected with whom. For newcomers, forewords also play the role of admission tickets to the literary field. In Sakakini's case, all of these elements are visible in addition to the emphasis of her gender. The already mentioned nine forewords for her debut *al-Khaṭarāt* (1932) were written by other literati such as Muhammad Jamil Bayhoum, known for their support of women's education. In them, the authors attested that her thoughts were appropriate »food for the youth intellectually, rhetorically, and in plain literary

style«[5], in the words of Bishara Khuri, and that she could keep up with men and even surpass most of them in her art because she knew women better than male writers[6]. Shaykh Ghalayini further certified the young woman's ideas as permissible in Islam. Such declarations of no objection and harmlessness in a literary or religious sense have the paradoxical effect that they—by directly or indirectly emphasizing Sakakini's gender—reduce her to it and make her an extraordinary case even as they attempt to dissipate prejudices about women. Although players in the literary field have to play by literary rules, it becomes obvious here that the issue of gender seeps into the literary criteria, directly or indirectly, and that there is no way of avoiding the issue of gender. Paradoxically, the talk about Sakakini's abilities as a woman stabilizes gender constructions, even though it aims to destabilize traditional gender roles.

The same can be said of the three forewords for Sakakini's first short story collection *Marāya l-nās* (1944) that represented an important form of acknowledgment. They were written by the Syrian literary critic »Prince« Mustafa al-Shihabi (al-Amīr Muṣṭafā al-Shihābī), the then already famous Egyptian short-story writer Mahmud Taymur, and the Lebanese writer Karam Melhem Karam (Karam Mulḥim Karam, 1903–1959)[7].

Mustafa al-Shihabi (1893–1968)[8] began his foreword by reminding his readers of Sakakini's first work and of the fact that he had reviewed it in the journal of the Arab Academy in Damascus[9]: Without going into detail, he mentioned that he had highlighted »the merits as well as the flaws«[10] of her book in the usual style of the Academy. Al-Shihabi had indeed complained that the book's treatment of its

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5  See Bishāra ᴀʟ-Kʜūʀī, Kalimat al-shāʿir al-ʿabqarī wa-l-ṣaḥāfī l-qadīr al-ustādh Bishāra al-Khūrī ṣāḥib »al-Baraq« al-agharr, in: Sᴀᴋᴀᴋīɴī, al-Khaṭarāt, p. wāw; also quoted ʿAlī Rashād ʿᴀʙᴅ ᴀʟ-Muʾᴍɪɴ/Manāl Kamāl ʿᴀʙᴅ ᴀʟ-Rᴀḥᴍāɴ, Najamāt wa-kawākib fī samāʾ al-iqtiṣād al-manzalī, 1937–1980, n.p. 2019, p. 94.

6  ᴀʟ-Kʜūʀī, Kalimat al-shāʿir, p. wāw.

7  al-Amīr Muṣṭafā Sʜɪʜāʙī, Kalimat al-ʿallāma al-adīb maʿālī l-Amīr Muṣṭafā l-Shihābī, in: Sᴀᴋᴀᴋīɴī, Marāyā l-nās, pp. 5f.; Maḥmūd Tᴀʏᴍūʀ, Kalimat al-ustādh Maḥmūd Taymūr Bey, zaʿīm al-qiṣṣā fī Miṣr, in: Sᴀᴋᴀᴋīɴī, Marāyā l-nās, pp. 7f.; Karam Mulḥim Kᴀʀᴀᴍ, Kalimat al-ustādh Karam Mulḥim Karam, imām al-qiṣṣa fī Lubnān, in: Sᴀᴋᴀᴋīɴī, Marāyā l-nās, pp. 9f.

8  Born in Hasbayya (in today's Lebanon), he studied agriculture in Paris and Istanbul. When his brother was executed by the Ottomas in 1916, he became an ardent Arab nationalist. Beginning in the 1920s and the 1930s, he held various governmental posts; in the 1940s, he was appointed governor of Lattakia and Aleppo. In the mid-1950s, he became Syria's first ambassador to Egypt. From 1959 to his death, he was President of the Arab Academy in Damascus. See: Sāmī al-Kᴀʏʏāʟī, al-Amīr Muṣṭafā al-Shihābi, in: Idem, al-Adab al-ʿarabī, pp. 299–303. Moᴜʙᴀʏᴇᴅ, Steel & Silk, pp. 120f.

9  al-Amīr Muṣṭafā Sʜɪʜāʙī, al-Khaṭarāt. Kitāb adab wa-akhlāq wa-jtimāʿ bi-qalam Widād Sakākīnī, in: Majallat al-Majmaʿ al-ʿIlmī l-ʿArabī fī Dimashq (RAAD) 5/6 (1932), pp. 382f.

10  Sʜɪʜāʙī, Kalimat al-ʿallāma, p. 5.

subject (which according to its subtitle was about ethics and society) was »weak«[11], lacking intellectual depth and a careful study of the relevant literature. While he praised Sakakini's style as surpassing »the style of a large number of those who are called literati and authors«[12], he then listed several unfortunate formulations from her essays. He concluded this unflattering criticism by at least unreservedly praising Sakakini's motivation for writing the essays, noting that the content of the book showed a sincere patriotic spirit, love of the Arabic language and a striving for higher morals. Now, in the foreword to her second book, al-Shihabi continued to recount that, when he met Sakakini a few years later personally, she came straight to the point by saying that his criticism had been »painful«[13] for her. Al-Shihabi, however, replied to this that the lesson, »in spite of its mercilessness«[14], seemed to have been useful and helped to improve her writing—which was, after all, the main aim of reviews in the journal of the Arab Academy. Thus, he praised her »upscale style, the good wording, the precise description, and the deep thoughts«[15] in her short stories. He especially expressed his admiration for her literary descriptions of women's lives »because it is impossible for the man, however well-versed in rhetorics he may be, to describe the movements of the soul in a life that he doesn't live«[16]. He not only stated that the stories combined pleasure with benefit, he also designed a task that Sakakini took to heart in the years to come: »If only Mrs. Widad were to deal with women's issues frequently, she would be of undeniable moral benefit to the readers by describing the lives of women in our homes and our societies and by immortalizing on paper the female customs that are slowly disappearing under the deluge of European influence.«[17]

This foreword as well as the episode connected with it is not only remarkable in itself, but also because al-Shihabi was a representative of the Arab Academy at that time as well as its vice president and its president in the 1950s and 1960s. Furthermore, when he became the Syrian ambassador to Egypt in the mid-1950s, while al-Mahasini was cultural attaché, al-Shihabi became not only one of the closest friends of Sakakini, but together they turned »the embassy into the prayer direction (*qibla*) of all scholars and intellectuals of Egypt«[18], in the words of journalist Wadiʿ

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11  Idem, al-Khaṭarāt, p. 383.

12  Ibid.

13  Idem, Kalimat al-ʿallāmat, p. 5.

14  Ibid.

15  Ibid., pp. 5f.

16  Ibid., p. 6.

17  Ibid.

18  Filasṭīn, Widād Sakākīnī, p. 98.

Filastin. Sakakini later called Mustafa al-Shihabi the person, who encouraged her and criticized her first steps in literature[19].

Mahmud Taymur, a leading voice of the Madrasa al-Ḥadītha (»The Modern School«), shaped a style that was committed to literary realism, social criticism, and psychological insights[20]. As this was the dominant literary trend in Egypt at the time, Taymur's expression of admiration for Sakakini's »refined art«[21] indicated that she lived up to the credentials of his group. This praise may have been partially inspired by the fact that Sakakini had previously described »Taymur's art«[22], in an article of the same name in the Egyptian journal *al-Risāla*, as multi-colored, creative, and ever-evolving. Taymur singled out three characteristics of Sakakini's short stories. He praised, firstly, her profound psychological analysis of women's emotions and, secondly, her accurate observation powers, which, he emphasized, were one of the most important components that made up a writer. Finally, he also stressed »the independence« (*istiqlāl*)[23] of her writing, which was »free from any foreign influence« (*khulūṣ hādhā l-fann min ayy mu'aththar ajnabī*)[24]. »In her writings, the author Mrs. Widad proceeds from a fertile ground at which her particular skills, which derive from her Oriental personality, sparkle; thus, she assembles in them the particular qualities of Oriental writing with its fables, its simplicity, and its courteousness.«[25]

In his foreword, Karam Melhem Karam[26] briefly recapitulated the development of the Arabic short story. He noted the limited beginnings before World War I—which according to him had been inspired by a revival of the prosimetric literary genre of the *maqāmāt* as well as by translations from European languages—only to bemoan finally, how widespread the art of story writing had become in his days so that, »everyone who carries a pen sees in the novel (*qiṣṣa*) or the short story (*aqṣūṣa*) the goal of his persistent search (*ḍāllatuhu*)«[27]. But in contrast to many others, Sakakini knew how to write short stories that were elegant in structure, deep in analysis, and reduced to the essential. It was no exaggeration to say that her

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19  Widād Sakākīnī, Kalimat al-mu'allifa, in: Eadem, Niqāṭ 'alā l-ḥurūf, p. 9.

20  On him and the *Madrasa al-ḥadīṯa* see Jan Brugman, An Introduction to the History of Modern Arabic Literature in Egypt, Leiden 1984, pp. 249–268; Wielandt, Das erzählerische Frühwerk.

21  Taymūr, Kalimat al-ustāḏ Maḥmūd Taymūr Bey, p. 7.

22  Widād Sakākīnī, Fann Taymūr, in: al-Risāla 421 (July 1941), pp. 959f.

23  Taymūr, Kalimat al-ustāḏ Maḥmūd Taymūr Bey, p. 8.

24  Ibid.

25  Ibid.

26  Karam belonged to »the League of Ten« around Hobeiche and pledged himself to literary renewal. He was a short story writer, literary critic, and journalist.

27  Karam, Kalimat al-ustāḏ Karam Malḥam Karam, p. 9.

eloquence puts to shame the hollow pomp (*bahraja*) of a large number of colorless writers, who enjoy fame in the realm of pens, since in her style lie rhetoric and beauty. When a woman has reached this outstanding literary position, she belongs to the gifted ones. Therefore, she is allowed to have ambitions and is entitled to success. She has become equal to man, though he imagines that no woman can match him.[28]

These forewords provided substantial credibility to Sakakini since the authors were considered outstanding writers. Mustafa al-Shihabi was a widely acknowledged scholar. Mahmud Taymur and Karam Melhem Karam were described as *zaʿīm al-qiṣṣā fī Miṣr* (»the leader of the short story in Egypt«) and *imām al-qiṣṣa fī Lubnān* (»the master of the short story in Lebanon«) in the subtitle of their respective forewords.

What is printed as the foreword for the second edition of Sakakini's feminist essays in *Inṣāf al-marʾa* ([1]1950, [2]1989) was originally the review of the first edition by the prominent Egyptian literary critic Shawqi Dayf (Shawqī Ḍayf, 1910–2005). Dayf was a former student of Taha Husayn and a colleague of Ahmad Amin, who was chief editor of the journal *al-Thaqāfa*, in which Dayf's review appeared[29]. He stated that Sakakini's work »belongs to the best books written on the women's cause. […] You will not find a book in which modern Arab women's history has been laid down with more reliability«[30]. He was particularly impressed by the wide range of topics that Sakakini addressed from ancient Greece to modern France, as well as from the ancient to the modern history of Arab women. He also appreciated Sakakini's style, especially her use of old Arabic poetic expressions as well as of expressions taken from the Qurʾan. With Sakakini's focus on literature, the arts and girls' education, he characterized her approach not as »a revolution against the heritage of the forefathers«[31], but as a call for »reform, education, and guidance« (*iṣlāḥ wa-tahdhīb wa-irshād*)[32]. Three times he called her approach »calm« (*hādiʾ*)[33] and underlined

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28  Ibid., p. 10.

29  Shawqī Ḍᴀʏꜰ, Inṣāf al-marʾa, taʾlīf al-sayyida Widād Sakākīnī, in: al-Thaqāfa 615 (October 1950), pp. 21f.; idem, Taqdīm, in: Widād Sᴀᴋᴀᴋɪɴɪ, Inṣāf al-marʾa, Damascus [2]1989, pp. 9–14. He published innovative studies on Arabic prose and poetry since the 1940s. His interests covered nearly all fields of Arabic literature, and later he wrote a monumental ten-volume history of Arabic literature (Shawqī Ḍᴀʏꜰ, Tārīkh al-adab al-ʿarabī, Cairo 1961–1996). He was President of the Academy of the Arabic Language in Cairo from 1996 to his death in 2005. On Dayf see Adel S. Gᴀᴍᴀʟ, Ḍayf, Shawqī, in: Fʟᴇᴇᴛ et al. (eds.), Encyclopaedia of Islam Three. He also wrote a positive review of Zaki al-Mahasini's doctoral thesis, see Shawqī Ḍᴀʏꜰ, Shiʿr al-ḥarb fī adab al-ʿarab li-duktūr Zakī l-Maḥāsinī, in: Sᴀᴋᴀᴋɪɴɪ (ed.), al-Duktūr Zakī l-Maḥāsinī, pp. 157–160.

30  Ḍᴀʏꜰ, Taqdīm, pp. 11f.

31  Ibid., p. 12.

32  Ibid., p. 14.

33  Ibid., pp. 11 and 13.

that she refrained from reproaching the opposite sex. In her introduction to the second edition of the work, Bouthaina Shaaban also refered to Sakakini's »calm«[34] answer to misogyny. She pointed out that Sakakini's book was not the first that used the notions of »women's literature« (*al-adab al-nisāʾī*) and »feminist critique« (*al-naqd al-nisāʾī*)[35], but that it was the first that discussed these notions »with this seriousness and objectivity«[36].

Once again, these examples testify to a gender-specific form of appreciation for these feminist essays, whose merit is to be a »calm« rather than a sharp or biting criticism. This wording also reflects that Sakakini strove for balance between the two sexes—for *inṣāf*, a just treatment; she certainly did not call for revolutionary up-heaval[37].

Muhammad Mandur's (Muḥammad al-Mandūr, 1906–1965) foreword to *Niqāt ʿalā ḥurūf* (*Dots on the Letters*, 1962) was of the utmost importance for the recog-nition of Widad Sakakini's skills as a literary critic. Mandur had been part of the literary circle around Taha Husayn since the 1920s, but became a »spokesman for socialist involvement in literary criticism«[38] beginning in the mid-1940s. His foreword appeared in a collection of Sakakini's literary criticism. As the book was printed and published in Cairo, Sakakini later decided to re-publishd most parts of it, including the foreword, in *Shawk fī l-ḥaṣīd* (*Thorns in the Harvest*) in Damascus in 1981. The importance of Mandur's praise for Sakakini is also underlined by the fact that it has been reprinted in full length in the 2019 volume of the Syrian Cultural Club (al-Nadwa al-thaqāfiyya) in honor of Sakakini[39].

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34  Shaʿbān, Muqaddima, p. 16.

35  Ibid.

36  Ibid., p. 17.

37  This has also been noted by ʿĀtif al-Buṭrus, Widād Sakākīnī wa-qaḍiyat al-marʾa, in: Mālik Ṣuqūr/ Nazīh al-Khūrī (eds.), Widād Sakākīnī bayna l-baḥth wa-l-ibdāʿ, Damascus 2019, pp. 38–40.

38  Brugman, An Introduction, p. 402. Mandur studied law and literature at Cairo University; with the help of Taha Husayn, he obtained a scholarship to continue his studies in Paris in 1930. In 1943, he wrote a dissertation under the supervision of Ahmad Amin about *al-Naqd al-manhajī ʿinda l-ʿarab* (*Methodical Critique among the Arabs*). He resigned from his university duties, when he was not offered an academic position, and worked as an editor, translator, and journalist. See, Salma Khadra Jayyusi, Trends and Movements in Modern Arabic Poetry, Leiden 1977, pp. 522–529; Brugman, An Introduction, pp. 402–410.

39  Muḥammad Mandūr, Widād Sakākīnī wa-l-naqd al-multazim, in: Sakākīnī, Niqāṭ ʿalā l-ḥurūf, pp. 3–7. The text is reprinted as Muqaddimat al-duktūr Muḥammad Mandūr, in: Sakākīnī, Shawk fī l-ḥaṣīd, pp. 7–12. It appears without source evidence as Muḥammad Mandūr, Baʿḍan mimmā qāluhu l-nāqid Muḥammad Mandūr fī l-adība Widād Sakākīnī, in: Ṣuqūr/Khūrī, Widād Sakākīnī, pp. 41–46.

In his foreword, Muhammad Mandur related Sakakini's work to Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of *literature engagée* that had been translated as *iltizām* and adopted by Taha Husayn and other mostly leftist Arab authors[40].

> Although the writer started to compose novels and short stories before the idea of engagement (*iltizām*) in literature spread across our Arab world from the most modern literary schools in the world, she was, however, already rightly guided in her literature to this idea by her own inspiration and a sincere feeling for the needs of our Arab society, a society, whose substance has not been gnawed on by anything, such as hypocrisy, cowardice or fear of responsibility.[41]

Mandur stressed that Sakakini was not only an »engaged« (*multazim*) writer in her narrative work, but also an »engaged critic« (*nāqida multazima*)[42]. She did not flee her responsibility to defend her positions, but exerted a brave and fearless form of criticism since a long time on the pages of journals and magazines. Although he neither held her critiques for flawless nor concurred with everything she wrote, he saw her opinions as objectively justified, worthy of respect and open for further debate[43]. Mandur also stressed that there were several talented female authors, who worked in short stories, novels, and poems. However, in the field of literary criticism, there was not a similar female presence. Literary talent was not enough for a critic, who should have a deep knowledge and understanding of culture in a broad sense, as well as of its various expressions and tendencies. Mandur not only praised Widad Sakakini for her critical abilities, he also underlined that the courage of her critiques had brought her some distress and trouble[44]. Yet, he expressed his belief that she was to find appreciation among her readers—especially among the younger generation for whom the articles had been collected—as a kind of consolation.

Whereas the forewords to *Khaṭarāt* and *Marāya l-nās* were words of encouragement from established writers who were presenting a young talent, Mandur's foreword took stock of 30 years of Sakakini's creative work. He did not introduce the book of a barely known writer, but justified the collection of her already published articles as illustrative material for brave literary criticism. Therefore, this foreword

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40  Verena KLEMM, Literarisches Engagement im arabischen Nahen Osten. Konzepte und Debatten, Würzburg 1998; eadem, Changing Notions of Commitment (*Iiltizām*) and Committed Literature (*al-adab al-multazim*) in the Literary Circles of the Middle East, in: Journal of Arabic and Middle Eastern Literatures 3, 1 (2000), pp. 51–62.

41  MANDŪR, Widād Sakākīnī, p. 3.

42  Ibid., p. 5.

43  Ibid., p. 6.

44  Ibid., p. 7.

must be read as an acknowledgement of Sakakini's important, even singular, position in the literary field.

Forewords are not the only form of literary acknowledgment. Personal acquaintance and contact or publicly expressed appreciation are important as well. Since Sakakini became acquainted with all the prominent figures in the Egyptian literary scene after her move to Cairo, these relationships in turn helped to widen the net of her contacts and to boost her own prominence. Wadi' Filastin recounts a story the writer 'Abbas Mahmud al-'Aqqad once told him. Al-'Aqqad had thought that a male ghost writer was behind Widad's work until he visited Sakakini and discussed the Arabic language, rhetoric, and writing with her. Since that day, he was convinced that she was a writer from head to toe[45]. This story is remarkable insofar as al-'Aqqad was well-known for his misogynistic views, which inspired Sakakini to criticize him. For example, al-'Aqqad held the view that there was a natural difference between men and women and that in the competition of the sexes, men were always superior to women, even »the male cook is always better than a female cook and a male fashion designer is always better than a female fashion designer«[46]. Sakakini criticized al-'Aqqad's views in articles that had appeared 1935 in *al-Ḥadīth* and 1944 in *al-Risāla*[47]. In this respect, al-'Aqqad's acknowledgement of Sakakini's literary competence can be seen as even more important than Bayhoum's, Karam's or Taymur's because in the story, as told by Filastin, a professed misogynist finally has no choice but to confess his admiration for a woman's knowledge. In contrast to the male supporters of Arab women's emancipation, the misogynist gives Sakakini the literary consecration *in spite of* her sex, not because of it.

Sakakini's exceptional position is illustrated by the fact that she was asked by the newly founded journal *al-Thaqāfa* (*Culture*, extant 1933 to 1934)[48] in Damascus in 1933 to answer the question why young women turned away from the Arabic literature. Sakakini pointed out the still dire need for more girls' schools, the still very young women's awakening (*nahḍa*)[49] in the Arab countries, as well as at the

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45  FILASṬĪN, Widād Sakākīnī, p. 93.

46  Quoted by ELSADDA, Discourses, p. 48.

47  For the relevant passages, see SAKĀKĪNĪ, Inṣāf al-marʾa, p. 27; eadem, al-Marʾa wa-l-taʿlīm al-ʿālī, p. 133; eadem, Aʿdāʾ al-marʾa, pp. 156–158; eadem, Ilā l-duktūr Ḥussām al-Khaṭīb, in: Eadem, Shawk fī l-ḥaṣīd, p. 212. Also compare OTTOSSON BITAR, I Can Do Nothing, pp. 42f.

48  The poet Khalīl Mardam Bey (1895–1959), the philosopher Jamīl Ṣalība (1902–1976), and the writers Kāẓim Daghestānī (1898–1985) and Kāmil ʿIyyād founded the journal with the goal of spreading modern literature in Syria.

49  In her article about the reasons for the stagnation of the female *nahḍa* in the same journal, Mary ʿAjami pointed out that educational societies had been founded in Lebanon and Syria just ten years before with the goal of raising women's positions; she bemoaned that educated women only contributed to these societies when they were invited to give a talk, see Mārī ʿAJAMĪ, al-Nahḍa al-nisāʾiyya fī Sūriyā wa-Lubnān, in: al-Thaqāfa 1 (1933), pp. 64–66.

governments' and the peoples' lacking interest in reviving Arabic cultural heritage; she deplored distorted views on literature especially in the conservative milieu and summoned government and people to join forces to combat the factors that kept young women away from literature[50].

Five years later, the editor of the Egyptian cultural journal *al-Risāla*, Ahmad Hassan al-Zayyat (Aḥmad Ḥasan al-Zayyāt, 1885–1968), still deplored the scant number of women who could express themselves in Arabic and enumerated besides Sakakini one Syrian and four Egyptian women, all of whom had already published articles in his journal[51]. He had a twofold explanation for the nearly complete absence of women authors in his journal. Firstly, most Arab women still lacked the necessary education and, secondly, many educated women were educated in foreign languages.

In this context, it was almost inevitable that writers would sooner or later have something positive to say about Sakakini as a women writer—and that these statements would be quoted over and over again as proof of her literary talents. In his anthology of the Lebanese short story, for example, Shawqī Badr Yūsuf quotes Muhammad Mandur and two further warrantors, the writer Taha Husayn and the female journalist Amina Saʿid (Amīna Saʿīd).[52] Taha Husayn had to say: »Read this writer. She has a vision and is brilliant in research and biography«[53]. Amina Said's oft-quoted statement reads:

> When Widad Sakakini is mentioned, every Arab people considers her one of their own. Thus, the Lebanese boast of her national origin (*jinsiyya*), the Syrians cling to her residency (*tawaṭṭun*) and identity, and the Egyptians see in her production the truest picture of the Egyptian literary mentality (*ʿaqliyya*). The truth is that all of them are right because in Widad there is the fragrance (*nafḥa*) of Lebanon, the depth (*ʿumq*) of Syria, and the sensibility (*ḥasāsiyya*) of Egypt so that when she writes, she carries you on the wings of literature to the remotest parts of this compilation of these precious properties.[54]

Consecrations in the literary field are mostly reciprocal and form circuits of (self-) legitimization. Since I have now shed a light on how other writers saw Sakakini, it

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50 Widād SAKĀKĪNĪ, Mā sabab inṣirāf al-fatayāt ʿan al-adab al-ʿarabī?, in: al-Thaqāfa 4 (1933), pp. 368–371.

51 Aḥmad Ḥasan AL-ZAYYĀT, al-Marʾa wa-l-adab, in: al-Risāla 240 (February 1938), p. 202. The other women were Falak Ṭarazī (a communist writer from Syria), Asmāʾ Fahmī, Suhayr al-Qalamāwī, Bint al-Shāṭiʾ, and Gamīla al-ʿAlāyilī. Also compare OTTOSSON BITAR, I Can Do Nothing, p. 52.

52 Shawqī Badr YŪSUF, al-Qiṣṣa al-qaṣīra al-nisawiyya lubnāniyya. Anṭūlūjiyā, Giza 2010, pp. 19f.

53 Ibid., p. 19.

54 Ibid., pp. 19f. It was quoted for example by FATTŪḤ, Widād Sakākīnī (1964), p. 18.

is not surprising that she payed tribute to the generation of Taha Husayn, Mahmud Taymur, and Muhammad Mandur for their support of her.

To begin with, she called Mayy Ziyada »my highest ideal« (*mathalī l-aʿlā*)[55] and considered her congenial and a kindred soul (see below). The press in Egypt and Syria in the 1960s also came to call her »Mayy's successor« (*khalīfat Mayy*)[56]. This appraisal certainly derived from Sakakini's stature in the literary field. It also hinted at the fact that both women stemmed from Lebanon and came of literary age in Egypt. Mayy is thus depicted as lighting a torch, which Widad carried on. Sakakini's reference to Mayy Ziyada must be read as a clear statement that she located herself in the lineage of modern Arab female writers. Thus, she positioned herself in a female and feminist tradition although, as we will see shortly, all of her other Arab literary authorities were male writers.

In an interview at about 1960, she named—next to Mayy Ziyada—Taha Husayn as the writer to whom she felt closest[57]. In the 1980s, she also called Taha Husayn and ʿAbbas Mahmud al-ʿAqqad »the two eternal critics«[58], who had been her role models for literary critique. In an interview in 1990, she named Muhammad Kurd ʿAli in the first place, followed by Taha Husayn, the Egyptian literary critic and poet Ahmad Shayib (Aḥmad Shāyib, 1896–1971), the Egyptian historian Ahmad Amin (Aḥmad Amīn, 1878–1953), and the critic Muhammad Mandur, stating: »These were the vanguard of those who encouraged me and got me started writing.«[59] Sakakini considered Ahmad Amin to be the first modern Arab historian to write a history of early Islam[60]. Amin was also the editor of the journals *al-Risāla* and *al-Thaqāfa* in Cairo, to which Sakakini contributed regularly. Amin was known for his outspoken criticism and complained in 1935 that although »more and more was being written, there was less and less genuine and constructive criticism«[61]. In this respect, he also noted that politics had meddled with literature and thus spoiled literature as well as literary criticism[62]. In 1954, Sakakini published an obituary for Ahmad Amin in the Beiruti journal *al-Ādāb*, claiming that his death was not absolute given that he lived on in books and studies that were written for

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55 SAKĀKĪNĪ, Mayy Ziyāda, p. 6.

56 NAṢR, Udabāʾ, p. 265 (caption).

57 Ibid., p. 290.

58 SAKĀKĪNĪ, al-Khuṣūma fī l-naqd, p. 28.

59 MĀRDĪNĪ, al-Adība. On Ahmad Amin, see Emmanuelle PERRIN, Amīn, Aḥmad, in: FLEET et al. (eds.), Encyclopaedia of Islam Three. Shayib wrote an Arabic standard work on literary criticism that saw many editions, see Aḥmad AL-SHĀYIB, Uṣūl al-naqd al-adabī, Cairo 1940.

60 Amin earned this reputation by his three volumes *Fajr al-Islām*, *Ḍuḥāʾ al-Islām* and *Ẓuhr al-Islām* (1928–1953), which dealt with the emergence of Islam.

61 William SHEPARD, The Dilemma of a Liberal. Some Political Implications in the Writings of the Egyptian Scholar, Ahmad Amin (1886–1954), in: Middle Eastern Studies 16, 2 (1980), p. 86.

62 Ibid.

posterity[63]. She noted that in his works on early Islam his aim had not been to satisfy every »sect« (*ṭāʾifa*) and every »tribe« (*qawm*), »even if he remained alone in one row while the world aligned itself against him in the other«[64]. Although, as she emphasized[65], she had not been his student at university her judgement rested on the fact that she had read his publications and listened to his lectures and learned a lot from them; she also recounted that she »was happy that he had approved of her literature«[66].

That Sakakini befriended two hegemonic players of different generations and countries—Kurd ʿAli of Syria and Taha Husayn of Egypt—is certainly no coincidence. Kurd ʿAli was the founder and first president of the Arab Academy of Damascus (established in 1918). He was considered a central representative of the elder generation, already active before World War I. As author and president of the Arab Academy, he represented the »conservative« and Syrian pendant to the Egyptian authors surrounding Taha Husayn, who considered themselves younger and more progressive, as well as to the Arab Language Academy[67], which was established in 1932 in Cairo. The names that Sakakini lists as influences demonstrate that she maintained good relations to the representatives of both of these camps. Obviously, Sakakini did not share the view that there were two starkly differentiated camps. Although she criticized misogynistic phrases in Kurd ʿAli's work[68], she maintained a friendly personal relationship to him and to his daughter (see below). In the scandal following the publication of his *Mudhakkirāt* (*Memoirs*, 1948–1951), she defended him against his critics as well as his right to choose outspoken works about fellow politicians and writers[69]. She also tried to mediate the tensions between Kurd ʿAli and the Language Academy in Cairo, as Kurd ʿAli was disinvited from the Academy's meetings in Cairo on the instigation of the then President Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid and the journalist Ahmad Hassan al-Zayyat, who were among those criticized in Kurd ʿAli's work[70]. Sakakini admitted that Kurd ʿAli had used »obscene

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63 Widād Sᴀᴋᴀ̄ᴋɪ̄ɴɪ̄, Aḥmad Amīn. Muʿallim al-adab wa-rāʾid al-jīl, in: al-Ādāb 8 (1954), p. 13.

64 Ibid. This can be read as an indirect defense against the critique of anti-Shiite tendencies in Amin's works.

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid., p. 14.

67 Taha Husayn was a member of the Academy in Cairo and would become its president from 1963 to his death in 1973.

68 Eadem, Ilā l-duktūr Ḥussām al-Khaṭīb, p. 212.

69 See the reprints of her positive reviews of Kurd ʿAli's memoires: Eadem, Mudhakkirāt Kurd ʿAlī, in: Eadem, Niqāṭ ʿalā l-ḥurūf, pp. 83–87, and eadem, Ḥawla Mudhakkirāt al-ustādh Muḥammad Kurd ʿAlī, in: Eadem, Niqāṭ ʿalā l-ḥurūf, pp. 226–229.

70 See her account, eadem, Muḥammad Kurd ʿAlī min aʿlām al-muslimīn al-muʿāṣirīn, 1876–1953, in: Nahj al-Islām 25 (1986), p. 174. She mentions an article that she had written in this respect in the Egyptian journal *al-Kitāb* that was not accessible for me.

expressions« (*alfāẓ badhī'a*) in the first volume, but she noted that he had apologized for his mistake in the second volume. However, she lamented that »schemers« (*dassāsūn*) had stirred up Kurd ʿAli's feelings and tricked him into his angry criticism of »the indignant«[71]. She added that one of schemers came from Aleppo, a second one from Damascus[72]. It is easy to identify Sami al-Kayyali from Aleppo as one of the »schemers«, since he was not only a friend of Taha Husayn, but often voiced his scepticism about the »old« style of literature and language reform cultivated in Damascus[73]. Moreover, Kurd ʿAli sharply attacked al-Kayyali in the third volume of his *Mudhakkirāt* because al-Kayyali had received money as a corresponding member of the Academy, but had not fulfilled any of his duties and even sent the Academy articles that were unsuitable for publication[74].

Maybe Sakakini exaggerated her mediating role by hindsight. However, the fact that she was the only woman[75] that Kurd ʿAli mentioned in his *Mudhakkirāt*, can be taken either as an incentive for her loyalty or as proof of his gratitude. He called her an *adība daʾūba*[76], »a tireless woman of letters«—an expression she later even adopted with a slight variation as *sābiqa dāʾiba*[77], »a tireless pioneer«, in her self-description of 1986. In his half-page biographical sketch, Kurd ʿAli mentioned that Sakakini was mainly an autodidact and that »what came from her rarely comes from the bearers of certificates of higher education, and this is due to her persistence (*bi-faḍl duʾūbihā*); her production confirms that certificates are something, but not everything«[78]. He characterized Sakakini's literary, narrative, and essayistic style as having »the spirit of the new blended with something from the old«[79]. Moreover, he already compared Sakakini's ascension to fame in Egypt with Mayy Ziyada and other »Egyptianized« women from Greater Syria. For the Syrian nationalist Kurd ʿAli, the attraction of Egypt to »Syrian«[80] women was obviously a problem that demanded an explanation; it further prompted him to compare the levels of education in Egypt and Syria. Thus, he claimed that Mayy's—and implicitly Widad's—»secret« of success in Egypt was the superior perseverance of Syrian women: while Syrian

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71  All quotes ibid.

72  Ibid.

73  For al-Kayyali's critique see for example the introduction to his biographical collections, AL-KAYYĀLĪ, al-Adab al-ʿarabī, p. 34.

74  Muḥammad KURD ʿALĪ, Hamsa fī udhun al-Kayyālī, in: Idem, al-Mudhakkirāt, vol. III/IV, Damascus 1948/1951, vol. III, p. 975.

75  According to OTTOSSON BITAR, I Can Do Nothing, p. 14.

76  Muḥammad KURD ʿALĪ, Adība daʾūba, in: Idem, al-Mudhakkirāt, Damascus 1949, vol. III, p. 916.

77  SAKĀKĪNĪ, Widād Sakākīnī. Sābiqa dāʾiba, in: Eadem, Sābiqāt al-ʿaṣr, p. 167.

78  KURD ʿALĪ, Adība daʾūba, p. 916.

79  Ibid.

80  Kurd ʿAli obviously spoke of Greater Syria including Lebanon and counted Sakakini as well as Mayy Ziyada among the Syrian women.

and Egyptian women had the same means, it was Syrian women who excelled in the literary field. He also jokingly noted that the fruits of education in Egypt were far less than the expenses (meaning that Egypt profited from the influx of well-educated Syrians), and he further argued that if education was united in »the Syrian countries« (*al-diyār al-shāmiyya*), the minds of Syria would be more fertile by far than those of Egypt.

Among her early supporters, it is certainly justified to single out Ahmad ʿArif al-Zayn, founder of *al-ʿIrfān*, and Muhammad Jamil Bayhoum because she later wrote longer tribute articles for both of them, which is rather untypical for her other work. In a 1972 article for the Kuwaiti journal *al-ʿArabī*, Sakakini stressed ʿArif al-Zayn's pan-Arab convictions and counted his journal *al-ʿIrfān* among the most important journals in the Arab East[81]. About his role in the Shiite community and »his embracement of the madhhab Ḥusayn«[82], she did not really have anything to say except for mentioning the »closed milieu«[83], in which the journal was astonishingly able to appear, and the fact that many scholars from Iraq and the Jabal ʿAmil[84]—i.e. many Shiite scholars—contributed to the success of the journal, which was open to writers from all Arab countries. In 1977, she wrote her article about Bayhoum for *al-ʿIrfān*. It was reprinted after Bayhoum's death in 1979 as a form of obituary[85]. The article did not focus on the women's helper, *naṣīr al-marʾa*, but interpreted Bayhoum's engagement in the women's question against the background of a broader patriotic *jihād* for »a new life,«[86] which was comprised of the struggle against the mandate system and imperialism in general insofar as it understood Palestine as »the Andalusia of the East«, *Andalus al-sharq*[87].

Sakakini's relations in the literary field also included connections with the left side of the political spectrum. Generally, this interest in social criticism can be traced back to her preference for literary realism established by Mahmud Taymur and others. Sakakini evaluated the views of Lebanese writer ʿUmar al-Fakhuri (ʿUmar al-Fākhūrī, 1895–1946), one of the judges of the *Makshūf* jury of 1937, extensively by writing a biography about him in 1970[88]. Al-Fakhuri pleaded for committed

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81 Widād SAKĀKĪNĪ, al-Shaykh Aḥmad ʿĀrif al-Zayn munshiʾ majallat al-ʿIrfān, in: al-ʿArabī 161 (1972), pp. 112–115. Also compare her praise in eadem, Maʿa l-adab al-ʿāmilī. Dirāsa wa-naqd-wa-taḥlīl. al-Nāqid al-muʾarrikh ʿAlī l-Zayn, in: Eadem, Shawk fī l-ḥaṣīd, pp. 150–154.

82 Eadem, al-Shaykh Aḥmad ʿĀrif al-Zayn, p. 115.

83 Ibid., p. 113.

84 Ibid., p. 115.

85 Eadem, Muḥammad Jamīl Bayhum min iʿlām al-fikr wa-l-tārīkh, in: al-ʿIrfān 67, 1 (1979), pp. 24–30.

86 Ibid., p. 29.

87 Ibid.

88 Eadem, ʿUmar Fākhūrī, Cairo 1970. Sakakini mentions that al-Fakhuri stemmed from the circle around Hobeiche and that the publishing house of *al-Makshūf* published al-Fakhuri's first literary work in 1938 (ibid., p. 43) as well as her victory in the competition of 1937 (ibid., p. 97). On

literature and social realism in his book *al-Adīb fī l-sūq* (*The Writer in the Market*, 1944), recommending a clear and simple language and eschewing the position of art for art's sake as well the elaborate rhetorics of classical Arabic works[89]. Interestingly enough, al-Fakhuri combined this literary approach with a strong Arab nationalism, in which the history of early Islam—standing for religious tolerance and freedom of thought—played a central role[90]. In her portrait, Sakakini not only praised him as a novelist, critic, and speaker (on the radio); she also laid stress on his engagement as a socially and politically committed author who held an outstanding position in the Arab world because of, »his early struggle for intellectual and national liberation«[91], which was also reflected in his co-founding of the influential Lebanese Marxist journal *al-Ṭarīq* in 1941. She stressed the importance of his anti-Ottoman booklet *Kayf yanhaḍ al-ʿarab* (*How Do the Arabs Rise?*) from 1913, which had been lost for Arab readers due to Ottoman censorship, but re-discovered and partly re-printed in 1968[92], and she pleaded for a re-printing of the whole work[93]. She also highlighted his anti-fascist attitude and his loyalty to the Soviet Union due to its struggle against Nazi Germany[94], underlining his conviction that freedom and democratic principles were compatible with socialism[95].

She also befriended the Lebanese writer, journalist, and translator Niqula Haddad (Niqūla Ḥaddād, 1870–1954), who spent several years in Egypt and was married to Rose Antun (Rūz Anṭūn, d. 1955), the editor of *Majallat al-Sayyidāt wa-l-Banāt* in Alexandria (published 1903–1930) and sister of secular journalist Farah Antun (Faraḥ Anṭūn, 1874–1922)[96]. Sakakini appreciated the social criticism in Haddad's novels and his translations of works on socialism and psychology as well as his translation of Einstein's theory of relativity, the first in Arabic. In his novels, he often dedicated himself to the plights of Arab women's lives and marriage arrangements; in his widely debated *Hawwāʾ al-jadīda aw Yvonne Monar* (*The New Eve or Yvonne*

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him see also Astrid Ottosson al-Bitar, Fākhūrī, ʿUmar, in: Fleet et al. (eds.), Encyclopaedia of Islam Three.

89 On this point see David F. DiMeo, Committed to Disillusion. Activist Writers in Egypt in the 1960s–1980s, Cairo 2016, p. 45.

90 On this point see A.A. Duri, The Historical Formation of the Arab Nation. A Study in Identity and Consciousness, New York 2012, pp. 249–253.

91 Sakākīnī, ʿUmar Fākhūrī, p. 40.

92 Ibid., pp. 19 and 129f.

93 Ibid., p. 129. Since then, the work has been reprinted in different editions, see ʿUmar Fākhūrī, Kayfa yanhaḍu l-ʿarab?, Beirut 1981.

94 Sakākīnī, ʿUmar Fākhūrī, pp. 63–65, 68. On this point regarding ʿUmar al-Fakhuri and Raʾif Khouri, see Sana Tannoury-Karam, This War is Our War. Antifascism among Lebanese Leftist Intellectuals, in: Journal of World History 30, 3 (2019), pp. 415–436.

95 Sakākīnī, ʿUmar Fākhūrī, pp. 63, 70, 79.

96 See eadem, Wujūh ʿarabiyya, pp. 44–54.

*Monar*, 1906)[97], he wrote about the life of an unmarried young mother, who was considered a »fallen woman« (*imra'a sāqiṭa*) by society.

Apart from her relations to conservative, liberal, nationalist, and socialist authors, Sakakini appreciated various prominent authors on the Islamic and Islamist spectrum—such as ʿUmar Farrukh/Mustafa al-Khalidi, Anwar al-Jundi, Sayyid Qutb, Muhibb al-Din al-Khatib, and Labiba Ahmad. She generally gave them credit for cherishing the Arab-Islamic past and speaking out against excessive forms of Westernization. One of her first supporters in Egypt, ʿAbd al-Hamid Jawdat al-Sahhar, who made the publication of *Marāyā l-nās* possible and whose help Sakakini explicitly appreciated later[98], moved in the milieu of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. In 1943, he wrote a book about the Prophet's companion Abu Dharr al-Ghifari (Abū Dharr al-Ghifārī, d. 652) with a foreword by Hasan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt[99]. Sahhar argued that Abu Dharr represented an originally Islamic form of socialism, asceticism, and solidarity, which was superior to the merely materialist understandings of socialism among modern socialists, national socialist, Marxists, or communists[100].

The Lebanese writer ʿUmar Farrukh (ʿUmar Farrūkh, 1904–1987) along with Mustafa al-Khalidi (Muṣṭafā al-Khālidī), who had previously been a professor of obstetrics at the American University of Beirut, published one of the most-read polemical attacks against Christian missionaries and Western Orientalists and their involvement in »Western imperialism« in the 1950s[101]. Sakakini wrote a positive review of the book[102].

The Egyptian literary critic Anwar al-Jundi (Anwar al-Jundī, 1917–2002)[103] polemicized against Western cultural influence in the Arab world and against Taha Husayn and his followers, especially in his bio-bibliographical reference work on

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97 On this novel, see Fruma ZACHS/Sharon HALEVI, Gendering Culture in Greater Syria. Intellectuals and Ideology and Late Ottoman Syria, New York 2015, pp. 132–139. On Haddad's socialist ideas see Donald M. REID, The Syrian Christians and Early Socialism in the Arab World, in: International Journal of Middle East Studies 5 (1974), 177–193.

98 Widād SAKĀKĪNĪ, »Arwa« wa-»al-Ḥubb al-muḥarram«, in: Eadem, Shawk fī l-ḥaṣīd, p. 208.

99 ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd Jūda AL-SAḤḤĀR, Abū Dharr al-ishtirākī l-zāhid, Cairo [10]1977. For Banna's foreword see Ḥasan AL-BANNĀ, Taqdīm, in: Ibid., pp. 3–5.

100 See Werner ENDE, Arabische Nation und Islamische Geschichte. Die Umayyaden im Urteil arabischer Autoren des 20. Jahrhunderts, Beirut 1977, p. 212; Manfred SING, The Tempestuous Affair between Marxism and Islam. Attraction, Hostility, and Accommodation since 1917, in: Béatrice HENDRICH (ed.), Muslims and Capitalism. An Uneasy Relationship?, Baden-Baden 2018, pp. 81f.

101 ʿUmar FARRŪKH/Muṣṭafā AL-KHĀLIDĪ, al-Tabshīr wa-l-istiʿmār fī l-bilād al-ʿarabiyya. ʿArḍ li-juhūd al-mubashshirīn allatī tarmī ilā ikhḍāʿ al-sharq li-l-istiʿmār al-gharbī, Sidon/Beirut 1953.

102 Reprinted in Widād SAKĀKĪNĪ, al-Tabshīr wa-l-istiʿmār fī l-bilād al-ʿarabiyya, taʾlīf: al-Duktūr Muṣṭafā l-Khālidī wa-l-duktūr ʿUmar Farrūkh, in: Eadem, Niqāṭ ʿalā l-ḥurūf, pp. 120–123.

103 See Werner ENDE, al-Jundī, Anwar, in: FLEET et al. (eds.), Encyclopaedia of Islam Three.

the *Conservation and Renewal in Arabic Prose* from 1961[104]. The book contains an appreciative, even flattering chapter on the works of Widad Sakakini[105], which is remarkable insofar as Jundi still expressed the opinion in 1963 that »most of what has been published in women's magazines«[106] under women's names had been either written by male writers either for these women or using an invented name. However, Sakakini in turn praised the bio-bibliographical book in a review[107]. She does not mention al-Jundi's attacks on Taha Husayn and other »Westernized« writers, but merely states that al-Jundi studied different intellectual trends[108]. She explains that he wants to show the impact of cultural contact with the West on the Arab intellectual awakening and, at the same time, draw attention to Western and Zionist attempts to inhibit this awakening. Al-Jundi also contributed an article to the booklet that was published by Sakakini in commemoration of the first anniversary of Zaki al-Mahasini's death[109]. This article suggests a personal relationship as well as a mutual esteem between al-Jundi and the couple.

In his bio-bibliographical work, Jundi called Sakakini a talented writer and considered her to be at the head of the female authors who participated in the Arab nationalist struggle against imperialism. He praises her »deep belief in the Arab fatherland (*waṭan*), the dignity of the Arab woman, and the splendour of Arab glory«[110]. He also calls her »an Egyptian by spirit« (*miṣriyyat al-rūḥ*)[111], who deeply loves »the old Arabic literature, reads its verses, and is influenced by it in a way unknown to female authors of this age«[112]. He underlines her vast knowledge of Western literature as well as her belief in »the sincerity of the Arab personality that preserves its main features«[113]. He further notes that »she lived her intellectual life in order to defend Arab women, so that she confronts anyone who argues with her on principle or by mistake with her opinion or argument«[114]. Quoting several paragraphs from her work on various topics, Jundi and notes that she trusts in

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104 Anwar AL-JUNDĪ, al-Muḥāfaẓa wa-l-tajdīd fī l-nathr al-ʿarabī l-muʿāṣir fī miʾat ʿām 1840–1940, Cairo 1961. For other attacks see idem, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn. Ḥayatuhu wa-fikruhu fī ḍawʾ al-islām, Cairo 1976; idem, Muḥākamat fikr Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, Cairo 1984.

105 Idem, Widād Sakākīnī, al-Marʾa al-ʿarabiyya, in: Idem, al-Muḥāfaẓa wa-l-tajdīd, pp. 793–800.

106 Idem, Kātibatān wahmiyyatān, in: al-Adīb 7 (July 1963), p. 40.

107 Widād SAKĀKĪNĪ, Fī maʿrakat al-taqrīb wa-l-tabaʿiyya al-thaqāfiyya, in: Eadem, Niqāṭ ʿalā l-ḥurūf, pp. 215–217.

108 Ibid.

109 See Anwar AL-JUNDĪ, al-Duktūr al-Maḥāsinī, hādhā l-wijdān al-mashbūb, in: SAKĀKĪNĪ (ed.), al-Duktūr Zakī l-Maḥāsinī, pp. 75–78.

110 AL-JUNDĪ, Widād Sakākīnī, p. 793.

111 Ibid.

112 Ibid.

113 Ibid.

114 Ibid., p. 794.

the power of argument when she criticizes male writers like Tawfiq al-Hakim. He thus attests to her »remarkable position«[115] in short story writing and her bold critiques[116].

Moreover, Sakakini contributed to the struggle for women's emancipation by composing a book-length biography of Shaykh Qasim Amin, one of the male enablers of women's emancipation. She thus took up an important strand of modern Islamic thought, making clear that women's emancipation was no *bid'a* (»(illicit) innovation«)[117]. Sakakini also wrote articles about the prominent Muslim reformers ʿAbd al-Qadir al-Maghribi (ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Maghribī, 1857–1956) and Taher al-Jazaʾiri (Ṭāhir al-Jazāʾirī, 1852–1920) from Syria and the politician ʿAbd al-Hamid al-Zahrawi (ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd al-Zahrāwī, ca. 1855–1916), whose execution by the Ottomans made him a martyr of the Arab nationalist movement[118]. She also wrote an appreciation of Sayyid Qutb's (Sayyid Quṭb, 1906–1966) interpretative approach to the Qurʾan, which the Muslim Brother and later theoretician of revolutionary Islam had developed at the beginning of his turn to religion. She maintains that Qutb's work represents a primary example of an aesthetical and literary interpretation of the Qurʾan[119]. Sakakini also wrote appreciatively of Muhibb al-Din al-Khatib's (1886–1969) work. The Syrian living in Egypt spread Salafi ideas in his journal *al-Fatḥ*[120] and attacked liberal authors calling them Westernizers and atheists—in the same way as his pendant Muhammad Rashid Rida (Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, 1865–1935) did in *al-Manār*. In her biographical sketch of al-Khatib's life in Egypt, Sakakini stated that he had tirelessly fought against the false tendencies of Westernization; she counted him among the most important personalities struggling for Islam and Arabism[121].

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115 Ibid.

116 Ibid.

117 Sᴀᴋᴀᴋɪ̄ɴɪ̄, Qāsim Amīn, p. 46.

118 Eadem, ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Maghribī, in: al-Hilal 5 (1961), pp. 112–114; eadem, ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd al-Zahrāwī, in: al-Hilāl 7 (1961), pp. 79–82; eadem, Shaykh Ṭāhir al-Jazāʾirī, in: Nahj al-Islām 23 (1986).

119 Eadem, Min manhal al-adab al-khālid. Taʾlīf al-ustādh Muḥammad al-Mubārak, Damascus 1963, in: Eadem, Shawq fī l-ḥaṣīd, Damascus 1981, pp. 146f. and 149. She also mentions Qutb as literary critic, see eadem, al-Khuṣūma fī l-naqd, p. 27. For Qutb's books, see Sayyid Qᴜᴛʙ, al-Taswīr al-fannī fī l-Qurʾān, Cairo 1944/45; idem, Fī ẓilāl al-Qurʾān, 30 volumes, Cairo 1952–1965.

120 On him and his journal *al-Fatḥ* see Sayid Mᴇʜᴅɪ, Muslime im Zwischenkriegseuropa und die Dekonstruktion der Faszination vom Westen. Eine kritische Auseinandersetzung mit Šakīb Arslāns Artikeln in der ägyptischen Zeitschrift al-Fatḥ (1926–1935), Berlin 2015.

121 Widād Sᴀᴋᴀᴋɪ̄ɴɪ̄, Muḥibb al-Dīn al-Khaṭīb fī ʿilmihi wa-waṭanihi, in: al-Adīb 9 (1952), pp. 20–22; eadem, Muḥibb al-Dīn al-Khaṭīb, in: Eadem, Wujūh ʿarabiyya, p. 91–97.

Sakakini also mentioned the journalist Labiba Ahmad (Labība Aḥmad, d. 1951) in her article about »observant female pilgrims«[122] in *Inṣāf al-marʾa*. For Sakakini, Labiba Ahmad, who was close to the Egyptian Muslim Brothers and the Saudi king, served as an example of an educated female pilgrim, who contributed to women's *nahḍa* (»awakening«) and had been travelling regularly to Mecca for a quarter of a century. In her portraits of women pioneers, she called Labiba Ahmad an unjustly »forgotten fighter« (*mujāhida munsiya*)[123], who belonged to the avant-garde of the women's movement in Egypt. Here, Sakakini also hints at Mayy Ziyada and mentions that she wrote her most remarkable articles for the journal *Nahḍat al-Sayyidāt* (*Women's Renaissance*), which was published by Labiba Ahmad. Mayy pointed out in them that the *nahḍa* was not a result of mass demonstration and protests, but of the world's understanding that Oriental men and women were united in their nationalist and patriotic demands and that women opposed neither unveiling nor the defense of their country. For Sakakini, Labiba Ahmad seems to have anticipated the call of today's religious organizations, since she had demanded the reform of religion and followed the motto that, »there is no treatment for this sick society except in the pharmacy of faith«[124]. Sakakini concludes that if Western schools of thought had not been widespread and a new generation had not tended to strange things (*al-gharīb*), Labiba Ahmad's ideas would have been better received during her lifetime[125].

Sakakini's appreciation of authors of different ideological and religious backgrounds, as well as her support of positions taken by writers who held mutually exclusive positions in the literary field, begs for an explanation. Authors aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood or holding Salafi views treat Shiʿa Muslims, Christians, secularists, and women not only as unequal, they more or less explicitly ground their dismissive attitude in the Islamic tradition. Although Sakakini thought highly of writers of diverse confessional and ideological backgrounds—*al-ʿIrfān* as the major Shiite journal of Islamic reformism, Zaynab Fawwaz as a writer of Shiite background, and Mayy Ziyada, Niqula Haddad, and Karam Melhem Karam as authors from a Christian background—, she never directly commented on the anti-Shiite, anti-secular, or anti-feminist views of Sunni Islamist thinkers, to the best of my knowledge.

To make things even more complicated, it is worth mentioning that the different authors held contradictory views about the history of early Islam, which must have been of some importance to Widad Sakakini, especially in relation to her

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122 Eadem, Ḥajjāt mulabbiyyāt, in: Eadem, Inṣāf al-marʾa, Damascus ²1989, p. 91. On her, see also chapter VI.2.
123 Eadem, Labība Aḥmad, mujāhida munsiya, in: Eadem, Sābiqāt al-ʿaṣr, p. 10.
124 Ibid., p. 11.
125 Ibid.

study on the Prophet's wives. Thus, the Damascene scholar Muhammad Kurd ʿAli held pro-Umayyad convictions that had an anti-Shiite orientation by necessity; Muhibb al-Din al-Khatib belonged to a Salafi group of intellectuals, who were avowedly anti-Shiite scholars; Ahmad Amin—partly consciously, partly unconsciously—demonstrated anti-Shiite tendencies. In contrast, Taha Husayn tried to avoid anti-Shiite prejudices and aimed at a balanced historical view; Ahmad ʿArif al-Zayn and scholars like the Damascene Shiite al-Sayyid Muhsin al-Amin (Muḥsin Amīn, 1867–1952), who published in *al-ʿIrfān*, understood themselves as enlightened reformers of (Shiite) Islam[126].

It is reasonable to assume that not all of these contacts were equally important for Sakakini at all times. Moreover, it is probable that she followed the trajectory of the interwar generation, whose spirit of optimism was dampened by World War II, giving way to a more conservative attitude[127]. However, it is difficult to pinpoint such a shift in Sakakini's written work since she was critical of overhasty modernization and referred to the Qurʾan, Islamic history, and Arabic literature from early on. The short explanation for the diversity of her contacts that I can offer here is that Sakakini was convinced that the revival of Arab-Islamic heritage had to play an important role in modern Arab culture, literature, politics, and society. Therefore, she actively sought to introduce Islamic elements into her own texts as well as into the literary discourse in general. It seems to me that she took note of scholars' different views with great interest and appreciated—maybe with the attitude of a professional literary critic—the various exciting approaches for a modern rewriting of Arab-Islamic history.

In spite of this, she never directly re-interpreted Qurʾanic verses or discussed whether the views expressed by Muslim reformers à la Qasim Amin or Islamist thinkers à la Muhibb al-Din al-Khatib were truly »Islamic«. When she wrote a two-page article about the *Culture of the Qurʾan*[128] in 1950, she deplored a lack of education, modern literature, and Qurʾanic exegesis in Syria. She wrote that she had seen the Qurʾan in every house and school in Egypt, but not so in Syria. This explained why the Arabic of Egyptian poets was so good and why Egyptian scholars of Islam, such as Muhammad ʿAbduh (Muḥammad ʿAbdūh, 1849–1905) and Muhammad Rashid Rida, took great efforts to adapt the Qurʾanic message to contemporary needs, whereas the intellectual life in Syria was stagnating, some exceptions notwithstanding[129].

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126 On these various groups see ENDE, Arabische Nation.
127 Author's interview with Suhayl MALĀDHĪ, 5 September 2003. For Sami al-Kayyali as an example of this tendency, see SING, Illiberal Metamorphoses, pp. 293–322.
128 SAKĀKĪNĪ, Thaqāfat al-Qurʾān (1950), pp. 10f.
129 The background for this critique was that the Faculty for Arabic Literature at the University in Damascus had re-opened in 1946, after having been closed for ten years. A Faculty of Shariʿa

In this respect, her reference to the Qur'an as a source of literary Arabic can be seen as part of her legitimation strategy in the literary field. The same goes for her quotation of her teacher's saying that the Qur'an was the lexicon of the poor. Through her knowledge and use of Qur'anic terms she might have tried to compensate for her lack of university studies. Yet the stakes for which she played were not religious, but literary. Therefore, all the guiding figures that had an impact on her writing in her own account were literati in a strict sense, either in the realm of the short story, novel, or literary criticism. The craft of writing was thus her primary vocation, whereas her engagement with Arab-Islamic subjects unfolded based on this craft. In this sense, she seems to have viewed liberal writers and Islamist authors as two camps belonging together—just like other presumable oppositions such as Orient and Occident or rationality and faith. I come back to her tendency towards harmonizing such opposites on a more general and theoretical level further below in the summary of this sub-chapter (see chapter II.1.3).

In this context, it is, however, worth mentioning that Sakakini's mixed group of friends, idols, warrantors, and acquaintances is exactly reflected by Zaki al-Mahasini in his work and his *Dīwān*. He held lectures on Ahmad Amin[130], praised Taha Husayn in a poem when the latter visited Damascus in 1941[131], wrote a poem for al-ʿAqqad because the latter had praised al-Mahasini's doctoral thesis[132] and he wished his knowledgeable »friend«, the Shiite scholar Muhsin al-Amin, all the best[133]. Moreover, he bemoaned the deaths of Huda Shaʿrawi[134], ʿAbbas Mahmud al-ʿAqqad[135], Ahmad Amin[136], Ahmad ʿArif al-Zayn[137], the communist intellectual Raʾif al-Khouri (Rāʾif al-Khūrī, 1913–1967)[138], Ahmad Hassan al-Zayyat[139], and Karam Melhem Karam[140], and he mourned the death of the Muhibb al-Din al-

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would only be established in 1954. The Syrian exception that she mentions is the religious scholar Maghribi, on whom she later also published an article, see eadem, ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Maghribī, in: al-Hilal 5 (1961), pp. 112–114.

130 Zakī AL-MAḤĀSINĪ, Muḥāḍarāt ʿan Aḥmad Amīn, Cairo 1963.

131 Idem, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn fī Dimashq 1941, in: Idem, Dīwān, pp. 382f.

132 Idem, Risāla ilā l-ʿAqqād, in: Idem, Dīwān, pp. 367f.

133 Idem, Ilā ṣadīqī l-Imām al-Sayyid Muḥsin al-Amīn, in: Idem, Dīwān, p. 366.

134 Idem, Dhikrā wafāt al-zaʿima al-miṣriyya Hudā Shaʿrāwī, in: Idem, Dīwān, pp. 294f.

135 Idem, Khulūd al-ʿAqqād, in: Idem, Dīwān, pp. 303f.

136 Idem, Ṭayf al-Amīn, in: Idem, Dīwān, pp. 323f.

137 Idem, Rithāʾ sanawī li-l-ṣadīq al-ʿaẓīm al-imām al-shaykh ʿĀrif al-Zayn, in: Idem, Dīwān, pp. 327f.

138 Idem, Raʾif al-Khūrī, in: Idem, Dīwān, pp. 335f; idem, Tawdīʿ li-Raʾif al-Khūrī, in: Idem, Dīwān, pp. 341f.

139 Idem, Rithāʾ li-l-ṣadīq al-ustādh Aḥmad Ḥasan al-Zayyāt, in: Idem, Dīwān, pp. 339f.

140 Idem, Li-dhikrā Karam Malḥam Karam, in: Idem, Dīwān, pp. 348f.

Khatib's son[141]. Therefore, it seems to be adequate to summarize these findings with the remark that Sakakini's and al-Mahasini's literary interlocutors cut across national, religious, and ideological boundaries. To put this result in a broader context, it should be qualified as interesting, yet not exceptional: all the cultural and literary journals that Sakakini and al-Mahasini read and to which they contributed were characterized by a more or less pronounced national, religious, and ideological diversity of their authors.

## 1.2 Literary Criticism and Generational Conflict

What remains to be done in this sketch of the literary field—after approaching Sakakini's relations to other prominent players—is to draw attention to her complex playing strategy in the field and to the dynamic character of this constantly changing field. From Sakakini's point of view, it was not only necessary for her to win over the dominant players in the literary field; at the same time, she also had to struggle against the dominant structures of the field to establish herself as a literary newcomer and a female writer. Therefore, her strategy in the field was multi-facetted. She paid credit to the dominant figures, while she also criticized some of them. She attacked literature written by men as a vehicle of female oppression, yet she refused to be defined by women's issues alone. She mainly abstained from the various forms of ideological trench-warfare that were fought between the progressive, liberal, conservative or Islamic writers for hegemonic positions in the field. She rather fought her own struggles and tried to build bridges between the camps, which is visible in her relatively even-handed biographical sketches of socialist and liberal as well as Islamist authors.

What is striking about Sakakini's acknowledgement of Taha Husayn and other writers as teachers or mentors is that these statements stem either from the end of her career or from the 1960s, when a younger generation voiced strong criticism of Taha Husayn and his generation. Only when she had become an established author herself in the 1950s and 1960s did she side with the generation of Taha Husayn against the attacks of a younger generation of writers, with whom she could not establish—with a few exceptions—fruitful connections. This is in accordance with the impression that circles of mutual acknowledgement—the currency used to pay with in the literary field—have a long life and stretch far beyond time and place.

From a chronological point of view, it is therefore interesting to understand the kinds of struggles involved in Sakakini's critiques. That is to say that it is important to understand whom she criticized through the years. In the following, I describe

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141 Idem, Muḥibb al-Dīn al-Khaṭīb muwāsāt li-bnihi l-waḥīd Quṣayy al-Khaṭīb, in: Idem, Dīwān, pp. 348f.

Sakakini's style of literary criticism and give some examples. In a second step, I pinpoint Sakakini's position in the sequence of the generations of Arab writers more systematically.

Already as a young writer, Sakakini acquired a reputation as an uncompromising literary critic who did not spare the »top dogs«, but could be seen as rigorous, nitpicking, and arrogant[142]. In 1935, she addressed »the arrogance of the men of letters«[143] past and present and finally pointed at Taha Husayn and 'Abbas Mahmud al-'Aqqad, saying that »if they talk to you, it is as if you belonged to the ants and they to the camels« (*fa-antā min al-namāl wa-hummā min al-jamāl*)[144]. She provided no argument for her judgement, or better: for her impression. She ended with the general advice to writers that if they wanted to immortalize themselves, they should »not vanish like useless foam« (*lā tadhhabū ka-zabad jufāʾ*)[145] in the vastness of the world, but speak openly to the people and not raise themselves above them, »for without them you would neither be nor write!«[146]. The editor Sami al-Kayyali printed the article in his journal *al-Ḥadīth*, but added a footnote[147], in which he explained that he published the text as an example of freedom of opinion. However, he wondered about Sakakini's »harsh verdict« without her knowing the two authors and explained that Taha Husayn could not be characterized by arrogance, but rather by gentleness, calmness, and forgiveness.

Regardless of whether Sakakini's critique was well-founded or not, it is possible to see al-Kayyali's reaction as well as Hobeiche's patronising critique of Sakakini in *al-Makshūf* in 1937 in a wider context. The literary field had only recently opened up to women, and cultural journals competed for women's voices and adorned themselves with the few women writers available. Yet, they reacted with pique to sharp criticism of the culture industry articulated by a representative of (what they understood as) the fairer sex, but printed it without taking it entirely seriously.

Another example is the Syrian literary critic 'Abd al-Karim al-Ashtar ('Abd al-Karīm al-Ashtar, 1929–2011), who complained of having been harshly criticized by Sakakini for nothing, even four decades after the incident[148]. After Ashtar pub-

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142  See 'Abd al-Karīm AL-ASHTAR, Widād Sakākīnī wa-ṣafḥa maṭwiyya min ḥiwār al-jīl, in: Idem, Musāmarāt naqdiyya, Aleppo 2002, pp. 138–143; FATTŪḤ, Widād Sakākīnī (1994), pp. 244–246; idem, Widād Sakākīnī. Nāqida, in: Idem, Min aʿlām al-adab al-ḥadīth, Beirut 1992, pp. 138–141.

143  Widād SAKĀKĪNĪ, Kibriyāʾ al-udabāʾ, in: al-Ḥadīth 9 (1935), pp. 665–668.

144  Quoted in OTTOSSON BITAR, I Can Do Nothing, p. 43.

145  Ibid., p. 668. Allusion to Qurʾan 13:17 »amā l-zabad fa-yadhhab jufāʾ«.

146  SAKĀKĪNĪ, Kibriyāʾ al-udabāʾ, p. 668.

147  Ibid., pp. 667f.

148  AL-ASHTAR, Widād Sakākīnī, pp. 138–142. For the whole debate see idem, Wathāʾiq lam tuktab fī l-adab al-mahjarī. Ḥadīth maʿa Mikhāʾīl Nuʿayma, in: al-Maʿrifa 24 (December 1963), pp. 103–110; Widād SAKĀKĪNĪ, Ḥawla ḥiwār Nuʿayma wa-l-Ashtar, in: al-Maʿrifa 25 (January 1964), p. 161; 'Abd al-Karīm AL-ASHTAR, Ḥawla ḥiwār Nuʿayma wa-l-Ashtar. Radd al-duktūr 'Abd al-Karīm al-

lished an article based on several interviews with the Lebanese writer Mikhail Naimy (Mīkhāʾil Nuʿayma, 1889–1988) in the Syrian cultural journal *al-Maʿrifa* in 1964, Sakakini claimed that the article should not have been published under the title *Documents that have not been Written about Mahjar Literature* because oral statements were not »documents« (*wathāʾiq*). When he justified his choice of words, Sakakini described him as »cunning« (*shaṭāra*)[149] and »arrogant« (*mukābara*)[150] and more generally complained that »arrogant people insist on their adherence to the error« (*iṣrār al-mukābirīn ʿalā iltizām al-khaṭaʾ*)[151] and »our literature today, in contrast to its horizons, suffers a moral trial side by side with confusion«[152].

Because of such disputes, characterizations of Sakakini either focus on »the vehemence of her temper« (*ḥiddat mizājihā*)[153] or they call her the »nun of literature« (*rāhibat al-adab*)[154]. Obviously, these divergent attributions follow the common gender construction of the woman as »fury/amazon« or a »nun/saint«. It is not only a mistake to attribute them to a singular author; this mistake also hints at a misrecognition of the structures, dynamics, and the rules of the literary field; Sakakini had learned early in her literary life how to masterfully—and certainly passionately—play according to the rules and requirements of the field. She also learned how much energy it takes to try to change them.

To further outline her way of criticizing other well-established authors, I pick out four specific cases. I demonstrate why and how she quarrelled with the philosopher Jamil Saliba (Jamīl Ṣalībā, 1902–1976), her former mentor Sami al-Kayyali, the theoretician of Arab nationalism Sati' al-Husri (Sāṭiʿ al-Ḥuṣrī, 1880–1968), and the writer Mikhail Naimy. Her longstanding controversy with Bint al-Shati' is discussed in a separate chapter below (see chapter IV).

In two reviews[155], she criticized the way in which the philosopher Jamil Saliba—a pupil of Kurd ʿAli—treated the development of literary criticism in Syria. She blamed him for not adequately appreciating the contributions of Kurd ʿAli[156] and passing over many other important critics in his book on *The Trends of the Critique in Syria* (*Ittijāhāt al-naqd fī Sūriyya*). On the occasion of his lecture about *The Intellectual*

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Ashtar ʿalā Widād Sakākīnī, in: al-Maʿrifa 27 (March 1964), pp. 157–159; Widād Sakākīnī, Taʿqīb wa-taṣwīb, in: al-Maʿrifa 28 (April 1964), pp. 128f.

149  al-Ashtar, Widād Sakākīnī, p. 141, a pun with his name.

150  Ibid.

151  Ibid.

152  Ibid., p. 142.

153  Ibid., p. 140.

154  Naṣr, Udabāʾ, p. 287.

155  Widād Sakākīnī, Muḥāḍarāt ʿan al-ittijāhāt al-fikriyya fī bilād al-Shām wa-atharihā fī l-adab al-ḥadīth, in: Eadem, Niqāṭ ʿalā l-ḥurūf, pp. 113–119; eadem, Ittijāh al-naqd al-ḥadīth fī Sūriyya, in: Eadem, Shawk fī l-ḥaṣīd, pp. 96–107.

156  Eadem, Ittijāh al-naqd, pp. 99–101.

*Trends in Greater Syria* (*al-Ittijāhāt al-fikriyya fī bilād al-Shām*), she complained that his title was too broad, his analysis was too short, and that he was totally ignorant of the contributions of women[157]. She added that she herself might be the reason for this ignorance because she had formerly criticized Saliba's edition of manuscripts by the Andalusian astronomer and mathematician Maslama Majriti (Majrīṭī, d. 1007)[158]; she assumed that maybe for this reason he avoided mentioning women so that he was not forced to come across her name[159].

In *Inṣāf al-marʾa*, Sakakini stated that the women in Syria—unlike women in Egypt, Iraq and Lebanon—had not known men who stood up for women's rights with their pen, though she explicitly singled out Sami al-Kayyali and his journal *al-Ḥadīth* as the exception that proves the rule[160]. Some ten years later, Sakakini expressed her surprise that al-Kayyali had not mentioned the poet Muhammed al-ʿAdnani (Muḥammad al-ʿAdnānī) in his book on literature in Aleppo, leading to a bitter exchange of allegations[161]. Al-Kayyali responded to the critique by saying that al-ʿAdnani was Palestinian and that Sakakini played an imperialist game when she threw him into an Arab melting pot, effacing his Palestinian heritage. Sakakini then pointed out that al-ʿAdnani was born in Syria and stemmed from a Syrian family that had migrated to Palestine for financial reasons and returned to Aleppo after the *nakba* of 1948. Even if he were a Palestinian, as a writer with great impact, he deserved to be mentioned in a book on the literary movement in Aleppo alongside the Armenians, Greeks, Lebanese, and the nationalized holders of other citizenships who appeared in the book. She quoted from al-Kayyali's introduction that he wanted to mention »everyone who contributed to constructing the edifice of the intellectual renaissance (*nahḍa*), even if he only laid down one brick«[162]. Finally, she welcomed al-Kayyali's book as a basically good work, though it lacked a throughline and a methodological orientation. Instead, it featured a journalistic style and was filled with flattery—this was true not only of this book, but also to his other work on

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157 Eadem, Muḥāḍarāt, pp. 118f. She states that all of Mary al-ʿAjami, Ruz Ghurayyib, Salma Sayegh, Fadwa Tuqan are missing.

158 She is referring to Maslama b. Aḥmad AL-MAJRĪṬĪ, al-Risāla al-jāmiʿa al-mansūba li-l-ḥakīm al-Majrīṭī, 2 volumes, edited by Jamīl Ṣalībā, Damascus 1949. She had written a review in *al-Thaqāfa* in 1950, which was reprinted as Widād SAKĀKĪNĪ, al-Risāla al-jāmiʿa al-mansūba li-l-Majrīṭī, in: Eadem, Niqāṭ ʿalā l-ḥurūf, pp. 107–112.

159 SAKĀKĪNĪ, Muḥāḍarāt, p. 119.

160 Eadem, Nahḍat al-marʾa al-sūriyya, p. 179.

161 See the two articles, Widād SAKĀKĪNĪ, al-Ḥarakāt al-fikriyya fī Ḥalab li-l-ustādh Sāmī al-Kayyālī, in: Eadem, Niqāṭ ʿalā l-ḥurūf, pp. 184–186; eadem, Radd ʿalā radd, in: Eadem, Niqāṭ ʿalā l-ḥurūf, pp. 239–242. Sakakini's critique refers to Sāmī AL-KAYYĀLĪ, Muḥāḍarāt ʿan al-ḥaraka al-adabiyya in Ḥalab, 1800–1950, Cairo 1957.

162 SAKĀKĪNĪ, Radd ʿalā radd, p. 240.

literature in Syria[163]. The dispute also had a clear personal side because al-Kayyali reminded Sakakini of the fact that she had published her early works in his journal. In her response, Sakakini expressed her thanks to him and recalled how happy she was to publish her articles in his journal, which carried the message of »renewal« (*tajdīd*); yet, she remarked that she had learned to walk alone and had not demanded that he praise her literature[164].

Moreover, she wrote unforgivingly about the relationship between al-Kayyali and her husband after both of them had died in 1972. She mocked al-Kayyali's comment, in one of his last articles, that al-Mahasini had become forgetful, stating that al-Kayyali himself had always »forgotten« to pay the prize money that al-Mahasini had won in the literary competition in al-Kayyali's journal *al-Ḥadīth* in 1936[165]—i.e. forty years previously. She then suggests that al-Kayyali had used the money for himself.

In 1956, Sakakini claimed that Satiʿ al-Husri's book *al-ʿUrūba awwalan* (*Arabism first*) contained nothing new and consisted only of a collection of previous articles and the repetition of a series of historical events without a clear definition of the concept of »nationalism«[166]. She explained to one of the main proponents of Arab nationalism that the audience was still waiting for a clear definition. What had triggered her reaction was Husri's treatment of the relations between Egypt and the Arab world, which she criticized as superficial and biased. He kept singing an old song of Pharaonism[167], claiming that Egyptians had only understood themselves as Arabs since the revolution of 1952. Mentioning several pan-Arab Egyptian authors, she stated that »if the author had known the Egyptians the same way I do, he would have recognized true Arabs among them and a rising youth in whose veins the passion of Arabism flows«[168].

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163  Ibid., p. 242. She refers to Sāmī AL-KAYYĀLĪ, al-Adab al-ʿarabī l-muʿāṣir fī Sūriyya, Cairo 1968 [¹1959].

164  SAKĀKĪNĪ, Radd ʿalā radd, p. 242.

165  Eadem, Bayna l-faqīdayn, in: Eadem, Shawk fī l-ḥaṣīd, pp. 70–76. Also compare Samāʾ AL-MAḤĀSINĪ, Zakī l-Maḥāsinī, pp. 40f.

166  Widād SAKĀKĪNĪ, al-ʿUrūba…awwalan li-l-ustādh Sāṭiʿ al-Ḥuṣrī, in: Eadem, Niqāṭ ʿalā l-ḥurūf, pp. 88–95.

167  Especially the liberal group of authors and politicians around Lufti al-Sayyid and Taha Husayn propagated an exclusive Egyptian nationalism drawing on the Pharaonic past in the 1920s and 1930s. They were sceptical about political ideas of pan-Arab unity. For the background, see Donald M. REID, Contesting Antiquity in Egypt. Archaeologies, Museums, and the Struggle for Identities from World War I to Nasser, Cairo 2015.

168  SAKĀKĪNĪ, al-ʿUrūba…awwalan, p. 94.

In three articles written between 1974 and 1978[169], she criticized the Lebanese writer Mikhail Naimy, author of the worldwide bestselling spiritual masterpiece *The Book of Mirdād* (1948)[170]. Naimy had lived many years in the USA and was one of the driving forces of *mahjar* literature, Arabic literature written in the Americas in the twentieth century. He initially wrote *The Book of Mirdād* in English and later translated into Arabic (1952)[171]. Due to this, Sakakini not only accused him of weak and faulty Arabic; she also bemoaned his dismissive attitude towards literary criticism. She hinted at the fact that he had made his name with a book of literary criticism, *Ghirbāl* (1923), in which he had denounced the prevailing literary conventions as well as hypocrisy and imitation in Arabic literature[172]. She now criticized that he himself had imitated al-ʿAqqad in *Ghirbāl* and that al-ʿAqqad's foreword to *Ghirbāl* had made him popular in the Arab world. Yet, what annoyed her most was that he had recently called on the critics to refrain from criticism—in *The Book of Mirdād* as well as in a lecture delivered to the congress of writers in Damascus. Therefore, she finally came to call him »an apostate from critique, someone, who renounces it« (*murtadd ʿan al-naqd wa-l-zāhid fīhi*)[173].

Sakakini did not throw random accusations around in these critiques. She not only produced several theoretical articles, pondering the meaning, problems, requirements, and biases of literary criticism[174]. She also believed that scrupulous and honest criticism was a necessity for the progress of literature and that especially modern Arabic literature had a dire need of critical attention[175]. Ottosson Bitar certainly gets it right when she speaks of Sakakini's »ambition to always tell the

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169 All of them reprinted in *Shawk fī l-ḥaṣīd*, see Widād Sakākīnī, Nuʿayma wa-l-ʿAqqād, pp. 60–66; eadem, Fī l-ghirbāl al-jadīd, 1923–1974, pp. 85–95; eadem, Mīkhāʾīl Nuʿayma bayna qāriʾihi wa-ʿārifīhi, pp. 161–166.

170 On Naimy see, C. Nijland, Nuʿayma, Mīkhāʾīl, in: EI².

171 See Issa J. Boullata, Mikhail Naimy. Poet of Meditative Vision, in: Journal of Arabic Literature 24, 2 (1993), p. 175, fn. 9.

172 Ibid., p. 174. Sakakini called it »one of the first sparks, in which the meanings of critique and renewal appeared in our contemporary literary life«, see Sakākīnī, al-Naqd wa-l-nuqqād, p. 18.

173 Sakākīnī, Fī l-ghirbāl al-jadīd, p. 93.

174 See the various articles on literature and literary criticism in *Niqāṭ al-ḥuruf*, *Shawk fī l-ḥaṣīd*, and *Suṭur tatajāwab*, especially the following articles: *Humūm al-naqd* (*The Concern of Critique*); *Man huwa l-nāqid?* (*Who is the Critic?*); *al-Naqd al-nazīh ḍarūra li-taqaddum al-adab* (*Honest Critique is a Necessity for the Progress of Literature*); *al-Khuṣūma wa-l-malāma fī l-adab wa-naqdihi* (*Controversy and Reproach. On Literature and Literary Critique*); *al-Khuṣūma fī naqd al-ʿarabī l-muʿāṣira* (*The Controversy in Contemporary Arab Critique*); all of them reprinted in: Sakākīnī, Suṭūr tatajāwab, pp. 5–34.

175 Eadem, al-Naqd al-nazīh ḍarūra li-taqaddum al-adab, pp. 17–20.

truth«[176]. Sakakini called the critic a »creative destructor«[177], who should have solid fundaments, yet be open to changeable aesthetic principles[178]. A critic should be well versed in the history of literature, rhetoric, language, philosophy, and psychology. Comparing literature both to a garden and a marketplace, she argued that a critic gives direction, prunes and weeds undesirable growth, and determines the value of works with her judgment. The critic aims to acquire an intellectual reputation and a high position. Yet, carrying the burden of criticism is a tiring and difficult business: there are no comparable troubles in the intellectual and literary world »because the Arab critic loses his friends through critique and lives to buy his enemies with this currency«[179]. As a basic problem, she identified that Arabic literature was exposed to a gust from the East and a storm from the West and that imposters spoke of literature in foreign terms—Romanticism, Realism, Surrealism, or Ideologism—without knowing the meaning of the words[180]. Thinking about the venality and psychology of art, Sakakini indicated that she relied, among others, on the ideas of French short story writer Pierre Mille (1864–1941) and André Malraux's *Psychologie de l'Art*[181]. Most of her critiques complain that the subjects of her attacks lack knowledge or fail to appreciate other authors or that their works are biased.

As her theoretical expositions and the practical examples show, Sakakini considered criticism and controversies a necessity and the elixir of modern literature. She also clearly defended the principles of and practitioners within the literary field. Thus, she cast doubt on the literary competence of the Damascene historian Shakir Mustafa (Shākir Muṣṭafā, 1921–1997)[182], who had criticized a special edition of Arab short stories, including one of Sakakini's works, that had been published in the January edition of *al-Ādāb* in 1954[183]. Mustafa's critique was written at the initiative of the journal itself. Three years later, Mustafa would be the first to publish

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176 OTTOSSON BITAR, I Can Do Nothing, p. 44.

177 SAKĀKĪNĪ, Man huwa l-nāqid?, p. 16. She relates Khalil Matran's (Khalīl Maṭrān, ca. 1870–1949) verses on his friend and poet Hafiz Ibrahim (Ḥāfiẓ Ibrāhīm, ca. 1871–1932) to the literary critic in general: »He builts and destroys in the new and the old poetry and thus the creative destroyer rises.«

178 Eadem, Humūm al-naqd, p. 6.

179 Ibid., p. 10.

180 Eadem, Ḥājatunā ilā l-naqd al-nazīh (*Our Need for Honest Critique*), in: Eadem, Niqāṭ ʿalā l-ḥurūf, p. 58.

181 Eadem, Humūm al-naqd, pp. 7–9. She must have relied on Arabic translations of these works. Many works of French literature and literary criticism were translated in these years. She also reviewed an Arabic work on female French authors, see eadem, Adībāt min al-gharb, in: al-Adāb 7 (1956), pp. 35f.

182 Shākir MUṢṬAFĀ, Qaraʾtu l-ʿadad al-māḍī min *al-Ādāb*, in: al-Ādāb 2 (1954), pp. 73–77.

183 Widād SAKĀKĪNĪ, Ghamāma tadhūb (*A Cloud Disperses*), in: al-Ādāb 1 (1954), pp. 53f. Mustafa described Sakakini's short story, despite its conservative structure, as generally good, but wondered

a comprehensive critical overview of short story and novel writing in Syria up to World War II[184]. In reaction to what Sakakini saw as a »confused and unfair critique lost between objectivity and subjectivity«[185], she complained that Mustafa had dealt with the greats of the literary establishment—she claimed that she did not wish to speak on her own behalf[186]—in an »arbitrary« (ta'assufī)[187] article »mixing apples and oranges«[188]. Sakakini wrote that she did not want to claim »sacredness« for the great writers, but that their works should be dealt with in a »righteous critique« (naqd nazīh)[189]. She maintained that Mustafa had hitherto not been known as a literary critic, a poet or a novelist, but only as a historian[190] and bemoaned that

> it is one of the shortcomings of our literary and intellectual life that the writer is born as a great critic among us, even if he is old, and that he does not care about practical experience and has no interest in practice or method; instead he hurries to walk, scurrying through the classes and placing himself at the head of the avant-garde, without any particular talent or long experience to carry him there[191].

In this way, she fended off unwanted competition and criticism, referring to her own long literary experience—and that of the other authors—as symbolic capital. By 1959 at the latest, when asked by the same journal to comment on the short stories that had been published in its previous edition, Sakakini can certainly be considered a recognized and well-established literary critic[192].

In a very outspoken article, written in preparation for the second conference of Arab writers in Damascus in 1956, she bemoaned state interference into literary matters[193]. She criticized the Syrian government's decision to assign a relatively high budget for a conference that served more representative than literary purposes, since delegations of 32 countries were expected to come. She found this troubling given that the Arab Academy of Damascus had only been able to finance two conferences of literary experts in the last ten years and had to cut down its publication of Arabic

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why it was necessary that the narrator herself entered her story to illuminate the inner processes of her characters, see Muṣṭafā, Qaraʾtu, p. 75.

184  Muṣṭafā, Muḥāḍarāt.

185  Widād Sakākīnī, Ḥawla naqd al-ʿadad al-māḍī, in: al-Ādāb 3 (1954), p. 67.

186  Ibid., p. 68.

187  Eadem, Kalimat ḥaqq, in: Eadem, Niqāṭ ʿalā l-ḥurūf, pp. 249, 251.

188  Ibid., p. 251. Cf. eadem, Ḥawla naqd al-ʿadad al-māḍī, p. 67.

189  Eadem, Kalimat ḥaqq, p. 252.

190  Eadem, Ḥawla naqd, p. 67; eadem, Kalimat ḥaqq, p. 251.

191  Eadem, Kalimat ḥaqq, p. 252.

192  Eadem, Qaraʾtu fī l-ʿadad al-māḍī min al-Ādāb, in: al-Ādāb 5 (May 1959), pp. 67f.

193  Eadem, al-Muʾtamar al-thānī li-l-udabāʾ al-ʿarab, in: Eadem, Niqāṭ ʿalā l-ḥurūf, pp. 34–39.

manuscripts. She also questioned the subject of the conference »literature and the state«, which was not chosen by the writers themselves, but instead by the ministry of education, although the writers Ra'if Khouri and Mikhail Naimy had just dealt comprehensively with the subject in some of their articles. She therefore questioned whether the conference was of any use for writers at all, lamenting the weakness of the literati in general, and especially their weakness in comparison to lawyers and physicians, who organized their conferences according to their own needs and concerns. She demanded that the state produce more books and support two or three talented authors, rather than financing such an expensive and useless conference. Thus, Sakakini's words bear witness that she was clearly aware of the structural weakness of the literary field in the face of political pressure in Syria in the 1950s. Its freedom would be even more restricted and censored after the Baʿth Party took power in 1963.

With a clear eye, Widad Sakakini also noted the transformation of the Arabic literary field over several decades, identifiying two main stages of literary controversies. Firstly, the foundational controversy between the »old« and the »new« in the 1920s;[194] secondly, after the so-called Egyptian »revolution« (*thawra*) in 1952, the younger generation's attack of its predecessors in the interwar period and especially at the hegemonic position of Taha Husayn in the literary field[195]. Pleading for social realism and engaged literature, the Egyptian philosopher Mahmud Amin al-ʿAlim (Maḥmūd Amīn al-ʿĀlim, 1922–2009) and the mathematician ʿAbd al-ʿAzim Anis (ʿAbd al-ʿAẓīm Anīs) claimed that their predecessors' literature was still tinted with the »old«, unable to depict reality and keep up with progress[196].

Sakakini did not directly belong to either peer group although she had been supported by the generation of Taha Husayn, Sami al-Kayyali, and Mahmud Taymur in the 1930s and 1940s. For the controversies of the 1920s, she was too young, while she was already too old to take the side of the younger generation of the 1950s.

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194  In the 1920s, critics such as al-ʿAqqad and al-Mazini critically engaged with the works of their famous predecessors, such as al-Manfaluti (Muṣṭafā Luṭfī al-Manfalūṭī, 1876–1924), Hafiz Ibrahim and Ahmad Shawqi (Aḥmad Shawqī, 1870–1932), see Widād Sakākīnī, al-Naqd wa-l-nuqqād fī adabinā l-ḥadīth, in: Eadem, Niqāṭ ʿalā l-ḥurūf, pp. 15–22. The conflict around Taha Husayn's book *Fī shiʿr al-jāhilī* is treated in eadem, al-Khuṣūma wa-l-malāma, pp. 21–26. Sakakini mentions that Taha Husayn was accused of »apostasy« (*ilḥād*), of treating the Arabic heritage with hostility, and of emulating the Orientalists, ibid., pp. 22f.

195  Eadem, al-Khuṣūma fī l-naqd, pp. 27–34. She revised this debate later again, see eadem, Ḥawla l-ḥaraka al-muʿāṣira fī l-naqd wa-l-adab, in: Majallat Hunna 34, pp. 162–165, in: Majallat al-Manhal (Jidda) July/August 1987.

196  For this debate see Klemm, Literarisches Engagement; eadem, Changing Notions of Commitment; Yoav Di-Capua, Changing the Arab Intellectual Guard. On the Fall of the *udabāʾ*, 1940–1960, in: Jens Hanssen/Max Weiss (eds.), Arabic Thought Against the Authoritarian Age. Towards an Intellectual History of the Past, Cambridge 2018, pp. 41–61.

She was fully aware of the achievements of the older generation, so she tended to take the side of Taha Husayn and al-ʿAqqad. Like al-ʿAqqad, she accused the younger critics of not having read the authors of the interwar period sufficiently, if at all[197]. She even quoted a lengthy passage written by Taha Husayn, in which he admitted that younger writer did not find enough support and encouragement among the older writers and the publishers[198]. He went on to complain of a literary standstill and warned against shallow literature, easy language, and short articles. By drawing a line between the controversies of the 1920s and those of the 1950s, Sakakini made it clear that she saw the attacks of the younger critics as a legitimate form of discussion, although she had doubts about the style and degree of the criticism. She admitted that progress in literature rested on writers who were ahead of their time in consciousness as well as in talent. Even if the dispute between the generations missed the right balance, the intellectual struggle could expunge banality and superficiality, broaden the writers' horizons, and bring Arab and Western culture together[199]. However, she called the critics »the revolutionary disturbed youth« (*al-shabāb al-thāʾir al-ḥāʾir*)[200], firstly, because of their egregious claim that their predecessors had fallen by the wayside and could no longer be followed and, secondly, because of their accusation that the older generation were hypocritical, making common cause with the rulers, yet denying it. Sakakini—like Taha Husayn, Sami al-Kayyali, al-ʿAqqad and others—found no other way than face irritated the critics' demand that literary realism and social criticism should go hand in hand—since this was the kind of literature the older generation had committed itself for the last four decades[201].

It is significant that Sakakini had no close contacts to talented young writers in this generational conflict—with the exception of Ghada al-Samman (see below chapter II.4). In her critique, written at the behest of *al-Ādāb*, of short stories by younger authors she expressed a relatively reserved and benevolent criticism, emphasizing the strengths of each story and giving advice for improvements[202]. Asked in an interview about the most talented young writer, she merely stated: »I don't want to annoy anybody«[203]. Implicitly, Sakakini compared her own experiences

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197  Sᴀᴋᴀᴋɪɴɪ̄, al-Khuṣūma fī l-naqd, pp. 29–31.

198  Ibid., p. 33.

199  Ibid., pp. 27f.; on this point more generally, see also eadem, Ḥājatunā ilā l-naqd al-nazīh, pp. 57–61.

200  Eadem, al-Khuṣūma fī l-naqd, p. 28.

201  Eadem, al-Khuṣūma wa-l-malāma, p. 22.

202  Eadem, Qaraʾtu fī l-adad al-māḍī min *al-Ādāb*, pp. 67f. All of the criticized authors were to become very productive writers: the Syrian journalist and writer Jān Āliksān (1935–2016) from al-Hasaka; the Syrian writer Sharīf al-Rās (ca. 1930–2000) from Hama, and the Syrian novelist Fāḍil Sibāʿī (b. 1929) from Aleppo.

203  Nᴀṣʀ, Udabāʾ, p. 291.

to those of the younger generation. She talked about her own beginnings under difficult conditions without material remuneration or appreciation, aside from some insignificant symbolic gestures. She claimed that she—and most of her generation—wrote for the sake of writing and because they had something to tell the people, while she did not earn much from her literature. Asked about the material wealth that she had earned with her books, she responded with »nothing«, explaining that she preferred the »ideational wealth«, which was the most valuable kind, to material wealth[204]. Asked why she did not compete for prizes of encouragement and submit works to state committees, she responded that she had done enough to deserve support: »I have paved the way for the union [between Syria and Egypt, 1958–1961] with my works, that's enough for me. My husband belongs to those who have established co-operation and cultural unity.«[205]

In these various statements, the underlying assumption is that for the younger generation literature is no longer a vocation. Sakakini's implicit accusation is that the aspiration for fame and wealth had subsumed the writers' preoccupation with language and literature. In an article about the Congress of Arab writers held in Damascus in 1956, she wondered about the appearance of »women who were aspiring literary fame at whatever cost«, and who were relying on »new clothes and heavy make-up« as well as »on secret hands that secured their appearance despite the fact that they did not have any previous preparation«[206]. She assumed that these women »came for entertainment, not to participate in the topics of the congress« (*li-l-tarfīh lā li-mushāraka fī mawḍūʿāt al-muʾtamar*)[207].

In a much later interview, shortly before her death, she clearly summed up this point by answering the question of what kind of advice she as an established writer could give to the next generation with the disillusioned words: »In reality, I can't give any advice to this generation that doesn't read anything«[208].

## 1.3    Dualisms and Harmonization

On the previous pages, I have tried to outline Sakakini's position in relation to other writers in the literary field with a focus on mutual recognition, but also in view of her role as a critic. The aim of this exercise was to better understand what kind of relationship existed between Sakakini's feminist approach and the dominant position of the male short story writers, novelists, and critics around Taha

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204  Ibid.

205  Ibid.

206  Sakākīnī, al-Muʾtamar al-thānī li-l-udabāʾ al-ʿarab, in: Eadem, Niqāṭ ʿalā l-ḥurūf, p. 34, fn. 1. I follow the translation provided by Ottosson Bitar, I Can Do Nothing, pp. 54f.

207  Sakākīnī, al-Muʾtamar al-thānī, p. 34, fn. 1.

208  Mārdīnī, al-Adība.

Husayn and Mahmud Taymur. The first conclusion was that the dominant »liberal« group of writers played an important role in Sakakini's career by recognizing her talent and aspirations. The second conclusion was that Sakakini expressed herself critically about various liberal and nationalist writers, even as she was on good terms with writers of various ideological affiliation and religious backgrounds. The explanation for this phenomenon lies in the structure of the literary field as well as in Sakakini's position. As an independent and feminist critic, she did not feel committed to a single literary or ideological camp. This can in part be explained by the fact that a feminist and emancipatory agenda ran across liberal, nationalist, and Islamic discourses. Yet, in order to persist in the face of the dominant discourses, the feminist position might seek common points with the other discourses and build alliances with them.

Beyond this point, Sakakini's intermediate position between the political-cultural camps of Arab nationalism and Muslim reformism also expresses an intermediate position between the call for modernization and the (modern) study of tradition, which sought for a sound combination of Occident and Orient. Shaykh Ghalayini positively described this position as being modern »without excess and without renunciation« in his foreword to Sakakini's *Khaṭarāt* and Sakakini used nearly the same wording (*ghayr ifrāṭ wa-lā-tafrīṭ*)[209] in an article on *The Future of the Girls*. I am inclined to call this attitude dualistic as it turned around various dualisms, understanding religion, spirituality, Sufism, and subjectivity as complementary to science, materialism, rationality, and objectivity.

Already in her first essay, she clearly opposed to what she understood as excessive Westernization among Arab authors:

> Many of those, who have imbued the ideas of the West too much and joined the circle of those fanatics among the Westerners who do not let an opportunity slip by without using it for defaming the people of the East and their habits, claim that Arab women before Islam, caught between tribe and clan, enjoyed no freedom. Many of them have, with no shame, gone even further and claimed that women's self-esteem did not surpass the narrow circle that begins and ends with being a means of amusement for the man.[210]

In the essays *al-Tajdīd fī l-sharq* (*Modernization in the Orient*)[211] and *al-Akhlāq wa-l-madaniyya al-ḥadītha* (*Ethics and Modern Civilization*)[212] from her volume *al-Khaṭarāt* (1932), this intermediate position is clearly visible. On the one hand,

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209  SAKĀKĪNĪ, Mustabal al-fatāt, p. 46.
210  Eadem, Taṭawwur al-marʾa, p. 399. I have made minor revisions to the translation offered by OTTOSSON BITAR, I Can Do Nothing, pp. 33f.
211  Widād SAKĀKĪNĪ, al-Tajdīd fī l-sharq, in: Eadem, al-Khaṭarāt, pp. 63–67.
212  Eadem, al-Akhlāq wa-l-madaniyya al-ḥadītha, in: Eadem, al-Khaṭarāt, pp. 68–72.

she writes that it would be ignorant of the Orientals to cling to the old without accepting the teachings of modern civilization (*madaniyya*). Rather, the *tajdīd* (»modernization«, »renewal«) seeps into every environment and subjugates it like a torrential current. It is therefore wise to move with the times and to create harmony between the old and the modern. The phenomena of Western civilization that flood the world should be judged with the mind, so that one can adapt that which fits to »our natural readiness« (*istiʿdādunā al-fiṭrī*) and can be of help for a rapid ascension (*nuhūḍ*).

On the other hand, she is very critical of the *tajdīd* that is under way in Turkey and Afghanistan. Using Turkey as an example, she criticizes the abolishment of Arabic script with a pun that shows the close connection of *lā-dīniyya* (»atheism«, »agnosticism«) and *lātīniyya* (»Latin«). Although the Turkish modernizers had carried out this overthrow with the same force as the war of liberation, they knew how to suppress the opposition of the majority of the people, who had accepted these new phenomena only reluctantly[213]. After a trip to Europe, the Afghan King followed Turkey's example and started a violent revolution against the past. It escaped him, however, that every country has its own special customs, circumstances, inheritances and peculiarities. That which has developed over centuries cannot be overturned in a few days, especially since the people were not familiar with Western culture. Reactionary forces thwarted the movement of *tajdīd* and dashed the king's hopes[214]. Among Arab intellectuals, she singled out the socialist Salama Musa (Salāma Mūsā, 1889–1958) as an »extremist« (*mutaṭarrif*) of Westernization because his ideas would lead to the elimination of the Oriental personality[215]. She was not only of the opinion that modern technology and science needed an ethical foundation[216]. To those who believed that Western civilization was without fault, she also argued that it had numerous flaws, including

> excess in freedom, going to extremes in embellishment and beautification (*al-tajammul wa-l-tabarruj*), surrendering to pleasure and luxury, indulging in dancing and amusement

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213 Ibid., pp. 68 and 70f.

214 Eadem, al-Tajdīd fī l-sharq, p. 65. She is referring to Amānullāh Khān (1892–1960), who abdicted in 1929, after the opposition to his reform project had massively increased.

215 Eadem, al-Akhlāq, p. 71. Musa, a sympathizer with the Fabian society, had called for a genetic improvement of the Egyptians by mixing their genes with European genes. On his views on eugenics, see Israel Gershoni, Liberal Democracy versus Fascist Totalitarianism in Egyptian Intellectual Discourse. The Case of Salama Musa and al-Majalla al-Jadīda, in: Christoph Schumann (ed.), Nationalism and Liberal Thought in the Arab East. Ideology and Practice, London 2010, pp. 145–172.

216 Sakākīnī, al-Akhlāq, p. 71.

to the point of impotence, which corrupts morals and principles, weakens health and conviction, and wastes wealth and spirit[217].

She also criticized the fact that in France rich, poor, and destitute women sought all means of artificial beautification. Yet, if they thought about it, they would know that »their excess in beautification, embellishment, and hollow pomp (*imʿānuhā fī l-tabarruj wa-l-zīna wa-l-bahraja*) was shameful (*muzrin*) for their position and place in society«[218].

In her lecture *Ḥayātunā l-rūḥiyya* (*Our Spiritual Life*)[219], held after World War II, she came back to the issue of a moral crisis underlying modern civilization. The text is a striking example of the space beyond political and cultural dividing lines that Sakakini was able to occupy. In the lecture, she clearly expressed the dualism of spirit and matter and refused to put the West on a pedestal. She started by criticizing the widespread materialism of the »mechanistic«[220] society, arguing that humankind in the present was sick in both the mind and the soul; a return to a spiritual life was necessary. The »mechanistic civilization« (*ḥaḍāra āliyya*) was the reason for wars and conflicts that were not solved by moral and spiritual reasoning, but by mechanic and financial forces. Already after the Great War, many people had turned back to the soul—she mentions as her only modern source the French-Jewish philosopher Henri Bergson (1859–1941), calling him »one of the predictors [priests] of this spiritual temple« (*aḥad kuhhān hādhā l-haykal al-rūḥī*)[221]. After World War II, the situation deteriorated to such a degree that somebody who died before it and was resurrected today, would flee the world again because it had turned into hell. Although the machines had reduced the travails of the bodies, they filled the souls with fatigue and sorrow. Man can no longer see the heavens because of the fumes of factories, and man's prayer to God is swallowed by the noise of the machines. The way back to the spirit is a return to the religious, »Christian and Mohammedan« (*masīḥīyya wa-muḥammadiyya*)[222], teachings. However, faith is not a means to distance people from civilization, it is, instead a vehicle for compassion, justice, and equality—a means of educating of the soul. »The best, what contemporary humankind is obliged to do, is to build a connection between its religion and

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217 Ibid.

218 Eadem, al-Jamāl wa-l-marʾa, in: Eadem, al-Khaṭarāt, p. 44.

219 Eadem, Ḥayyātunā l-rūḥiyya, in: Eadem, Suṭūr tatajāwab, pp. 165–178. She delivered the lecture to the Literary Women's Club, a date is not given in the reprint. It was held after World War II, presumably in the 1950s.

220 A common global concept after World War I and World War II that was also used in the critique of fascism, e.g. by the psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich (1897–1957).

221 Sакākīnī, Ḥayyātunā l-rūḥiyya, p. 174.

222 Ibid., p. 175. Judaism is not mentioned.

its earth, taking the spirit from its heavens and the matter from its earth«[223]. The recognition of the soul, as demanded by Socrates and Jesus, should become a human science, preventing man from being torn between the two sides of life, either by exaggerating one's toil or by surrendering to fate. If there was a connection between »our spiritual force« and the culture and civilization of the West, it would constitute nothing less than »the completion of humankind« (*khulāṣat al-insāniyya*)[224].

However, we can also detect a kind of boundary work in Sakakini's writings, with which she tried to exclude things that were not acceptable to her. Thus, in certain instances her principally dualistic attitude ran the risk of shrinking to one-dimensionality. This danger results from the fact that she clearly understood Arabic literature as inseparable from Arab nationalism; she even called literature »the pioneer of Arab nationalism«[225]. This idea can certainly be acknowledged by nationalist as well as Islamist voices, but it excludes literature that is not clearly committed to the nationalist cause. An obvious point of intersection with nationalist and Islamist discourses is particularly evident when Sakakini criticizes colonialism, imperialism, Zionism, and materialism. Sakakini's basically nationalist tenor is visible in her portraits of women—in spite of their diverse religious and ideological background—because she strongly emphasizes the combative stance taken by her subjects, regardless of whether it was directed against Turk-Ottoman rule[226], the French Mandate[227] or Zionism. In her portraits of women in *Sābiqāt al-ʿaṣr* (1986), she rarely misses an opportunity to point at the cause of Palestine; most of the entries mention the participation of the portrayed woman in a conference on Palestine or depict their engagement for Palestinian refugees in word and deed. The aforementioned example, in which Sakakini combines Labiba Ahmad's pilgrimages with quotes from Mayy Ziyada, symbolizes an Arab unity that binds together both sexes, faith, patriotism, the criticism of society, and the resistance to colonialism and highlights women's contributions to the struggle for national independence.

The connection of a criticism of the West with a criticism of Zionism forms a »cultural code«[228] that is shared by various ideological camps and builds a connecting point or a bridge between these camps. This cultural code helps to classify activist women in the »right« camp, attesting that they hold the »right« convictions. The benefit of the code is that Sakakini describes women pioneers as fighters for the Arab and Palestinian cause by emphasizing their resistance to colonial powers

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223  Ibid., p. 176.
224  All quotes ibid., p. 178.
225  Quoted by Al-Jundī, Widād Sakākīnī, p. 798, from the collection of essays *Sawād fī bayāḍ*.
226  See her portrait of Ibtihāj al-Qadūra. Rāʾida wa-zaʿīma, in: Sakākīnī, Sābiqāt al-ʿaṣr, pp. 69f.
227  See her portrait Nāzik al-ʿĀbid. Rāʾidat al-waʿy l-nisāʾī fī l-Shām, in: Eadem, Sābiqāt al-ʿaṣr, pp. 22–29.
228  For the concept of the »cultural code« see Shulamit Volkov, Antisemitismus als kultureller Code. Zehn Essays, München ²2000, pp. 76–87.

and Zionism. By showing that women took part in the same struggle as nationalists and Islamists, she hopes to subvert the anti-feminist argument that women who were (too much) engaged beyond their household destroyed the foundations of the Arab-Islamic family and contributed to the decay of the Arab-Islamic society. The implicit counter-argument is that women lived up to their responsibility for family, society, and nation at the same time. Sakakini wrote that instead of restricting women to kitchen and maternity, the Arab countries were in dire need of women's participation and education, especially with regard to Jews and Western invaders who used modern methods of education[229]. Referring to the *nakba*, the loss of Palestine in 1948, Sakakini explicitly used the argument that the Arabs should learn from the Jews and take them as their example. In this context, she expressed her bewilderment about the fact that people were still perpetuating the opinion that women belonged into the kitchen: »How is this possible, when our last war against the Jews confirmed that among them, every girl and every woman was drafted and worked.«[230] That this argument functioned as an ideological glue is visible in the fact that it was quoted approvingly by al-Jundi[231].

Thus, while Sakakini understood Orient and Occident or the spiritual and the material world as two reconcilable sides, the subtlety of her views on dualism turned into a perception of mere oppositions when she criticized Zionism and attributed only one-sided material knowledge to it. The same cultural code is at work when Sakakini voices her scepticism about pure Westernization. In *Inṣāf al-marʾa*, she polemicized against »aristocratic women's clubs« that read European literature and behave like European women, as if they were living in Paris or London[232]. She also passingly remarked that the women who neglected their household and their children's education, were those living in luxury; they were the reason for prejudices against women and misogyny[233].

That Mahmud Taymur—who himself was strongly influenced by modern Western European as well as Russian literature—praised Sakakini's literary subjects as authentically Arab and not influenced by the West[234] is part of the same cultural code and approval procedure that labelled Sakakini's works as an authentic and legitimate female experience in the Arab world. This form of approval is ambivalent, to say the least, because it can be understood to say that Sakakini was not influenced

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229  Widād Sakākīnī, al-Marʾa wa-l-taʿlīm al-ʿālī, in: Eadem, Inṣāf al-marʾa, Damascus ²1989, p. 132.

230  al-Jundī, Widād Sakākīnī, p. 796. I could not find the original source. For a similar remark, see Sakākīnī, al-Marʾa wa-l-taʿlīm al-ʿālī, p. 132.

231  al-Jundī, Widād Sakākīnī, p. 796.

232  Sakākīnī, Majālis al-adab, p. 53.

233  Eadem, Inṣāf al-marʾa, in: Eadem, Inṣāf al-marʾa, Damascus ²1989, p. 31.

234  Taymūr, Kalimat al-ustādh Taymūr Bey, p. 8.

by modern European literature, while Sakakini herself mentions various European women writers as sources of inspiration[235].

## 2.     »Feminist Criticism« and »Women's Literature«

Sakakini laid down her main ideas about women's roles in society, feminist critique, and women's literature in the essays that she collected in *Inṣāf al-mar'a* (*The Just Treatment of Women*, 1950/51). My analysis of these essays—as well as of her other essays on the same topics—has a thematic and a semantic level. Firstly, I want to show that she reflected on the socio-political conditions of women in general, criticized women's exclusion in various social fields and outlined the aims of literature written from a female perspective. Secondly, as the adjective *nisawī* can refer both to »women's« and to »feminist« affairs, I also try to express that she speaks about »women« in general (*al-mar'a*, *al-nisā'*) from a critical, that is to say »feminist«, perspective. Yet, her thoughts about literature mostly relate to »women's literature« rather than to an explicitly feminist literature. The underlying idea is that *nisawī* should be translated differently according to context. What she and others called *naqd nisawī* can be translated as »feminist critique«, that is a social criticism from women's perspectives. In contrast, *adab nisawī* or *adab al-nisā'* refers to literature written by women. The term underlines both women's participation in literary production and a perspective that focusses on the social and psychological aspects of women's lives. This kind of literature can be justifiably regarded as »women's literature«, but it may not be feminist in a strict sense. The difference pertains to the author's perspective, but also the subjects that she treats. It is important to note that the term *nisā'ī* is fully congruent neither with »female« nor with »feminist«; it can denote the overlapping as well as the distinct areas that are dealt with in women's and feminist studies. Hence my choice to subsume Sakakini's social criticism under feminism and her literature under women's literature, without denying the underlying common ground.

### 2.1     What does *inṣāf al-mar'a* mean?

According to Sakakini, women's literature should fulfil four tasks: the contribution of women's perspectives to men's literature; the proliferation of ideas in support of women's liberation from the shackles of tradition; the depiction of female secrets in life, emotions, and thought, which are hidden to men; and the critique of men's

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235  See SAKĀKĪNĪ, Adab al-niswa, p. 95, for her references to George Sand (1804–1876), Anne de Staël (1766–1817), Colette (1873–1956) and Anne Elisabeth de Noailles (1876–1933).

imaginations about women's lives[236]. Although Sakakini shared the idea that women knew women's emotions, psyche, and secrets better than most men[237], she did not understand women's literature as a literature by women for women; rather, women's literature gives expression to women's feelings and thus explores the secrets of women's lives and explains them to men who otherwise create false images of women. Thus, she defined women's literature as consisting,

> in those poetic statements, messages written in prose and artistic images in which the writing woman expresses her innermost being and her secret feelings in female milieus, in which male writers are unable to live, of which they have no knowledge and which they cannot see with their own eyes. [...] It consists of the incomprehensible female life and the customs that are concealed from men. For what writer, however far his consciousness may reach and however much his imagination may overflow, can grasp the secrets of women since they [the women] remain for them [the men] in deep wells and under thick veils?[238]

She defended Taha Husayn against the criticism of the writer and professor of Arabic literature, Zaki Mubarak (Zakī Mubārak, 1892–1952), who considered it wrong that Taha Husayn had written two of his novels from the perspective of female protagonists[239]. She not only defended Taha Husayn, but also argued that there could be nothing better than an author like Taha Husayn writing novels about women—considering the virtuosity of his literature. She also hinted at the fact that she met with the same accusation by a critic after her victory in the literary competition of *al-Makshūf* because she as woman had written about two men, whereas another critic supported her with the words: »You know more about us than we do ourselves«[240]. However, she admitted having turned away from such subjects after that because she wanted to focus on the »concerns and deficiencies« (*humūm wa-ʿuyūb*)[241] in contemporary women's lives, depicting their innermost thoughts in the most accurate way possible. Although she stated that both sexes should specialize in their respective literature and focus on it, she also noted that the small number of talented women writers and their low productivity made the participation of male critics unavoidable. She predicted that in the end, Arab women would be able to create their own special, eloquent, and independent literature that

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236 For these points, see especially ibid., pp. 93–100.
237 Ibid., p. 96.
238 Ibid.
239 See here and the following sentence ibid., p. 98.
240 Ibid., p. 99.
241 Ibid.

would be true to their feminity and contribute to men's literature with its message of goodness and beauty[242].

In another essay titled *What We Do Not Know about Women's Literature*, originally published in 1962, she quotes the answer given by the French writer Colette (1873–1954) to the question what distinguished her literature as a woman: »My literature is man's literature«[243]. Sakakini explains that Colette's style and creativity were as good as any man's. She then turns to the paucity of women writers in Arab countries before the contemporary »renaissance« (*nahḍa*) and recounts the story of the journalist ʿAbd al-Hamid Hamdi (ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd Ḥamdī)[244], who wrote a monthly column under the female pseudonym *fatāt al-Nīl* (»Girl of the Nile«) and received letters of admiration for it. Yet, she remarks that it was rare and demanded creativity to find »women's literature« written by men. Even Muslim legal scholars in history often consulted their wives or female relatives in law cases pertaining to women's affairs because they wanted to include a perspective that was largely concealed from them[245]. Taking a look at female characters in world literature, Sakakini suspects that, for example, Anna Karenina was an invention by Tolstoy without a model in reality because »a plausible existence would not allow a conscious woman, raised in an educated environment, to leave her son and husband for a lover and devote all her efforts to this error«[246]. Sakakini demanded that women writers produce »truthful literature« (*al-adab al-ṣādiq*)[247], reflecting their thoughts and feelings. »Truthful literature knows of no differences between men's and women's literature, except for the topic that reflects the temper and nature«[248]. With the intellectual and civilizational progress taking place, the number of Arab women able to write this kind of literature was sure to increase. However, »despite its widening the horizons, its meanings, and women's participation in building it, this literature will go on to be ignorant of many sides of her [the woman's] works and talents that she has not revealed or dealt with«[249]. In this context, Sakakini reminded her readers of the limitations of the power of imagination by quoting French writer Georges Duhamel (1884–1966), a master of psychological novels, who said: »I am not capable of analysing my own soul. How should it be easy for me to analyse anybody else's soul?«[250] Sakakini concluded her essay with the remark

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242  Ibid.
243  Sakākīnī, Mā najhaluhu min adab al-marʾa, in: Eadem, Suṭūr tatajāwab, p. 120.
244  Hamdi founded the newspaper *al-Sufūr* (»Unveiling«) in 1915, see Baron, Unveiling, p. 381.
245  Sakākīnī, Mā najhaluhu, p. 124.
246  Ibid., p. 122.
247  Ibid., p. 123.
248  Ibid.
249  Ibid.
250  Ibid.

that it would do little harm if men and women described the side of life that they knew best and were creative in a subject that was closer to their nature and heart. Since both sexes participated in the literary production, their pens should compete with each other »in everything concerning it [i.e. literary production]« (*fī kull mā min sha'nihi*)[251]. Female pens, mature in thought and culture, should neither be »exploitative« (*mustaghilla*)[252] nor anonymous. »How much is the man touched to see a woman's face in the way God has created her, free of spuriousness; for what spuriousness could be more serious than if Eve fabricated for her face a mask with a moustache or attached a beard to it«[253].

As these remarks show, Sakakini underlines both women's difference from men and their equality to them. Because women are different from men, they are better equipped to write about their own difference. Since they are no less talented than men when encouraged, they can not only contribute equally to modern literature through their writing, but also overcome male domination and male disdain for women in general and for women's literature specifically.

Sakakini's view of women in literature is consistent with her ideas on the social and political status of women. As already mentioned, her central term *inṣāf*, »just treatment«, is rather a demand for an equilibrium between the sexes than a call for revolution against men. It is a flexible concept that allows her to both emphasize women's difference from men and demand women's equality. The main thesis in *Inṣāf al-mar'a* is that the shackles and restrictions of Arab women were products of history and society. The central term *inṣāf* is a plea for »justice«, which hints at the multiple forms of injustice that are inflicted on women. While the term *ʿadl* refers to justice in legal sense, *inṣāf* means the fair cutting into halves; it reflects the idea that women represent *niṣf al-umma*, »half the nation«[254], although they do not have equal shares, rights, and tasks. They have been reduced to cooking and childcare or held as prisoners of their house for centuries—under the pretext of myths, traditions, or women's nature. Until recently, they have seldomly resisted or partaken in public life. Within a few decades, however, they have achieved a »remarkable progress« (*al-taqaddum al-marmūq*)[255]. This progress provoked the reaction of misogynists, ridiculing the women's movement and warning against a Westernized style of life; however, other men supported women's demand for political and familial rights and contributed to women's successes[256].

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251 Ibid., p. 125.

252 Ibid. Sakakini marks a boundary that separates good and trivial literature. »Exploitive« in this context bears sexual overtones. I come back to this subject at the end of this subchapter.

253 Ibid.

254 Sakākīnī, Inṣāf al-mar'a, p. 29.

255 Eadem, al-Taqaddum al-marmūq, in: Eadem, Inṣāf al-mar'a, Damascus ²1989, pp. 181–187.

256 Eadem, Inṣāf al-mar'a, pp. 26–32.

The trope that Arab women were held as prisoners and men left half the *umma* without education is already present in Sakakini's very first essay[257] and reflects Qasim Amin's discourse[258]. It is possible to understand Sakakini's approach as a continuation of Qasim Amin's views: after his call for the »liberation of the woman« (*taḥrīr al-marʾa*) from her prison at home has borne fruits, Sakakini's can be understood as the next step, a focus on fair distribution.

> The age when house arrest (*al-iqāma al-jabriyya*) was forced upon us is over, and it is now one of our rights to breathe the same way men do, because the air is for everyone and the sun is for everyone. But we must strengthen ourselves for the possibility of wind storms and sun fires and we must show our skills and talents by doing the right work. We are just as qualified for the law of life in exactly the same way as men are. And in doing so, not a single one of the intransigent and chauvinist people can stand in our way, however far he may go in his egoism and stubbornness.[259]

The term *inṣāf* appears neither in the Qur'an nor in Qasim Amin's work. ʿAbbas Mahmud al-ʿAqqad used the expression in an article from 1943, in which he claimed that Qasim Amin had called for *inṣāf al-marʾa*[260]. In fact, the modern use of the term can almost certainly be traced back to Zaynab Fawwaz, who used the term in 1892[261], before Qasim Amin had even written his works; Fawwaz criticized the lack of respect, irresponsibility, and insensitivity of men and referred to herself as the »bearer of the banner of justice« (*ḥāmilat liwāʾ al-ʿadl*)[262]. Beyond the term, she shared other similarities with Sakakini: she came from a poor family in the south of Lebanon, albeit of Shiite background, was active as a literary figure in both Egypt and Syria, trying her hand at biographies, essays, and novels. She also fought fiercely for girls' education, but defended Islamic traditions such as veiling and gender segregation, which she did not consider a strong restriction. Moreover, she

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257  Eadem, Taṭawwur al-marʾa, p. 401.

258  For the idea that »half of the *umma*« lives »under unjust treatment« (*fī ẓalamāt*), see Qāsim Amīn, Taḥrīr al-marʾa (1899), Cairo 2012, p. 23. For the trope that women are prisoners of men and in their home, see ibid., p. 15, and idem, al-Marʾa al-jadīda (1900), Cairo 2012, pp. 21, 27, 105, and 108.

259  Sakākīnī, al-Taqaddum al-marmūq, p. 186.

260  al-ʿAqqād, Qāsim Amīn, p. 341.

261  Fawwāz, Rasāʾil Zaynabiyya, pp. 28–53 passim. She used the term in a debate with the Lebanese Christian author Hana Kurani (1870–1898), in which she argued that neither nature nor religion prevented women from working and doing men's jobs. For the background of this debate see Brӓckelmann, »Wir sind die Hälfte der Welt«, pp. 125–127 and 181f.; also compare Zeidan, Arab Women Novelists, p. 65.

262  Fawwāz, Rasāʾil Zaynabiyya, p. 125. For her criticism of men, see also Brӓckelmann, »Wir sind die Hälfte der Welt«, p. 96.

was rather critical of a westernized lifestyle[263]. It is therefore not surprising that Zaynab Fawwaz is the first entry in Sakakini's biographical lexicon[264].

Yet, what does *inṣāf* mean in Sakakini's work? Her call for *inṣāf* cannot be simply equated with »gender equality«. In one of her essays she poses the question of whether women and men had their own, different culture or whether »this age aimed at equality between the sexes in rights and duties«[265]. She gives no straightforward answer to this question in her text; yet, in another essay, Sakakini welcomes the fact that Syrian women have been granted the right to vote before other Arab women, yet she emphasizes that *inṣāf* is not limited to political rights:

> They [women] do not believe the man when he says that the right to vote is all the woman wants from the *inṣāf*. For there are rights that are more connected to women (*ḥuqūq alṣaq bi-nisāʾ*) and more useful for home and society than political rights, such as the right to a dignified life (*al-ḥayāt al-karīma*) and to their just share (*al-qisma al-ʿādila*), the inhalation of the sacred freedom (*tanassum al-ḥurriyya al-muqaddasa*), and many other matters, in which the man wipes out the woman's right. Nevertheless, the society, in which the consciousness slowly creeps forward, and the time, which floods the borders and dams like a liquid, are the two guarantors of *inṣāf al-marʾa*.[266]

After mentioning a dozen women activists in various Arab countries, she foresees the objection that someone might say: »these are few and the mass of the women are not like them«[267], to which she replies: »when was the mass of the men better, for the extraordinary people are few among both sexes«[268]. Sakakini draws a boundary to »the rich women fanatics« (*al-mutaṭarrifāt al-mutrafāt*)[269], who insist that women's work should be restricted to the home, whereas they themselves are the least engaged in domestic work; she calls these women »the grimmest enemy of both sexes,«[270] and their behavior one of the reasons for men's enmity towards women, as already mentioned (see chapter II.1.3).

Yet, the term *inṣāf* is open to different interpretations. On the one hand, it is telling in the passage quoted above that *inṣāf* goes beyond the politically liberal view that equality simply means equality before the law. Sakakini's understanding

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263  Bräckelmann, »Wir sind die Hälfte der Welt«, pp. 178 and 182.
264  Widād Sakākīnī, Zaynab Fawwāz, in: Eadem, Sābiqāt al-ʿaṣr, pp. 7f.
265  Eadem, al-Thaqāfa al-nisawiyya al-manshūda, in: Eadem, Inṣāf al-marʾa, Damascus ²1989, p. 137.
266  Eadem, Inṣāf al-marʾa, p. 30.
267  Ibid., p. 31.
268  Ibid.
269  Ibid.
270  Ibid.

of equality is derived from the dignity of the human being, her freedom and self-responsibility. In contrast to most male discourses on women's emancipation, it is a comprehensive demand that begins with legal equality and includes private, individual, family, cultural, and social aspects. Interpreted this way, *inṣāf* would mean more than mere legal equality. On the other hand, it is also telling that Anwar al-Jundi quotes extracts from the same passages with the remark that Sakakini has a »moderate opinion« (*muʿtadilat al-raʾy*)[271] regarding women's rights because she perceives them »not only in women's political demands, but also in the dignity of women and their position in their home«[272]. It is strange that al-Jundi understands Sakakini's demands to dignified life as a moderation and that he connects dignity to work in the household, thus seeing Sakakini's proposition not as an extension, but rather as a restriction of legal rights.

However, this might not be a misinterpretation either. In an article about *The Future of Arab Women*[273], Sakakini demands that women bear their heavy burden and prove »by knowledge, devotion, and faith« (*bi-maʿrifa wa-tajarrud wa-īmān*) that they are capable of contributing to the progress of society and »that the exercise of political rights does not deter them from their first function (*al-waẓīfa al-ūlā*) and distract them from their nature and home«[274]. Seen this way, *inṣāf* tries to harmonize the demands for emancipation and equality with reproductive work and the appreciation of motherhood[275], which are among the main sources of gender inequality. To my mind, Sakakini's texts reflect here a general dilemma of women's emancipation, all the more so because Sakakini generally tries to hold a middle ground between »exaggerated« Westernization and »outdated« traditionalism.

On the other hand, Sakakini cancelled exactly this passage about women's political rights and natural duties in a reprint of the same article in 1959. In the new version, she replaced the sentence with the statement that

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271 AL-JUNDĪ, Widād Sakākīnī, p. 795.

272 Ibid.

273 Widād SAKĀKĪNĪ, Mustaqbal al-marʾa al-ʿarabiyya, in: al-Adīb 12 (1953), pp. 26f.

274 All quotes ibid., p. 27.

275 See her positive review of a book on »the inspiration of motherhood« by the Lebanese writer Rūz ʿAṭāllāh Shaḥfa: Widād SAKĀKĪNĪ, Waḥy al-umūma, in: Majallat al-Majmaʿ al-ʿIlmī l-ʿArabī fī Dimashq (RAAD) 3 (1951), pp. 441f. For a short biography of the author, in which Sakakini mentions the book as well as her own article about it, see eadem, Rūz ʿAṭāllāh Shaḥfa, 1890–1955, in: Eadem, Sābiqāt al-ʿaṣr, p. 117. Sakakini also wrote about the Mother's Day in a completely uncritical way, see eadem, Takrīm al-umūma, in: Eadem, Sawād fī bayāḍ, Damascus 1959, pp. 70–80. Sakakini tells of the origin of Mother's Day in the USA in 1907 and its spread to Arab countries, without giving exact dates. She sees the custom of giving flowers as a beautiful gesture of homage to the mothers of the world. She does not mention the fact that even its inventor, Anna Jarvis (1864–1948), tried in vain to save the originally feminist idea from its commercialization.

building a new socialist society […] requires the co-operation of both genders with regard to every big and small issue, in the natural domain and the familial and social life as well as in the output of talented and distinguished women in art and science. For it would be stupid and out of place for their (i.e. the women's) usefulness to be limited only to the home and family since modern co-operative society demands an increase in its regenerating diverse intellectual energies (*ṭāqāt fikriyya mutaʿaddida mutajaddida*).[276]

Here she further inserted a completely new conclusion, in which she described emancipation as a future-oriented project that lived, like every vision of the future, on the promise of a new spring. If there was no future, human wishes were limited to the here and now:

It will be the same with women as they stand, in view of their present situation, looking out for the sun to illuminate the horizons of the near morning, fill their wings with light, faith, and desire, and nourish in them thought, talent, and character so that they, like the steadfast men, work for peace, love, and immortality[277].

This revision of the 1953 essay in 1959 has not only to do with a reformulation regarding the women's question, but it also reflects the euphoria at the beginning of the Egyptian-Syrian unification. It is, however, interesting that in both versions of the text, Sakakini declares that despite mistakes and lack of success, she is »not pessimistic« about the future of the women's movement; rather, she expresses the need for perseverance in women's struggles in the rhetorical question: »Does a tree bear fruit, barely after it has taken root?«[278]

Taken together, it appears that Sakakini moves back and forth between claims of difference and claims of equality. As a term of criticism, *inṣāf* addresses both the exclusion and the oppression of women; as an emancipatory concept, it can demand both the recognition of women as the Other of men and women's equality with men.

### 2.2 The Scope of Feminist Criticism and the Rejection of Sagan-Type Literature

The essays in the volume *Inṣāf al-marʾa* can be grouped around three thematic priorities:

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276 Widād SAKĀKĪNĪ, Mustaqbal al-marʾa al-ʿarabiyya, in: Eadem, Sawād fī bayāḍ, p. 142.

277 Ibid., p. 144.

278 All quotes eadem, Mustaqbal (1953), p. 27 and eadem, Mustaqbal (1959), p. 141.

(1) Sakakini describes the active participation of women in culture and literature past and present. She treats the »literary meetings« (*majālis al-adab*) of early Arab-Muslim women, underlining that these activities preceded Western women's literary salons by several centuries[279]. With regard to contemporary times, she depicts progress in women's education[280], but also shows that the Syrians were lagging behind the Egyptians[281].

(2) She outlines the high social position of women in early Islam[282], their participation in pilgrimage[283] and war and hence the »heroism« (*buṭūla*)[284] and »manliness (chivalry) of women« (*murūʾat al-marʾa*)[285]. She also recounts the recent rise of Syrian women and their participation in the struggle for national independence[286].

(3) She criticizes the widespread misogyny[287] in society and literature and sheds a differentiated light on special tropes[288] and stereotypes[289] used in connection with women. She understands the emergence of modern women's literature as well as women's emancipation as worldwide phenomena[290].

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279  Eadem, Majālis al-adab, p. 54. This chapter from *Inṣāf al-marʾa* is a lecture that Sakakini held at the Arab Academy of Damascus, see ibid., p. 41, fn. 1. She had already addressed this subject in a 1933 article, see eadem, Adībāt al-ʿarab fī majālisihinna, in: al-Thaqāfa (Damascus) 1 (1933), pp. 68–72.

280  Eadem, al-Marʾa wa-l-taʿlīm al-ʿālī [*Women and higher Education*], pp. 127–136.

281  Eadem, al-Thaqāfa al-nisawiyya al-manshūda [*The Desired Female Culture*], pp. 137–146; eadem, al-Thaqāfatunā l-fanniyya [*Our Artistic Culture*], pp. 189–198.

282  Eadem, Muḥammad, muḥarrir al-marʾa [*Muhammad, the Liberator of Women*], pp. 161–170; eadem, Iḥyāʾ al-banāt [*The Revival of the Girls*], pp. 113–120.

283  Eadem, Ḥajjāt mulabbiyyāt [*Female Pilgrims to Mecca*], pp. 85–92.

284  Eadem, Buṭūlat al-marʾa al-ʿarabiyya [*The Heroism of Arab Women*], pp. 57–64.

285  Ibid., p. 61.

286  Eadem, al-Sūriyyāt fī l-niḍāl al-waṭanī [*Syrian Women in the Patriotic Struggle*], pp. 33–40; Nahḍat al-marʾa al-sūriyya [*The Rebirth of Syrian Women*], pp. 171–180.

287  Eadem, Fattish ʿan al-rajul [*Search for the Man*], pp. 147–152; eadem, Aʿdāʾ al-marʾa [*The Woman's Enemies*], pp. 153–160. The latter essay was a reprint of an article published in *al-Risāla* in 1943. As early as 1938, she had taken aim at the misogyny of various writers from al-Maʿarri (d. 1057) to Schopenhauer (d. 1860), see eadem, ʿAdū l-marʾa, in: al-Risāla 253 (09.05.1938), pp. 780f.

288  Women's tears are treated as a literary subject in classical and modern literature, in eadem, al-Laʾālī l-ilāhiyya [*Devine Pearls*], pp. 113–120.

289  Eadem, Hal al-marʾa wafiyya? [*Is the Woman Loyal?*], pp. 65–73; eadem, Kayfa tataḥaddath? [*How Does She Speak?*], pp. 75–83; eadem, Qufl bi-ghayr miftāḥ [*A Lock without a Key*], pp. 107–112.

290  Eadem, Adab al-niswa [*Women's Literature*], pp. 94f.; eadem, Inṣāf al-marʾa [*The Just Treatment of Women*], pp. 23–32.

Each thematic focus reflects Sakakini's historical thinking that Arab women's *inṣāf* and participation were guaranteed in early Islamic times, had been lost in the centuries of decline and were well on the way to being regained in the recent decades. Drawing on the essays of this volume as well as on essays published by her elsewhere, I want to pinpoint her feminist writing position more systematically in relation to Pierre Bourdieu's critique of masculine domination. Bourdieu determines three areas as mainly responsible for the reproduction of rather stable hierarchical gender relations in spite of more or less permanent social transformations: family, education, and religion[291]. Family is the place where a »natural« reproduction of gender roles in everyday life happens. Educational institutions transform gender differences into male and female preferences for subjects, disciplines, occupations, hobbies, professions, and areas of knowledge; although education shapes and changes society, it also has the undesirable effect of stabilizing gender hierarchy, in that society appreciates almost exclusively male spheres of expertise, while devaluing areas with high or growing female participation. Religion is a central field of symbolic power that sanctions gender differences and reserves certain areas and activities for men. Following these considerations, I sum up what Sakakini had to say about the reproduction of gender differences in these three areas—family, religion, and education—and add, for obvious reasons, literature as a fourth important space for the reproduction of gender norms.

In an article about the »housewife«, Sakakini thematised the unequal roles and the power hierarchy between men and women by considering the kind of »housewife« who was in demand as well as the efforts that were made to find and create the ideal housewife[292]. She started with the remark that if one applied political models to the household, one could find tyrannical, socialist, and democratic conditions, yet the democratic model was an exception. In Arab and Oriental countries, the husband »has absolute power« (*lahu al-amr wa-l-nahī*)[293], interfering in big and small issues, even in especially female affairs; however, a house without a mother, sister or wife was like a ship without captain. In modern times, the understanding of what »housewife« means has changed; in »the most progressive contemporary nations«, the confusion about the characteristics of a housewife seems to be greatest since modern women have broken with their grandmothers' traditions and developed a dislike of housework. These nations now invented competitions, prizes and examinations for the ideal housewife. Having seen such a competition at the cinema, Sakakini expresses her surprise that not only cooking skills and the knowledge of housekeeping, clothes, education, and nursing were tested, but also familiarity with

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291  See for example Bourdieu, Männliche Herrschaft, pp. 148–151.

292  Widād Sakākīnī, Sayyidat al-manzil, in: Eadem, Suṭūr tatajāwab, pp. 146–150.

293  Ibid., p. 147.

social questions and world news, as well as general education and quick-wittedness. This example showed not only what qualifications men expected from a brilliant housewife, but also that their demands exceeded all reason. That nobody set up a questionnaire about the qualities of the ideal houseman and his qualifications for fatherhood and married life »possibly belonged to the phenomena of inherited tyranny« (*la'alla ḥādhihi l-ẓāhira min ẓawāhir al-istibdād al-mawrūth*)[294]. In this short article, Sakakini clearly sees hierarchical structures in (traditional) Arab families, but also the reproduction of gender hierarchies in modern (Western) societies.

Religion is an important feature in Sakakini's treatment of the Arab-Islamic past and its connection to modern life as reflected in her book *Ummahāt al-mu'minīn* and her controversy with Bint al-Shati'. Her main argument that Arab women in early Islam were more able to lead independent lives than in later centuries of »decline« (*inḥiṭāṭ*) and under Turkish or colonial occupation can be even traced back to her first published article *Taṭawwur al-mar'a* (*The Development of the Women*, 1927)[295]. As I deal with this idea in detail further below, suffice it to note here that her argumentation centers on the idea that Muhammad can be considered »the liberator of women«[296] and that modern emancipation can therefore be considered a return to the original principles of Islam, when »there was not difference between the two sexes in their rights and duties« (*fa-mā farq bayna l-jinsayn fī l-ḥuqūq wa-l-wājibāt*)[297]. As Sakakini shows the various forms of women's active participation in early Islam and early Arabic literature, her view tackles and subverts male interpretations of Islamic norms, which affirm male domination.

The issue of women's education was a life-long topic for Sakakini, who worked as a teacher herself for several years. In her book on Qasim Amin, she underlined his view that women's education was no *bid'a* (»unlawful innovation«), but in line with Islam. After the Great War, the debate soon shifted to the question of whether women should be allowed to study and have unrestricted access to all disciplines[298]. Sakakini left no doubt in her text that Qasim Amim would have been very pleased to see talented and educated women liberate themselves from ignorance and backwardness, step out of isolation, and participate in building a modern society alongside men only 30 years after his call for their liberation[299]. Sakakini combined Qasim Amin's contribution to the foundation of what was to become the University of Cairo (1908) with his demand for girl's education (*tarbiya*). She then suggested in a non-historical deduction that he had not only approved of

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294  Ibid., p. 150.

295  Eadem, Taṭawwur al-mar'a, pp. 399–402.

296  Eadem, Muḥammad, muḥarrir al-mar'a, pp. 161–170.

297  Eadem, Iḥyā' al-banāt, p. 118.

298  For these debates see Ende, Sollen Frauen schreiben lernen?, p. 55.

299  Sakākīnī, Qāsim Amīn, p. 37. See the same argument in eadem, Inṣāf al-mar'a, p. 30.

girls' schooling, but also of higher education for women, arguing that for Qasim Amin education (*tarbiya*) was the precondition of higher education (*ta'līm*)[300]. She claimed that he would have been happy to know that the first women had been accepted for a course of study only 20 years after the foundation of Cairo University[301]. Without taking into account the changing positions in Qasim Amin's thought, his »educational« ideal and his still patriarchal thought, Sakakini maintains that the enlightenment of women had started with his work and was carried on by women such as Huda Sha'rawi and Mayy Ziyada[302]. The women's movement in the Middle East was thus inextricably linked to Qasim Amin's name and his appeal had found an echo from the Nile to the Euphrates and from the Barada to the shores of Libanon, where Arab women had at first appeared as journalists and writers, before acquiring positions in the academy, as high officials or as ministers[303].

Obviously, Sakakini tries to legitimize women's higher education by explicitly linking it to Qasim Amin and Islamic thought. This reference has an ambivalent effect as it always conjures up the question of whether women's education—and its presumably negative consequences—stood in harmony with Islamic principles. This question caused permanent discussions about the limits and aims of women's emancipation. This debate, in which men often demanded the last word, further explains the final point in Sakakini's argumentation that the education of women was impossible without the commitment of women[304]. In practice, many women and women's rights activists—including Sakakini herself—worked in the education sector of girls and women, probably out of conviction, but also because this area offered paid jobs for women. The education of women by other women was seen as socially acceptable, paid work and came close to the traditional educational role of women.

Against this background, it is therefore worth mentioning that Sakakini could react with annoyance to men's debate about the higher education of women. A radio discussion between four men from Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon gave her the reason to write a sharp commentary[305]. Although only one of them advocated a restriction of women's admission—no law studies, no engineering—, she criticized

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300  Eadem, Qāsim Amīn, p. 46.

301  See ibid., p. 50.

302  Ibid., p. 54; eadem, Insāf al-mar'a, p. 30f. For the changing positions of Qasim Amin see ZEIDAN, Arab Women Novelists, pp. 15–20. For a critique of Amin's patronizing and patriarchal approach, see Leila AHMED, Women and Gender in Islam. Historical Roots of a Moden Debate, New Haven/London 1992, pp. 144–168; for an analysis of the layers of Amin's voice, see Nergis MAZID, Western Mimicry or Cultural Hybridity. Deconstructing Qasim Amin's »Colonized Voice«, in: The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences 19, 4 (2002), pp. 42–67.

303  SAKĀKĪNĪ, Qāsim Amīn, p. 54.

304  Eadem, al-Thaqāfa al-nisawiyya, p. 144.

305  Eadem, al-Mar'a wa-l-ta'līm al-'ālī, pp. 127–136.

that no women with experience in the educational system were present during the discussion. She called it a *jawr* (»injustice«, »oppression«) that men alone discussed the lives and problems of women without asking them or caring about their opinions, as if they were their »eternal custodian« (*al-waṣī l-abadī*)[306]. She also found it astonishing that men pondered the higher education of girls without taking their situation into account; higher education was the continuation of primary and secondary education, which first of all should be granted to both sexes without any exception[307]. She also was annoyed that one participant voiced the opinion that the role of the woman was primarily connected to the family[308] and that her education depended on its usefulness for her domestic duties. Equal education for man and women might lead to a »great catastrophe« (*nakba kubrā*)[309] for marriage, motherhood, and family. She wrote that he, although he posed as a helper of women, actually behaved like a »women's enemy« (*ʿadū li-l-marʾa*)[310] because of his reluctance to give »perfect freedom and higher culture« (*al-ḥurriyya al-muthlā wa-l-thaqāfa al-ʿāliya*)[311] to them.

The example elucidates that Sakakini's take on women's liberation stood in contrast to what was called emancipation in male discourses. She tirelessly underlined that equality in education was not of benefit for society alone, but a value in itself that opens »new horizons«[312] to women. Apart from that, she believed that all women—and especially educated women—influenced men in a positive way, »however arrogantly men may treat them«[313]. It is therefore a peculiarity of Sakakini's feminist discourse that she used the indigenous hegemonic—nationalist and Islamist—discourses to legitimize the Arab-Islamic authenticity of women's emancipation, while she tried to subvert the gender hierarchy reproduced in the hegemonic nationalist and Islamist discourses at the same time.

Apart from family, religion, and the educational system, literature—or art more generally—forms a fourth institutionalized social field that helps to reproduce gender hierarchies. In her attempt to define and demand women's literature (*adab al-niswa*)[314], Sakakini explained that men's literature was the source of myths and

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306  Ibid., p. 133.

307  Ibid., p. 134.

308  Although this was exactly the position that Qasim Amin and other male supporters of women's emancipation at the beginning of the twentieth century had held, see for example ZEIDAN, Arab Women Novelists, p. 20.

309  SAKĀKĪNĪ, al-Marʾa wa-l-taʿlīm al-ʿālī, p. 132.

310  Ibid., p. 136, fn. 1.

311  Ibid.

312  Eadem, al-Thaqāfa al-nisawiyya, p. 141; eadem, Thaqāfatunā l-fanniyya, p. 197.

313  Eadem, al-Marʾa wa-l-taʿlīm al-ʿālī, p. 135.

314  Eadem, Adab al-niswa, pp. 93–100.

imaginations about women; in it, female worlds and perceptions were misrepresented, and prejudices about women preserved. As an example, Sakakini named the famous bibliographic encyclopaedia *Kashf al-ẓunūn* by Katib Celebi (Kātib Çelebī, 1609–1657), in which she had found several entries on books on justice (*naṣaf*, *inṣāf*), but no single work that was dedicated to the just treatment of women. Moreover, men's imagination often replaced reality. Many authors blamed Eve and her seduction for man's difficulties on earth—even authors form the Arab-Islamic world. Reproducing this myth, the writers overlooked the fact that Eve was not even mentioned in the Qur'an, whereas Adam was reprimanded because of his disobedience to God. Therefore, the demand for the education of women was closely connected to women's participation in the literary scene, which in turn was a prerequisite for gender justice. Women should pursue creative and artistic activities and write literary as well as scientific texts. Drawing on Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*, Sakakini argued that women's writing was—just like men's writing—a way of confirming their existence[315]. She had already expressed the same thought in her first volume *al-Khaṭarāt*, when she quoted Descartes and justified her own writing with the argument that God had given »the ability to think« (*al-fikr*) to men and women alike, stating: »I thought and felt my existence, and so I wrote down consecutively« what came to my mind«[316].

This, however, did not mean that she appreciated every woman's writing. As mentioned with regard to the second Arab Writers' Congress in 1956 in Damascus, she perceived unnamed young female writers, who appeared there, with suspicion due to their presumable lack of talent, help from hidden hands, and unseriousness about literature. Moreover, what she generally abhorred was the use of Arabic dialects, *al-'ammiyya*, which, in her view[317], was closely connected to superficial literature and a »revealing literature«, *al-adab al-makshūf*[318], that disclosed too much and too trivial secrets about women's bodies, feelings, and desires for the amusement of male readers. In a harsh attack on what she marked as »Saganism« (*al-Saghāniyya*), an Arabic literature inspired by Françoise Sagan (1938–2004) and her bestselling novel *Bonjour Tristesse* (1954), Sakakini drew a clear boundary between what she understood as literature and the trivial depiction of women's pleasure-driven love life. She did not count »the scheming vulgarian that depicts a frantic adolescent and the stimulation of sensitivity, imitating Sagan« among »our literature«, although some people called for it; the purpose of »the libertinism of the feminine« in Western literature was not »guarding her honor or recognizing

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315 Ibid., p. 93.

316 Eadem, al-Muqaddima, in: Eadem, al-Khaṭarāt, p. 4.

317 She dedicated several articles to her struggle against the dialect, see eadem, al-'Ammiyya wa-l-saṭḥiyya, in: Eadem, Sawād fī bayāḍ, Damascus 1959, pp. 191–198.

318 See eadem, al-Adab al-makshūf, in: Eadem, Sawād fī bayāḍ, Damascus 1959, pp. 91–102.

her truth«[319]. Sakakini targeted the voyeuristic aspect of such a one-dimensional literature that missed any emancipatory goal and rather pleased men:

> Men claimed that women, who work as writers, are more able to depict their psyche and world, and women believed them. She answered his call by sometimes flirting with him and sometimes rebelling against him, looking for her freedom that he robbed from her, until she sets out for an empty circle, not knowing how to turn around. There are then suddenly these poor and rough pencils, dizzy due to the Saganian maelstrom and enchanted by the male praise that demand from them to live according to their own minds and express the secrets of their lives without shame and fear of what has been called tradition and was invented by backward societies. He demanded from her to expose her psyche and emotions and to sing of him and her seductive parts in love poems so that he could hear of them with her help and read about them in her literature. And all of a sudden there was this literature that called values and tradition fairy tales and silly things; so, for it, recklessness was freedom, physical desire love, and disrobing natural. Sagan was the leader of this outburst, she, who destroyed her father's home[320] with her riot (*bi-fitnatihā*).[321]

Sakakini argued that »Sagan-style literature« (*al-adab al-sāghānī*) did not spring from »the societies, the homes, and the lives of our lands«, but was »a counterfeit imported product« (*mutawrada muqallada*)[322] that did not correspond to the existing social conditions. It was based on the idea that women wanted to use their new freedom to act out their instincts the way they wanted to, not the way their backward societies and families wanted them to do, both of which still aimed to mould boys and girls to the nation's specifications. Such stories were a great success only »with adolescents and shameless people« (*ʿinda l-murāḥiqīn wa-l-majānīn*), while literati and critics mocked »these childish outcries« (*hādhihi l-ṣarākhāt al-subyāniyya*)[323]. However, the success of this kind of literature showed the triumph of business acumen, even if the habits of society and the values of literature (*al-adab*, literally »good manners«) and humanity fell over it[324].

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319  All quotes eadem, Mā najhaluhu, p. 124.

320  In *Bonjour Tristesse*, the main character is a disillusioned teenager who misjudges the feelings of his father's fiancée, who subsequently dies in a car accident, a suspected suicide.

321  Widād Sᴀᴋᴀ̄ᴋɪ̄ɴɪ̄, Hiya fī qiṣaṣinā l-ḥadītha, in: Eadem, Sawād fī bayāḍ, Damascus 1959, pp. 174f. The importance of this passage is underlined by the fact that it is quoted by Fᴀᴛᴛᴜ̄Ḥ, Widād Sakākīnī (1964), p. 21, and Fɪʟᴀsᴛ̣ɪ̄ɴ, Widād Sakākīnī, p. 91, in their portraits of Sakakini.

322  All quotes Sᴀᴋᴀ̄ᴋɪ̄ɴɪ̄, Hiya fī qiṣaṣinā, p. 175.

323  All quotes ibid.

324  Ibid., p. 176.

This quote is not of interest because of the question of whom Sakakini actually criticized in these words[325], but because Sakakini's statement makes clear what kind of literature she advocates. Whereas she excluded modern frivolous literature from »our literature«, she admitted that erotic texts were part of all literatures and briefly mentioned various examples from classical Arabic *mujūn* poetry and the eroticism of the 1001 nights[326]. However, she opposed the classical notion of erotic literature to modern forms of innermost and sexual self-disclosure. She questioned the value of this literature, even if the psychological struggle between intellectual and religious convictions and sexual adventures was sincerely depicted as in the case of André Gide (1869–1951)[327]. According to her, literature should not be limited to challenging the boundaries of decency and good manners in a traditional society; it should offer more than that. Beyond psychological complexity and social criticism, it should follow an aesthetic ideal and a higher message. Her practical realization of these ideas in her short stories and novels will be discussed in chapter III.

## 2.3    Mayy Ziyada as a Role Model

Sakakini's interest in the life and work of Mayy Ziyada was not new when she published her biography about Mayy in 1969. Since the 1940s, she had published several articles in memory of Mayy. The biography was partially based on this earlier work[328]. The collected essays of *Inṣāf al-mar'a* contain several hints at Mayy. Even after the publication of her biography, she returned to the subject, dedicating a biographical entry[329] to her or comparing her to Albert Camus[330]. She also critically

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325  Sakakini does not mention names, so it remains unclear which authors she had in mind. However, the Lebanese writer Layla Baʻlabakki (Laylā Baʻlabakkī, b. 1936) and her novel *Anā aḥyā* (*I live*, 1958) have often been associated with a literary trend, influenced by Sagan. Today, Baʻlabakki's novel is considered »a milestone in the development of the Arabic novel in Lebanon«, Yumna AL-ʻID, Lebanon, in: ASHOUR et al. (eds.), Arab Women Writers, p. 23.

326  SAKĀKĪNĪ, al-Adab al-makshūf, pp. 94–97. For Arabic erotic literature see for example Zoltán SZOMBATHY, Mujūn. Libertinism in Medieval Muslim Society and Literature, Cambridge 2013; Pernilla MYRNE, Female Sexuality in the Early Medieval Islamic World. Gender and Sex in Arabic Literature, London 2020.

327  SAKĀKĪNĪ, al-Adab al-makshūf, p. 98. She only hints a Gide's homosexuality indirectly, but does not mention his defense of pederasty; she speaks more generally of »his sexual sins« (*maʼāthimuhu l-jinsiyya*). On Gide see Alan SHERIDAN, André Gide. A Life in the Present, Cambridge 1999.

328  Widād SAKĀKĪNĪ, Dhikrā Mayy, in: al-Adīb 10 (1944), p. 14; eadem, al-Ishtirākiyya ʻinda »Mayy«, in: al-Maʻrifa 19 (1963), pp. 47–54; eadem, Rāʼida minnā. Dirāsa adabiyya hadītha, in: al-Maʻrifa 23 (1963), pp. 71–76; eadem, Nadwat Mayy, in: al-Maʻrifa 36 (1963), pp. 107–112; eadem, Mayy Ziyāda fī ṣadāqatihā, in: al-Adīb 12 (1965), pp. 2–4; eadem, al-Insāniyya fī adab Mayy, in: al-Adīb 2 (1967), pp. 12f.

329  Eadem, Mayy Ziyāda. Adībat al-ibdāʻ fī ʻaṣrihā, 1860–1941, in: Eadem, Sābiqāt al-ʻaṣr, pp. 30–38.

330  Eadem, Ẓulumāt »Mayy« wa-ashiʻʻatuhā, in: al-Maʻrifa (Damascus) 322/323 (1990), pp. 213–217.

reviewed the works of authors who claimed to have discovered something new about Mayy or who published hitherto unpublished works—Sakakini either thought they were wrong or claimed to have already dealt with the material in her own biography[331]. In order to write Mayy's biography, Sakakini collected a vast amount of material by and about Mayy and interviewed many of her contemporaries. Although it could have been theoretically possible that the two women met in the 1930s, Sakakini mentions no such meeting. In the introduction, Sakakini clarified that her view of Mayy Ziyada was not only dictated by her sympathy for her, but by the desire to write a biography in the same way as Mayy Ziyada would have liked to write about herself:

> If there was not the unjust accusation of spiritual reincarnation (*al-taqammuṣ al-rūḥī*), physical return of philosophical incarnation (*al-ḥulūl al-falsafī*), I would claim that Mayy's spirit—whose echo and resonance I have accompanied since her disappearance—writes with my pen about herself and unites itself with my mind (*khāṭirī*) in removing the insult (harm) from her and puting her in the place that she deserves due to her zeal and talent.[332]

Sakakini saw Mayy Ziyada not only as a literary precursor or part of the women's movement[333], she also put her in a line with the male pioneers of modern literature and literary criticism[334] and called for more appreciation of Mayy, her literary salon[335], and the great influence that she had on literature and art as well as on the scholars, artists, and writers of her time: »It is Mayy's right—since she was ahead of her time and her comrades in gender because of her precocious talent—that we call the period of time, when her star shone, ›Mayy's epoche‹, just as we speak of al-ʿAqqad's and Taha Husayn's epoche«.[336]

The main purpose of Sakakini's biography was to counter the legends, clichés, and unproven statements that male writers spread about Mayy Ziyada. On the one hand, Sakakini quoted from the many positive judgements of writers like Taha Husayn, Ahmad Hassan al-Zayyat, Huda Shaʿrawi or Salma Sayegh[337]; she cites ʿAbbas Mahmud al-ʿAqqad with stating that Mayy was »an astonishing phenomenon in Cairo's life, and the astonishing thing about her is that she united the best what

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331  Eadem, Ḥawla l-shuʿla al-zurqāʾ, in: Eadem, Shawk fī l-ḥaṣīd, pp. 201f.; eadem, al-Aʿmāl al-adabiyya li-Mayy Ziyāda, in: Ibid, pp. 203f.; eadem, Min al-Rayḥānī ilā Mayy, in: Ibid., pp. 205f.

332  Sᴀᴋᴀ̄ᴋɪ̄ɴɪ̄, Mayy Ziyāda, p. 6. Cf. Oᴛᴛᴏssᴏɴ Bɪᴛᴀʀ, I Can Do Nothing, p. 68.

333  Sᴀᴋᴀ̄ᴋɪ̄ɴɪ̄, Mayy Ziyāda, pp. 112–115.

334  See for example ibid., pp. 120, 213, and 224.

335  She founded her salon in Cairo in 1913 or 1914 and it lasted for three decades.

336  Ibid., p. 9.

337  Ibid., pp. 122–141; 212–219.

is in both sexes and the best features and traits they have«[338]. On the other hand, Sakakini pointed at the fact that most of the male writing about Mayy Ziyada was imbued with prejudices and gender constructions. She quoted for example the leftist author Salama Musa as stating that the »clear deficiency in her (Mayy's) culture was that when she wrote a book or an article she wrote it with her heart, with her emotion without reason and logic«[339]. Against this background, it seems understandable that Sakakini wanted to see justice done to Mayy Ziyada and that she dedicated the final chapter of her book to the reception of Mayy Ziyada's work. In *Sābiqāt al-ʿaṣr*, she also ends her portrait of Mayy criticizing unfounded accusations[340].

In the biography, she presents various male explanations for Mayy's illness with drops of derision, arguing that her depression would have never been interpreted the same way, had she been a man[341]. Sakakini criticizes a series of articles, written by the journalist Kamil al-Shinawi (Kāmil Shināwī) in 1955 and later published as a book, as disparaging; the author called Mayy Ziyada »the beloved (worshipped) of the literati« (*maʿbūdat al-udabāʾ*)[342] and explained her importance with reference to the (male) visitors to her salon. Another author, Anwar al-Maʿdawi (al-Maʿdāwī) deduced from the correspondence between Mayy and Khalil Gibran (Jubrān Khalīl Jubrān, 1883–1931) that doubts were justified since she was not a woman like others because she did not react with »the affection of the female« (*ʿātifat al-unthā*)[343] to men; her femininity had withered and died, which prevented her from finding a partner in life[344]. Sakakini wondered why the second edition of *Ḥayāt Mayy* (Mayy's Life, 1942) by Muhammad ʿAbd al-Ghani Hasan (Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Ghanī Ḥasan), published in 1964, contained unproven additions, among them the claim that Mayy used to smash dishes and shred cushions until her strength ran out[345]. The most astonishing explanation for Mayy's depression, according to Sakakini, was presented by the Lebanese writer ʿAbd al-Latif Sharara (ʿAbd al-Laṭīf Sharāra), who held that Mayy's illness was caused by the fact that her »romantic« upbringing in Palestine collided with the climate that the Jews spread in and beyond Palestine[346].

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338  Ibid., p. 213.
339  Ibid., p. 217.
340  Eadem, Mayy Ziyāda (1986), p. 38.
341  Eadem, Mayy Ziyāda, p. 224.
342  Ibid., p. 220.
343  Ibid.
344  Ibid., p. 221.
345  Ibid., p. 222.
346  Ibid., pp. 222f.

To dispel rumours about Mayy's mental illness, Sakakini quotes in length from the report that Sami al-Kayyali published in *al-Ḥadīth* after visiting Mayy in 1938[347]. In it, al-Kayyali wrote that Mayy not only talked as if nothing had happened to her, but also formulated one stimulating thought after the other, in a ravishing and well-ordered style. Al-Kayyali summed up his impressions with the words: »If it hadn't been for this entertaining meeting, I would have been one of those people who believed most in Mayy's madness.«[348] Sakakini comments on al-Kayyali's report and his confession by saying that he had not been one of Mayy's old friends, but knew her through her literature and asked for a visit when rumours about Mayy's illness started to spread. »Many writers and journalists tried to explore Mayy's situation and see her, but most of them were denied access to her—except for those whose loyalty and support for her cause she felt.«[349]

In her biography, Sakakini expressed admiration for many sides of Mayy's work, not only for her »literary salon« and her engagement for »the progress of women« and »the equality of the sexes«[350]. She also described Mayy's understanding of her »Oriental« and »Arab« identities[351], her »humanity«[352] and »socialism«[353]. Sakakini had already dealt with some of these points in articles for various journals[354]. She also expressed sympathy for Mayy's understanding of religion[355]. While her father was a Maronite from Lebanon and her mother a Greek-Orthodox from Palestine, Mayy accepted the best of both denominations in a spirit of tolerance. Mayy's spirituality resulted from a »melancholic Christianity«, determined by the Messiah's suffering due to his message. Mayy's pessimistic basic tone was already visible in the diary that she kept during school and in which she grappled with death, according to Sakakini. In later years, her spirituality went beyond the teachings of the churches und turned towards other religious convictions and the secrets of life and nature. She always held on to her religious feelings, even in discussions about science and liberation, which were often considered atheistic at the time. One of her friends was Shibli Shumayyil (Shiblī Shumayyil, 1850–1917), an advocate of Darwin's evolution theory, with whom she discussed half seriously, half mockingly,

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347  Ibid., pp. 194f. Al-Ḥadīth's article appeared in al-Ḥadīth 6 (1938), p. 397.

348  Sakākīnī, Mayy Ziyāda, p. 195.

349  Ibid.

350  Ibid., pp. 112–115.

351  Ibid., pp. 53–58.

352  Ibid., pp. 97–100.

353  Ibid., pp. 101–106.

354  Cf. her earlier articles eadem, Nadwat Mayy (1963), pp. 107–112; eadem, al-Insāniyya fī adab Mayy (1967), pp. 12f.; eadem, al-Ishtirākiyya ʿinda »Mayy« (1963), pp. 47–54.

355  Eadem, Mayy Ziyāda, pp. 27–38.

stating »I am surprised to see you as an unbeliever towards God, but a believer towards Darwin«[356].

Drawing a parallel between Mayy and herself once again, Sakakini underlines that Mayy lived in Palestine, Greater Syria (*bilād al-Shām*) and Egypt; so, the question for her was where her fatherland (*waṭan*) was, when the Egyptian national movement demanded »Egypt for the Egyptians«[357]. Although Mayy had not lived through the *nakba* (the loss of Palestine in 1948), she suffered from being torn between these countries and saw it as an expression of the fragmentation of the Arab countries. In spite of her similar life experiences, Sakakini confessed that she never fell prey to a similar »confusion (*ḥayra*)« or »grief (*ḥasra*)«[358] because the pan-Arab idea had spread since Mayy's time. She held that »I found every Arab land I lived in or visited a home country (*muwaṭan*) for me, in which the origins of my family and my ancestors and the lands of my children lie«[359].

It is rather obvious that most men's portraits of Mayy Ziyada, in which she is typically depicted as raging between genius and insanity, follow a not so subtle form of gender construction. Whereas her intellectual endeavours are connoted as untypical for a woman, her alleged tendency to insanity/hysteria can be decoded as typically female. Mayy Ziyada's importance is not restricted to her own literary work; through her literary salon, she inspired other women to overcome social barriers and enter the literary field. Moreover, Mayy Ziyada is considered the first Arab women of the modern era who was acknowledged as a writer during her lifetime[360]. Yet, due to public interest in her person, her salon, and her relations to men, she was seen as a controversial personality, especially in the decades after her death; her role as a writer and the role of her salon as a literary nodal point were pushed into background or disappeared completely[361]. Antje Ziegler has counted more than a dozen works about Mayy published by male authors by the 1970s[362]. The dominating image that was established after her death was the picture of the fallen muse. It draws on various aspects of her biography, starting with alleged love affairs with guests in her literary salon over her correspondence with Khalil Gibran to the alleged insanity that caused her admission to a Beirut hospital in

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356  Ibid., p. 34.

357  Ibid., pp. 58–67.

358  Ibid., p. 67.

359  Ibid.

360  Zeidan, Arab Women Novelists, pp. 74–77, especially 77.

361  See Ziegler, Al-Ḥaraka Baraka!, pp. 103–115.

362  Ibid., p. 103, fn. 4 and p. 104, fn. 6. Female writers that published works about Mayy are Rose Ghurayyib in 1978 and Salma al-Haffar al-Kuzbari in 1982 (*Collected Works of Mayy Ziyada*) and in 1987. For the period before Sakakini's biography appeared, Ziegler only mentions two master theses at the American Universities in Beirut and Cairo from 1956 and 1966, whose sphere of influence must have been rather limited.

1936. She seems to have suffered from a depression after she lost three people close to her—her parents and Jibran—in a short period.

Joseph Zaydān, who published unknown works by Mayy in 1996, explains that the misjudgements of Mayy resulted mostly from the fact that even her contemporaries and friends focussed rather on the woman than on the writer and rather on her belletrist works than on her articles about political affairs, such as freedom, democratic rights, and anti-colonial policy. He further states that her contemporaries' praise for her literary and intellectual capabilities often took a form that would have been judged as offensive, if related to a man[363]. He therefore understands the recent re-evaluation of Mayy's literary contribution as a result of the re-treatment of an epoch and society, in which it was unusual for women to be unveiled and to voice their opinions publicly. In the reinvigorated debate about Mayy Ziyada in the 1990s, opposing standpoints clashed with each other. Antje Ziegler has explained the new interest in her with the attraction of the liberal and secular concepts of the *nahḍa* among writers who face a growing Islamist traction in Arab societies. Mayy Ziyada's life and work is a suitable stage for debates on Arab self-understanding, not only because of her being a woman and Syrian-Christian immigrant to Egypt, but also because she never equalled modernity with the neglect of Arab cultural heritage and always advocated the reconciliation of opposing standpoints. Yet, even in this changed climate, an author from Cairo (Aḥmad Ḥusayn al-Ṭamāwī) still aimed at questioning Mayy Ziyada's personal integrity by spreading the rumour that she might have been a lesbian and was connected to the Masonic Lodge in Cairo. Moreover, he claimed that as a writer, she was lucky rather than talented and that her works were characterized by superficial knowledge, literary weaknesses, and banality[364].

In this regard, Sakakini's biography can be seen as an early and the first feminist precursor to a re-evaluation of Mayy Ziyada and her achievements. Yet, it seems that it was rather seldomly referred to by later writers[365]. What it clearly reveals, however, is Sakakini's will to create a tradition of modern women writers and her intend to inscribe herself into this tradition. While she drew on early Muslim women's literary sessions to root women's literary activities in the distant Islamic past, she used Mayy Ziyada—a writer of Christian background—as a contemporary example for pan-Arab women's activities.

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363  Zaydān, Maṣādir al-adab al-nisāī, pp. 109f.

364  Ibid., p. 112.

365  For example, Ziegler, Al-Ḥaraka Baraka!, does not mention Sakakini's biography. However, Ghāzī, in a recent publication, used Sakakini's work as one of his sources, see Khālid Muḥammad Ghāzī, Mayy Ziyāda. Sīrat ḥayyātihā, adabuhā wa-awrāq lam tunshar, Gizeh 2010.

### 3.    The Transnational Web of Women Interlocutors

On the previous pages, I have tried to describe Sakakini's position in the transnational Arabic literary field by her relations to the dominant men of letters. Being dependant on—sometimes ambivalent—forms of appreciation for her, she took part in struggles for recognition and, as a conscious player in the field, she was also embedded in circles of mutual recognition and acknowledgement. Yet, the impression that her literary success was mainly dependent on men is only partially true and simply results from the fact that the main actors in the literary field were men. This impression pushes aside the various women in Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt, with whom Sakakini interacted and who played an active role in education, journalism, culture, and politics. Sakakini's success in the literary field was extraordinary to a certain degree, yet she did not succeed as an isolated player. She herself described the appearance of the »Beirut feminist caravan (*al-qāfila al-nisāʾiyya al-Bayrūtiyya*)«[366] as a formative influence. She writes that Lebanese women—she mentions the literary club of Habuba Haddad (Ḥabūba Ḥaddād, 1898–1957)[367] as an example—were the first among Arab women to demand their freedom and the first to demand their political and social rights[368]. In the following, I present short portraits of the women who were important in Sakakini's life, according to her own or other persons' accounts. In this regard, I will be able to discuss her own ideas against the background of multi-facetted women's activism in those times. Sketching the web of Sakakini's interlocutors does not aim at locating her as a part of homogenous intellectual or social movement. Rather, I consider her »in relation to the full range of interactions—conversations, discussions, disagreements, and conflicts—«[369] she had with her contemporaries.

(1) **Huda Shaʿrawi**, founder and president of the Egyptian Feminist Union (Ittiḥād al-Nisāʾ al-Miṣrī, founded in 1923)[370]: Sakakini seems to have been a regular guest at the meetings of the literary salon in Shaʿrawi's home and met important Egyptian writers there[371]. Sakakini called Shaʿrawi a pioneer and leader of the Arab, not only Egyptian, women's movement[372] and »the first pioneer who encouraged women

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366  Sakākīnī, al-Taqaddum al-marmūq, p. 184.

367  Eadem, Ḥabūba Ḥaddād, in: Eadem, Sābiqāt al-ʿaṣr, p. 133.

368  Eadem, al-Taqaddum al-marmūq, pp. 184f.

369  I borrow this term from Kateman's study on ʿAbduh, see Ammeke Kateman, Muḥammad ʿAbduh and His Interlocutors. Conceptualizing Religion in a Globalizing World, Leiden 2019, p. 34.

370  On her, see for example Zeidan, Arab Women Novelists, pp. 33–35 and 53.

371  Sakākīnī, Majālis al-adab, p. 52.

372  Eadem, Hudā Shaʿrawi. Rāʾidat al-nahḍa al-nisawiyya al-muʿāṣira, in: Eadem, Sābiqāt al-ʿaṣr, pp. 15–20.

to unveil«[373]. She appreciated not only Sha'rawi's political activities, but also her cultural and literary interests and wrote that Sha'rawi was the first to praise Mayy Ziyada at the beginning of her appearance in Egypt as well as after her death.

(2) **Amina Sa'id**, member of the Egyptian Feminist Union and founder of the Egyptian woman's magazine *Ḥawwā'* (*Eve*, founded in 1954): She was a close friend and admirer of Sakakini[374]. She was among the first female students at Fu'ad I University (later Cairo University) and earned a degree in English literature (1935). After that, she began to publish articles and reports about women in various journals and worked as one of the earliest full-time female journalists. Sakakini counts her among the »bravest Arab female writers«[375], and positively comments on her self-confident mode of expression. Sakakini also mentions that Amina Sa'id married an academician, what opened the way to work for her. The literary meetings in Amina Sa'id's house were colorful events of thought and journalism, bringing together the cultures of Orient and Occident[376].

(3) **Munira Thabit** (Munīra Thābit, 1902–1967), Egyptian lawyer and journalist: Sakakini maintained a friendly relationship to Munira Thabit, who was close to the Wafd-Party and demanded woman's suffrage[377]. Sakakini writes that Munira Thabit had expressed things in 1923 that nobody (in the Arab world) had said before her: »Give women their rights in intellectual life, in the world of politics, and in social activities!«[378] When the first parliament was elected under the Egyptian constitution of 1923, she argued with Wafd leader Sa'd Zaghlul (Sa'd Zaghlūl, 1859–1927) because of the exclusion of women from the elections. She enrolled as the first woman in the French Law School in Cairo (1925) and earned a *licence en droit* in Paris (1933) as the first Egyptian woman[379]. She was founder of the Wafdist journals *L'Espoire* (1925) and *al-Amal* (The Hope, 1926–1960). As she relentlessly demanded the right to vote and equal representation in contrast to the »women of the moderate orientation«[380], as Sakakini underlines, her views were attacked—»like the

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373  Eadem, Qāsim Amīn, p. 54.

374  Author's interview with 'Isa Fattūḥ, 31 May 2003.

375  Sakākīnī, Karīma wa-Amīna al-Saʿīd, in: Eadem, Sābiqāt al-ʿaṣr, p. 71.

376  Eadem, Majālis al-adab, p. 52.

377  Eadem, Munīra Thābit. Mujāhida thāʾira, in: Eadem, Sābiqāt al-ʿaṣr, p. 102 and author's interview with Samāʾ al-Maḥāsinī, 23 August 2003. On her, see Zeidan, Arab Women Novelists, p. 48.

378  Sakākīnī, Munīra Thabit, p. 102.

379  Due to the barriers before mixed courts because of her sex, she turned to journalism. On her, see Beth Baron, Egypt as Woman. Nationalism, Gender, and Politics, Cairo 2005, pp. 177–180; Arthur Goldschmidt, Biographical Dictionary of Modern Egypt, London 2000, pp. 212f.

380  Sakākīnī, Munīra Thabit, p. 103. Sakakini means the Egyptian Feminist Union that followed other priorities from the mid-1920s to mid-1930s.

appearance of the plague«[381]—by »narrow-minded persons (*mutazammitūn*) and Azharis«[382]. »I found my friend Munira Thabit like a badly wounded leader after a long struggle, and she did not stop fighting«[383], writes Sakakini and points out that her tireless »feminist striving (*al-jihād al-nasawī*)[384], which began in 1923 only bore fruit in 1956 with the granting of the active and passive right to vote[385].

(4) **Suhayr al-Qalamawi** (Suhayr al-Qalamāwī, 1911–1997)[386], writer, professor and chairperson of the Arabic Department at Cairo University, President of the Egyptian Feminist Union (1959), and Member of Parliament (1958–1964, 1979–1984): She was the first female student to enter Cairo University (1929), the first to receive a scholarship to do research in Paris after her Master's degree in Arabic Literature (1941), and the first to receive a PhD from Cairo University (1943). Sakakini acknowledges her pioneering role in a detailed account of her life[387] and underlines the importance of her study of the *One Thousand and One Nights*, with which she earned her PhD[388]. After earning her doctorate, she became the first woman lecturer and worked her way up to become a professor. Sakakini mentions Suhayr al-Qalamawi several times in *Inṣāf al-mar'a* and emphasizes her friendship with her[389]. In interviews, Sakakini counted her among the best writers[390] and said that she herself had fought misogyny »together with Suhayr al-Qalamawi and Amina Saʻid«[391].

(5) **Insaf Sirri** (Inṣāf Sirrī), lifelong educator and first Director of the Shubra Secondary School for Girls (opened in 1925)[392]: She was part of the first delegation

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381  Ibid.

382  Ibid.

383  Ibid.

384  Ibid.

385  However, Egyptian women had to apply to register for the election, which only few did until 1972 (twelve percent). For the background, see Jad Adams, Women and the Vote. A World History, Oxford 2014, pp. 408–410.

386  On her, see Zeidan, Arab Woman Novelists, pp. 78f.

387  Widād Sakākīnī, al-Duktūra Suhayr al-Qalamāwī. Nābighat al-jāmiʻiyyāt, in: Eadem, Sābiqāt al-ʻaṣr, pp. 106–112.

388  Ibid., p. 108.

389  See, for example, eadem, Inṣāf al-mar'a, p. 30; eadem, Kayfa tataḥaddath?, p. 82. Also see the portrait in eadem, Sābiqāt al-ʻaṣr, pp. 106–112.

390  Naṣr, Udabā', p. 290.

391  Mārdīnī, al-Adība.

392  See, Margot Badran, Feminists, Islam, and the Nation. Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt, Princeton, NJ 1995, p. 143. The Shubra Secondary School for Girls was opened at the demand of the Egyptian Feminist Union, 37 years after the first secondary school for boys had been opened.

of Egyptian female students sent abroad and possibly the first author of an Arabic children's book[393]. Sakakini appreciates her as a pioneer of the modern education of girls[394]. Sakakini met her while teaching at the Higher Institute for Arts, where Insaf Sirri had become the director. When Sirri retired from the teaching profession, Sakakini held the farewell address for her[395].

(6) **Gamila al-ʿAlayili** (Jamīla al-ʿAlāyilī, 1907–1991), Egyptian poet and novelist and first female member of the Apollo Poet Society (1932–1934)[396]: She was influenced by Mayy Ziyada in her early career and founded a literary association in Alexandria[397]. She published her first collection of poems in free verse and prose poetry in 1936, thus rebelling against traditional constraints in form and content, but also against men's prejudice—voiced for example by al-ʿAqqad—that women were unable to write poetry[398]. In her novels, she addressed the relationship between men and women in a rapidly changing society[399]. In her novel *Arwāḥ tataʾallaf* (*Souls in Harmony*, 1947), she lets a woman named Mayy discuss her ideas with a journalist named Saʿid in a series of letters—which is obviously inspired by the long-time correspondence (1912–1936) between Mayy Ziyada and Jibran Khalil Jibran. Sakakini maintained a lasting correspondence with Gamila al-ʿAlayili until their final years and said in a radio broadcast that al-Alayili's poetry had the greatest influence on Arabic women's poetry in general[400].

(7) **Salma Sayegh** (Salmā Ṣāyigh, 1889–1953), feminist teacher, poet, and friend of Mayy Ziyada from Beirut with a Palestinian and Christian background: Sayegh worked most of her life at a girls' school at the Mission laïque française in Beirut and was an Arabic teacher when Nazira Zayn el-Din was a pupil at the school[401]. She was very active in various women's organizations and especially in the Syrian-Lebanese Feminist Union (Ittiḥād al-Nisāʾī l-Sūrī l-Lubnānī, founded in 1928)[402].

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393 Widād Sakākīnī, Inṣāf Sirrī. Rāʾidat al-tarbiya al-ḥadītha fī l-ʿālam al-ʿarabī, in: Eadem, Sābiqāt al-ʿaṣr, p. 56.

394 Ibid., p. 58, and idem, Inṣaf al-marʾa, p. 30.

395 Sakākīnī, Inṣāf al-Sirrī, p. 61.

396 The society was founded by Egyptian poet Ahmad Zaki Abu Shadi (Aḥmad Zakī Abū Shādī, 1892–1955) and dedicated to the renewal of Arab poetry.

397 Ashour et al. (eds.), Arab Women Writers, pp. 350f.

398 Hoda Elsadda, Egypt, in: Ibid., p. 118.

399 Ibid.

400 Samāʾ al-Maḥāsinī, Widād Sakākīnī.

401 Esther Möller, Orte der Zivilisierungsmission. Französische Schulen im Libanon 1909–1943, Göttingen 2013, p. 258.

402 See Thompson, Colonial Citizens, p. 98.

Sakakini calls herself Salma Sayegh's »pupil« (*talmīdha*)[403] and quotes from her own speech in memory of Sayegh in which she recalled that she once wondered whether it was given to her and her class mates to follow in the footsteps of this »struggling and toiling« (*kādiḥa mukāfiḥa*)[404] educator and writer. She compares Sayegh to Mayy Ziyada since both women were »stars of consciousness, freedom, and reform« in the firmament of Arabic literature[405]. That Sakakini calls Sayegh »a struggling and toiling woman« (*kādiḥa mukāfiḥa*), may be a hint at Sayegh's sympathies for communist and unionist activities[406].

(8) **ʿAnbara Salam al-Khalidi** (ʿAnbara Salām al-Khālidī, 1906–1986), a women rights activist, known for her petition to Faysal (Fayṣal) in 1919 and for delivering, in 1927, the first lecture by an unveiled Lebanese woman[407]: Sakakini counted herself among ʿAnbara's friends and colleagues[408]. She mentions ʿAnbara's studies at the Protest College in Beirut (the later American University) and in England (1925–1927), which helped her to translate the Iliad and the Odyssey into Arabic (1944, 1946). Hailing from a high-ranking Lebanese family, she married the educator Ahmad Samih al-Khalidi (Aḥmad Samīḥ al-Khālidī) from Jerusalem. She was an activist in the women's movement as well as in the movement of Arab nationalism and declined the invitation to attend an international women's congress in New York 1947 with the words: »Thank you for the invitation to represent Palestine, however, I consider it mandatory for me to refuse the invitation due to President Truman's inimical standpoint towards the Arabs of Palestine.«[409]

(9) **Nazik al-ʿAbid** (Nāzik al-ʿĀbid, 1887–1960)[410], Ottoman and Syrian woman rights activist: Sakakini calls her »the pioneer of feminist consciousness in Damascus«[411]. She demanded women's rights under the Ottomans, under Faysal's Arab government, under the French Mandate and after independence. In 1919, she founded the women's magazine and society *Nūr al-Fayḥāʾ* (*Light of the Fragrant*

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403 Sᴀᴋᴀᴋɪɴ̄ɪ, Salmā Ṣāyigh. Kādiḥa mukāfiḥa, in: Eadem, Sābiqāt al-ʿaṣr, p. 63.

404 Ibid.

405 Ibid., p. 64. After her marriage in 1911, Sayegh gave birth to a daughter, but obtained a divorce from her husband and started studying medicine without completing her degree. During World War II, she migrated with her brother to Brazil.

406 On this, see Tʜᴏᴍᴘsᴏɴ, Colonial Citizens, p. 157.

407 On her, see ibid., pp. 118 and 136.

408 Sᴀᴋᴀᴋɪɴ̄ɪ, ʿAnbara Salām al-Khālidī, 1906–1987, in: Eadem, Sābiqāt al-ʿaṣr, p. 68.

409 Ibid.

410 On her, see Zᴇɪᴅᴀɴ, Arab Women Novelists, pp. 45, 49 and 283f.; Tʜᴏᴍᴘsᴏɴ, Colonial Citizens, pp. 95, 127f., 141, 146, and 170.

411 Sᴀᴋᴀᴋɪɴ̄ɪ, Nāzik al-ʿĀbid, pp. 22–29; See also, eadem, Inṣāf al-marʾa, p. 31 and eadem, Nahḍat al-marʾa al-sūriyya, p. 175.

*(i.e. Damascus)*) and later also a school for orphans of the same name. She was the head of an unveiled women's delegation speaking out against the impending Mandate system before the Kind-Crane-Commission, which studied the situation in Palestine, Syria, Lebanon and Anatolia in the frame of the Paris Peace Conference 1919. As the founder of the Red Star Society (a precursor to the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement), she led a battalion of nurses in the one-day Battle of Maysalun (1920) against French troops, which brought her lasting fame. Sakakini compares her to Khawla bint al-Azwar and Jeanne d'Arc[412], the latter comparison being commonplace. She married the writer Muhammad Jamil Bayhoum and settled in Beirut.

(10) **Mary 'Ajami**[413], Syrian feminist writer: Sakakini praises her as the founder of the first Syrian women's journal *al-'Arūs* (*The Bride*) and the first literary salon in Damascus (from 1920 to 1923). Although there still exists the rumour in Damascus that the relation between the two women were not the best or that Sakakini had a low opinion of 'Ajami[414], Sakakini's portrait leaves no doubts about her respect for 'Ajami and describes their encounters in detail[415] (maybe because of such rumours). Sakakini writes that she had wished to meet 'Ajami already as a student after reading one of her articles. When they later became neighbours in Damascus, she visited 'Ajami with her children, who shared her admiration for this woman pioneer, who followed a style of simplicity in daily life as well as in literature. Sakakini recalls that once a foreign writer came to talk about the situation of women and all the women threw themselves in fancy clothes. Upon arriving at Mary 'Ajami's (sparsely furnished) house, he exclaimed smilingly: »It seems to me that this woman is the real writer.«[416]

(11) **Thurayya Hafez** (Thurayyā Ḥāfiẓ, 1911–2000)[417], women's rights activist, teacher, and politician: Sakakini calls her an »early revolutionary«[418] and writes that Hafez, as the daughter of one of the Arab nationalists executed by the Ottomans in 1916, already imbibed the revolution against Turkish occupation with her mother's

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412  Eadem, Nāzik al-'Ābid, pp. 25f.
413  On her, ZEIDAN, Arab Women Novelists, pp. 45, 49, 52, and 83.
414  Author's interview with 'Isā FATTŪḤ, 31 May 2003.
415  Widād SAKĀKĪNĪ, Mārī 'Ajamī, 1888–1969, in: Eadem, Sābiqāt al-'aṣr, pp. 42–44.
416  Ibid., p. 44.
417  See THOMPSON, Colonial Citizens, p. 147; ZEIDAN, Arab Women Novelists, p. 55. For her views on women's rights and homosexuality, see her meeting as told by Bouthaina SHAABAN, Both Right and Left Handed. Arab Women Talk about Their Lives, London 1988, pp. 46–54.
418  Widād SAKĀKĪNĪ, Thurayyā al-Ḥāfiẓ. Thā'ira mubakkira, in: Eadem, Sābiqāt al-'aṣr, p. 139.

milk[419]. In this respect, she comes to talk about Prince Mustafa al-Shihabi[420] as an Arab nationalist who fought the Ottomans because he admired Thurayya's mother's patriotism, married her and later also directed Thurayya to Arab nationalism. Beyond that, Sakakini's biography of her in *Sābiqāt al-ʿaṣr* is rather incomplete. For example, she does not mention that Hafez led a women's demonstration in Damascus demanding free elections in 1928 and another demonstration in 1943 against the Syrian Muslim Brothers and their demand for veiling; in the latter case, Hafez argued that the veil was mentioned neither by Muhammad nor in the Holy Book[421]. In 1953, Hafez founded the Muntadā Sukayna (»Sukayna's Club«), a literary salon named after Sukayna bint Husayn, the granddaughter of Prophet Muhammad, which existed for ten years. Sakakini mentions that Hafez succeeded in inviting the greatest intellectuals and writers to give lectures in her club[422]. Hafez was a Nasserist and politically active, running for a seat in parliament in the 1950s, though she failed to win the election[423]. Together, Sakakini and Hafez were part of the Syrian delegation that visited the World Festival of Youth and Students in Moscow in 1957[424]. During the United Arab Republic (1958–1961), Hafez founded the Ittiḥād al-Qawmī (National Union), in which Sakakini was a member together with one of the newly appointed first female Syrian Members of Parliament, Jihan Musulli (Jihān Mūṣullī, 1908–1996)[425]. After the coup of the Baʿth-Party in 1963, Thurayya Hafez had to leave the country and found asylum in Egypt, where she continued the struggle for unity between Egypt and Syria[426]. Contacts between her and Sakakini are said to have been rather close[427].

(12) **Kulthum ʿAwda** (Kulthūm ʿAwda, 1882–196?), professor of Arabic literature in the Soviet Union: When Sakakini was invited as a member of the Syrian cultural delegation to the World Festival of Youth and Students in Moscow in 1957, she

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419  Ibid.

420  The above-mentioned critic of her first collection of essays, see chapter II.1.1.

421  On these demonstrations and the anti-veil movement, see Thompson, Colonial Citizens, pp. 147 and 242.

422  Sakākīnī, Thurayyā al-Ḥāfiẓ, p. 139.

423  Again, this is not mentioned by Sakakini.

424  Christina Weber, Thurayya al-Hafiz. Wirken einer syrischen Frauenrechtlerin, Nationalistin, Lehrerin, Publizistin, Parlamentskandidatin und Betreiberin eines literarischen und politischen Salons in Damaskus, in: Dagmar Filter et al. (eds), Arabischer Frühling? Alte und neue Geschlechterpolitiken in einer Region im Umbruch, Freiburg 2013, p. 234.

425  A second appointed female Member of Parliament was the lawyer Widad al-Azhari (Widād al-Azharī).

426  Sakākīnī, Thurayyā al-Ḥāfiẓ, p. 139.

427  Author's interview with ʿĪsā Fattūḥ, 31 May 2003.

visited ʿAwda and—on her initiative—delivered two lectures on al-Maʿarri (al-Maʿarrī) at the University of Moscow[428]. ʿAwda also translated one of Sakakini's short story (Sayyidunā Junayd) into Russian, according to Sakakini[429]. Sakakini describes ʿAwda's life story in detail.[430] ʿAwda was born in Nazareth and wore a veil, which was common among Christian women at that time. She visited a school of the Palestinian-Russian Society and married a Russian physician with whom she moved to Russia to flee her family. Her parents forgave her only after years. During the First World War, she served as a nurse in various territories. When her husband died, she was left with three children and started to teach Arabic in Leningrad (until 1941), became an assistant to the prominent scholar of Arab studies, Ignaty Krachkovsky (1883–1951), and was finally appointed professor of Arabic literature, the first woman from Palestine to hold that title. In 1947, she was among the writers who answered the question posed by the Cairo-based journal *al-Hilāl* »How can I live contentedly?« by narrating her own life[431]—»perhaps the first example of autobiographical writing by a Palestinian woman«[432]. ʿAwda named as the reason of her happiness that she

> worked willingly, not despite myself at every stage of my life. […] I was never ashamed of any sort of work, as long as it did not dishonor me or someone else. Finally, the great Orientalist Krachkovski taught me many lovely things about my people that I did not know, and I grew happier in the hope that we Arabs must have a future that is no less glorious than our past.[433]

Sakakini ends her portrait with the gift that ʿAwda gave Sakakini on her departure from Moscow, a cup of salt and a handwritten paper saying: »A life without hope is like food without salt.«[434]

(13) **Fadwa Tuqan** (Fadwā Tūqān, 1917–2003), Palestinian poet, famous for her poems about the Palestinian suffering: There was mutual acknowledgement between

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428 Sᴀᴋᴀ̄ᴋɪ̄ɴɪ̄, Widād Sakākīnī, p. 168.

429 Eadem, Kalthūm ʿAwda. Min rāʾidāt al-marʾa al-ʿarabiyya al-ḥadītha, in: Eadem, Sābiqāt al-ʿaṣr, p. 79.

430 Ibid., pp. 72–79.

431 Ibid., pp. 77f.

432 Radwa Aѕʜᴏᴜʀ, Palestine and Jordan, in: Eadem et al. (eds.), Arab Women Writers, p. 224. For excerpts from ʿAwda's account see ibid., pp. 224f.

433 Ibid., p. 225. This is also quoted by Sᴀᴋᴀ̄ᴋɪ̄ɴɪ̄, Kalthūm ʿAwda, p. 78.

434 Sᴀᴋᴀ̄ᴋɪ̄ɴɪ̄, Kalthūm ʿAwda, p. 79.

Sakakini and Tuqan. Sakakini called Tuqan the »Khansāʾ of Palestine«[435] and praised her poems about Palestine, her brother Ibrahim's death, her passion and especially her love poems[436]. In an interview, she named Fadwa Tuqan alongside the Iraqi free verse poet Nazik al-Malaʾika (Nāzik al-Malāʾika, 1923–2007) as the most important Arab female poets and the ones to whom she felt closest[437]. According to Samaʾ al-Mahasini, Fadwa Tuqan expressed her admiration for Sakakini's work—especially the novel *al-Ḥubb al-muḥaram* and the collection of essays *Inṣāf al-marʾa*—in letters to Sakakini[438]. Tuqan especially liked the psychological analysis of the characters in Sakakini's novel and wrote about the essays: »My friend, you have triggered the deepest admiration in me for a long time because you write with the spirit, heart, and feeling of women. In my opinion, this is the most important element of women's literature.«[439]

(14) **The Women's Cultural Club** (al-Nadwa al-Thaqāfiyya al-Nisāʾiyya), established in the late 1930s: Beginning in 1950, the club organised yearly women's lectures »at the all-male bastion of the Arab Academy in Damascus«[440]. After her return to Damascus, Sakakini maintained good contacts to the women activists of the club, namely the President of the Syrian Women's Association, ʿAdila Bayhoum (ʿĀdila Bayhum, 1902–1975)[441], and its co-founders, among them the already mentioned Jihan Musulli and Rima Kurd ʿAli (Rīma Kurd ʿAlī), daughter of Muhammad Kurd ʿAli. The club contiued to exist under Baʿth rule and was able to finance the printing of Sakakini's collection of women's biographies *Sābiqāt al-ʿaṣr* (1987).

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435 Eadem, Fadwā Ṭūqān. Shāʿirat Filasṭīn wa-l-ʿarab, in: Eadem, Sābiqāt al-ʿaṣr, pp. 96–101. The name al-Khansāʾ (»Gazelle«) refers to a female poet of early Islam (d. ca. 646), famous due to her elegies for the dead. She lost two brothers in a tribal fight before the advent of Islam. When she heard the news that she had lost all of her four sons in the battle of Qadisiya (636) against the Persians, she did not grieve, but praised their martyrdom.

436 Ibid., p. 98. Also see her article eadem, Fadwā Ṭūqān, shāʿirat al-wajd wa-l-ḥanīn, in: al-Risāla 968 (January 1952), pp. 77–79.

437 Naṣr, Udabāʾ, p. 290.

438 Samāʾ al-Maḥāsinī, Widād Sakākīnī.

439 Ibid.

440 Thompson, Colonial Citizens, p. 97.

441 See the portrait in Widād Sakākīnī, ʿĀdila Bayhum, 1902–1975, in: Eadem, Sābiqāt al-ʿaṣr, pp. 122–125. Born in Beirut, ʿAdila was a relative of Muhammad Jamil Bayhoum and active in the women's movement since her early years. After marrying into the al-Jazaʾiri family of Damascus, she moved to Damascus and became the President of the Syrian Women's Union (1944–1967), until the Baʿth government merged women's organizations into one umbrella organization.

(15) **Ghada al-Samman** (Ghāda al-Sammān, b. 1942)[442], journalist and prominent novelist from Syria: Her father, Ahmad Samman (Aḥmad Sammān, 1907–1968) was the President of the University of Damascus and a close friend of Widad Sakakini and Zaki al-Mahasini[443]. Ghada's relation to Sakakini seems to have been especially close since Sakakini encouraged her to write[444]. Sakakini also wrote two positive reviews of Ghada al-Samman's debut works[445]. Ghada al-Samman was the only representative of the younger generation, with whom Sakakini had close personal contacts.

(16) **Lacunae:** In her collections of women biographies *Sābiqāt al-ʿaṣr*, Sakakini did not mention some prominent Syrian writers, most notably Ulfat Idlibi (Ul-fat al-Idlibī, 1912–2007) and Salma Haffar al-Kuzbari (Salma Ḥaffār al-Kuzbarī, 1923–2006). The Lebanese Nazira Zayn al-Din with her two controversial books on unveiling is also missing. The Egyptian intellectual and activist Doria Shafiq (Dur-riyya Shafīq, 1908–1975), who organized protests for women's suffrage and went on hunger strike under ʿAbd al-Nasser's reign, is not mentioned either. The reasons for this neglect are unclear. On the one hand, the explanation that there might have been a competitive relationship or a personal aversion[446] appears plausible at first sight, but remains speculative. In the cases of Zayn al-Din and Shafiq, it could be that Sakakini excluded them on ideological grounds because she thought that they had defiled the feminist or nationalist cause—Zayn al-Din by appealing to the French and Shafiq by challenging ʿAbd al-Nasser. On the other hand, Sakakini's friend, the poet Gamila al-ʿAlayili, is also missing in the collection of women's biographies, although Sakakini regarded her as a pioneer of women's poetry (see above no. 6). Sakakini's 54 portraits cover a wide range of different women activists, engaged in

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442  See ZEIDAN, Arab Women Novelists, pp. 191–205; HADIDI/AL-QADI, Syria, pp. 69, 91, and 94f.

443  See also, Zaki al-Mahasini's mourning poem about the untimely death of Ghada's mother in 1944, Zakī al-MAḤĀSINĪ, Damʿatī ʿalā Salmā Ruwayha, in: Idem, Dīwān, pp. 292f.

444  Author's interviews with ʿIsā FATTŪḤ, 31 May 2003, and Dhukāʾ AL-MAḤĀSINĪ, 20 August 2003.

445  Widād SAKĀKĪNĪ, ʿAynāka qadarī, in: al-Ādāb 4 (April 1963), pp. 41f.; eadem, Lā baḥra fī Bayrūt, in: Eadem, Shawk fī l-ḥaṣīd, pp. 128–133.

446  OTTOSSON BITAR, I Can Do Nothing, pp. 36 and 54f., also notices the exclusion of female authors from Sakakini's work. She traces this back to the Western-oriented education in the cases of Zayn al-Din and Shafiq and to Sakakini's general rejection of most other women writers, whom she held for mediocre. Ashtar generally refers to Sakakini's reputation, which was characterized by »the vehemence of her temper and a poor opinion of others« (*ḥiddat mizājihā wa-sūʾ ẓannihā fī l-ākharīn*), ASHTAR, Widād Sakākīnī, p. 140. With this characterization, Ashtar refers to a remark by Shakir Mustafa in his lectures about short story and novel writing in Syria; according to Ashtar, Mustafa recounted that Sakakini did not answer to his questions because she feared he would use her ideas for his book. I could not find this remark in the printed version, MUṢṬAFĀ, Muḥāḍarāt.

education, literature or politics, with Islamic, nationalist, and socialist provenance, from Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Egypt.

Another factor that might explain such omissions could be conditions for the publication of *Sābiqāt al-ʿaṣr*, which are unknown to me; yet, the book gives an unfinished, incoherent impression. Some entries are very detailed, while others omit important events in the lives of some of the portraited persons, lack precision, or are stubs. Even the titles of the entries vary. Some give the name of the portraited woman, have a subtitle, in which the woman is characterized, and give her live data; others only have a title with the name and third ones add either subtitle or life data. In one case, the entry of Kulthum ʿAwda, I detected that the whole text is a verbatim of an article that had appeared in 1960[447]. Moreover, the book appeared in 1986, in Sakakini's final years, and had to be approved by the Syrian Ministry of Culture. The criteria for the selection of the biographies might therefore not have been fully hers; the book does not comprise any introduction, in which the criteria would be explained. In her dedication, Sakakini merely thanks the Women Cultural Club (see above no. 14) for taking care of the printing and distribution of the book[448].

What the panorama of women authors, scholars, educators, and rights activists in this sub-chapter shows is that Widad Sakakini not only maintained a series of personal contacts that were important to her. She was also a keen observer of women's activities in various social fields and countries and took on the task of recording their efforts to achieve emancipation. In this regard, it is not possible to understand her writings isolated from the wider horizon of women's emancipatory activism in the whole of the Mashreq.

## 4.    Summary: The Location of Widad Sakakini's Literature

Widad Sakakini's writing was closely related to Arab authors of different genres, generations, religious background, ideological orientation, and national belonging, mainly from Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt. She was able to build personal contacts to many prominent figures in the transnational Arabic literary field, especially during her stays in Egypt. As a talented young writer, she found early personal and institutional support, exemplified by literary journals in Lebanon and Syria (*al-ʿIrfān*, *al-Ḥadīth*, and *al-Makshūf* ). After her move to Egypt, she was acknowledged as an accomplished writer especially in the genres of essay writing, literary criticism and short story as well as novel writing. In the Diagrams 1 and 2, I have mapped

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447   The only difference is that the article stated that ʿAwda belonged to »the pioneers of modern women«, while the entry added that she was one of »the pioneers of modern Arab women«, see Sakākīnī, Kalthūm ʿAwda (1960), p. 87 and eadem, Kalthūm ʿAwda (1986), p. 72.

448   Eadem, Sābiqāt al-ʿaṣr, p. 3.

Sakakini's complex position in the literary field in relation to her male and female interlocutors, considering friendships, literary proximity, and critical relationships. Diagram 1 shows her position in relation to literary genres and male and female authors. Diagram 2 delineates her position between feminists and misogynists. The diagrams show the transnational and multi-religious as well as the politically and ideologically diverse character of her interlocutors.
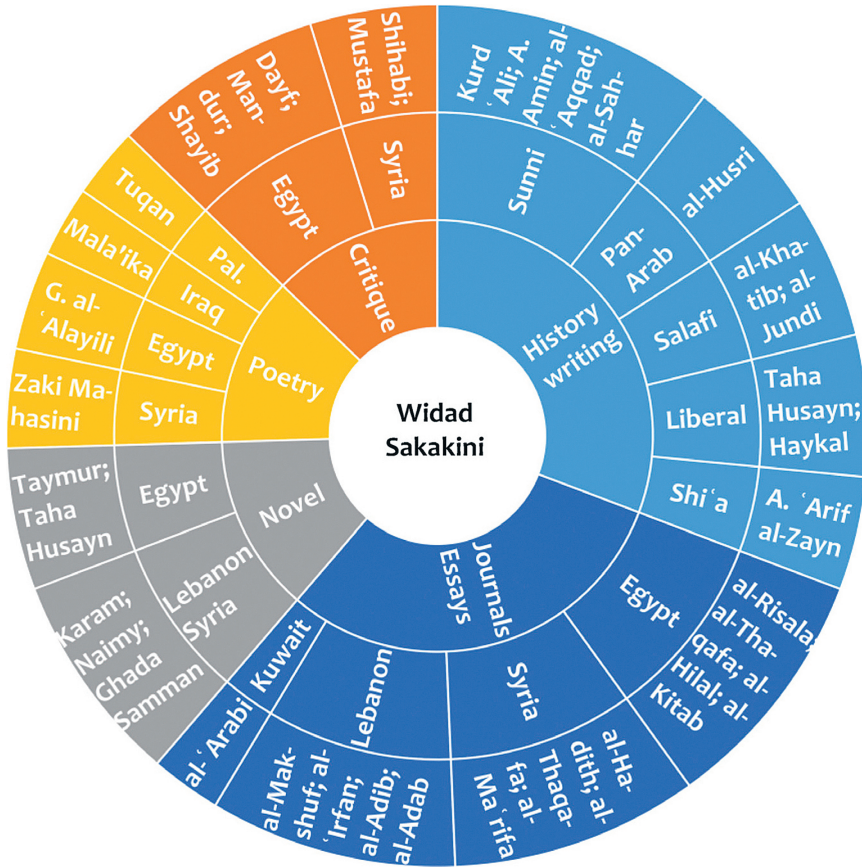


Fig. 6   Widad Sakakini's Position in the Literary Field: Genres & Interlocutors.
         Source: Manfred Sing

As Sakakini's position in the field mainly depended on the consecration by male writers, gender stereotypes often played a role in appraisals of her skills; this »very

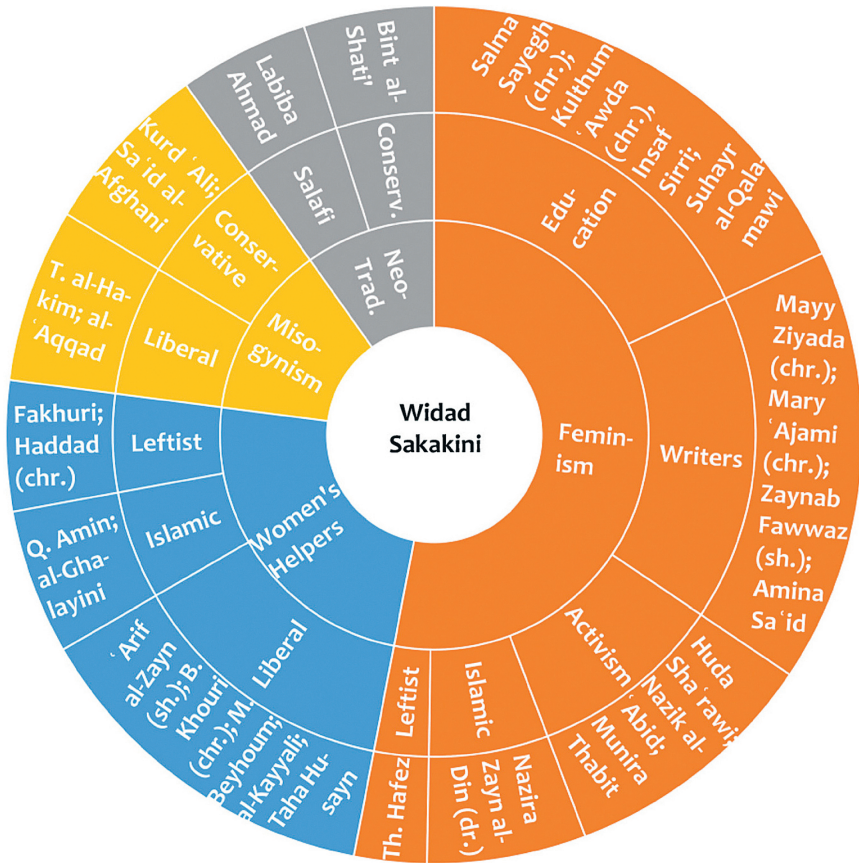449  chr. = Christian; sh. = Shiite; dr. = Druze.

Fig. 7   Widad Sakakini's Position in the Literary Field: Feminism & Misogynism[449]
Source: Manfred Sing

good for a woman«-undertone was an ambivalent recognition in itself and proved to be all the more so, as soon as she dared to voice sharp criticism. Therefore, characterizations of her ranged between stressing the vehemence of her temper and calling her a nun of literature, simply reproducing a gendered stereotype.

As a writer, she was very much concerned about such stereotypes about women in literature composed by men. On the one hand, refuting these stereotypes and writing about the hidden sides of women's lives was her entry ticket into the literary field as a female writer; on the other hand, she made it her life's mission to write about Arab women's lives, practically in her short stories and theoretically in her essays.

While pleading for the further development of women's literature, she positioned herself as standing in the tradition of other writing Arab women, most

prominently Mayy Ziyada. Her focus on girls' and women's education as a key element for the development of women's literature as well as for emancipation in general were very much in line with the Arab feminists' discussion in the early and mid-twentieth century. The same holds true for her stress on the importance of motherhood—as another aspect of educating the nation—and her criticism of lazy upper-class women who keep themselves busy with superficial things[450].

She understood her literary activities as part of the wider struggle for women's emancipation in Arab countries. Her writings, especially her essays and women's portraits, bear witness to her interest in the activities of the different groups inside the women's movement; she also established contacts with a number of women's rights activists and female authors in different countries.

Already in her early work, she managed to balance the triangle of Arab nationalism, the history of early Islam, and women's emancipation. She argued that women's rights were not only an important factor of modern nation building, but already inherent in early Islam. In this way, she claimed authenticity for the contemporary demands for women's rights, which is particularly evident in her treatment of the Prophet's wives (see chapter IV and V). To my knowledge, this kind of harmonization between Arab nationalism, Islamic history, and women's rights was rather uncommon among male authors. Leftist writers held a secular view of Arab history and women's emancipation. Nationalist authors re-wrote the Arab-Islamic past for nationalist uses or re-interpreted the biography of Muhammad for a modern understanding of religion (see chapter IV.3), but they did not care for a re-interpretation of women's roles in this context. Authors from the politically Islamic spectrum generally had a problem coming to terms with feminist demands and therefore did not project them back onto the past.

Sakakini's writings about Arab women of early Islam also helped her to argue that she was just as reserved about rigid adherence to traditions as she was about excessive Westernization. Already in her first essay, published in 1927, she elaborated this line of reasoning, which she would pursue all her life. Accordingly, Arab women had been largely liberated in early Islam, but lost their rights in centuries of cultural and political decline; they were now merely striving to regain their original, ancestral position when they demanded—without any exaggeration—just treatment in present times.

Ottosson Bitar has erroneously attributed Sakakini's first article to 1928 and suggested a possible antithesis to Nazira Zayn al-Din's book on unveiling of that year[451]. However, Sakakini's approach tied in with the Arab feminists' main line of reasoning

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450  The same ideas were already expressed by female authors at the turn of the century, see Bräckelmann, Zaynab Fawwāz, pp. 151–165.

451  See Ottosson Bitar, I Can Do Nothing, p. 34.

in the first half of the twentieth century. Most feminists and rights activists saw not the veil as the main obstacle in women's lives, but the lack of women's (higher) education. Most of them also voiced reservation about rapid social change and precipitous Westernization, while at the same time claiming that Islam supported women's education and rights. Since the 1920s, Huda Sha'rawi as well as her journal *L'Egyptienne* underlined that the reason for Egyptian women's »backwardness« was not »Islam, as many Europeans believe« since Islam »has granted women greater justice than previous religions«[452]. Sha'rawi especially criticized gender divisions within the urban upper class, in which »veiling and seclusion were symbols of a high social status« and held the view that »all the traditions excluding women from the public space were connected to the financial and social status of the family and not to Islam«[453]. In this context, it seems a bit misleading to me when Margot Badran calls Huda Sha'rawi and her comrades-in-arms representatives of a »radical liberal feminism«[454], although Badran knows well that they »shied away from a secularism that severed all links with religion«[455]. Since it is not clear exactly what »radical«[456] means here, I would rather argue that the early Egyptian feminists tried to reconcile their secular feminist demands with Islamic norms, aiming to avoid or downplay any impression of contradiction. Sakakini went a step further in the same direction with her attempts to root women's rights in Arab-Islamic history, thus authenticating them. Using the Arabic expression *inṣāf al-mar'a* was part of this strategy because it could often replace the neologism *nisā'iyya* and its derivates, which were modelled on feminism; the Arabic expression also dissipated the impression that women's just treatment had something to do with ideology, which was implied by the word structure ending in -iyya and -ism.

In this respect, Ottosson Bitar is quite right that there was a contradiction between Arab mainstream feminism at the time and Nazira Zayn al-Din, who advocated a feminist reinterpretation of the Qur'an, thus locating gender inequality in religion itself—an approach that has only been taken up again since the 1990s

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452  All quotes Huda Shaarawi, Harem Years. The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist, 1879–1924. Translated, edited and introduced by Margot Badran, New York 1987, p. 81.

453  All quotes Julia Lisiecka, Re-reading Huda Shaarawi's »Harem Years«. Bargaining with the Patriarchy in the Changing Egypt, in: The SOAS Journal of Postgraduate Research 8 (2015), p. 50.

454  Margot Badran, Independent Women. More Than a Century of Feminism in Egypt, in: Judith E. Tucker (ed.), Arab Women. Old Boundaries, New Frontiers, Bloomington, p. 135; reprinted in Margot Badran, Feminism in Islam. Secular and Religious Convergences, Oxford 2009, p. 124.

455  Margot Badran, Competing Agenda. Feminists, Islam, and the State in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Egypt, in: Deniz Kadiyoti (ed.), Women, Islam, and the State, Basingstoke 1991, pp. 210f.

456  For a critique of the term and Badran's periodization of Egyptian feminism see Ruth Roded, Review, in: Middle Eastern Studies 47, 1 (2011), p. 205, URL: <www.jstor.org/stable/27920350>. For a further discussion on this point see chapter V.4.

with a decidedly feminist Qur'anic exegesis (see chapters V. 4 and VI. 2). Sakakini avoided critically re-reading the first source of Islam and was content, as we will see (see chapters V and VI), to rewrite the Prophet's biography—that is, she tried to re-write the narrative framework, in which the Islamic revelation is embedded, in a more gender-conscious way.

# III.   The Narrative Work

Relationships between women and men play an important role in Sakakini's fictitious work. She created a variety of constellations—a combination of individual factors and social conditions—to depict the failure or success of relations and ask about the factors that either prevent or enable the happiness of the women and the couples in her stories. This thematic focus is not only interesting because it reflects the importance of the subject itself, but also because it negotiates the dominant gender relations and ideas about gender roles. This literary re-negotiation becomes even more fascinating in times when gender roles are rapidly changing—which had been the case in most Arab countries since the 1920s.

Relations between couples, even in their fictitious form, are never exclusively individual or random encounters. They reflect social conventions and behaviors combined with individual characteristics and psychological processes. Sakakini's stories often depict these relationships through the inner monologues of women. In this way, Sakakini not only reconstructs gender hierarchies and reflects on the inferior status of women from their viewpoint; she also combines the objective conditions with their subjective processing by the protagonists.

Arab literary critics have mostly classified Sakakini's narrative work as »realistic« literature spiked with »psychological analysis«—following the Egyptian school of modern literature. For our purpose, this classification is questionable for two reasons. Firstly, it does not take into account, what it means that a female/feminist author writes in opposition to patriarchy; secondly, the connection between realism and psychology is not self-evident, but rather paradoxical. The real and the imaginary are not simply two sides of the same coin. When Sakakini writes about psychological processes, she does not simply mirror the social world or a woman's character or situation. Rather, she immerses herself and her readers into the world of desires, wishes, and fears. The fact that wishes are postponed, non-fulfilled or turn out to be unfulfillable is more difficult to bear than the mere social circumstances that produce frustration, deprivation, or hopelessness. In one of her essays, Sakakini states that diseases of the soul are »worse and more bitter«[1] than diseases of the body; the latter may lead to healing or death, but there is no medicine for mental illnesses.

The following chapter is mainly interested in this connection between the transformations of society and gender relations on the one side and the literary reflections of these transformations on the other side. Therefore, I describe the changing

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1  Widad Sakākīnī, Taʿaddud al-shakhṣiyya, in: Eadem, Suṭūr tatajāwab, p. 164.

marriage market in Arab countries from the beginning through the middle of twentieth century (III.1). I am especially interested in showing—following Bourdieu's approach—how the growing cultural capital of women negatively affects their opportunities in choosing and finding partners. Following this, I show how Sakakini treated this theme in various constellations in her work and what kind of escape lines she drew for her heroines (III.2). Here, my thesis is that she re-wrote the concept of *ʿudhrī*-love (platonic love) from classical Arabic literature and turned it into a feminist plot (III.3). Finally, I try to give an answer to the question of whether Sakakini's take can be considered innovative and feminist by discussing her plots and the criticism in the relevant secondary literature.

## 1.   The Context: The Changing Marriage Market

With growing social mobility at the beginning of the twentieth century, including girls' education and women's professional activities outside their own four walls, traditional marriage strategies in Arab countries also started to change. In general, the traditional endogamous marriage is based on the same rating system inside a social group, whose members agree on the same evaluation system for symbolic forms of capital; this means that there is a commonly shared ideal of a wife. With a growing positive valuation of girls' and women's education, this unity inside a social group breaks apart and the partner search increasingly follows a double-track strategy. Members of the same society evaluate partners for their sons and daughters differently. Families of the same social milieu ensure a good education for their daughters and look for a son-in-law who has been at least as well educated. For their sons, however, these families continue to prefer traditional, non-working housewives; this disparity is often reflected in state laws that stipulate that women who want to go to work need their husband's permission[2].

   Traditional marriages follow the logic of asymmetrical exchange. Accordingly, a man increases his symbolic capital by marrying a woman who corresponds to the prevailing ideal of beauty and virtue; in this logic, women only circulate as the objects of exchange between the families. Due to women's education and social mobility, the structures of the marriage market change from a purely protectionist system to a system that also incorporates features of free exchange. Women's role

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2  While these laws had been abolished in all but ten Arab states by 2020, there are various legal and social impediments for women's economic activities, according to a World Bank study, see World Bank Group (ed.), Women, Business, and the Law 2020, Washington 2020. For example, Muslim scholars discuss the conditions and limits of women's right to work, see, for example, Dina Mansour, Women's Rights in Islamic Shariʿa. Between Interpretation, Culture and Politics, in: Muslim World Journal of Human Rights 11, 1 (2014), pp. 1–24.

is no longer restricted to being a valuable object of exchange, which increases a man's symbolic power; they themselves become actors on the marriage market, who bring in forms of symbolic capital and look for an equal partner. The losers of this transformation are not only lesser educated men, but also the educated daughters of the socially aspiring lower and middle classes, who have difficulties finding an adequate husband. Either they look for a marriage candidate in a similar social milieu, who may lack their level of cultural capital, or they have to find a man of erudition from a higher social background, who may not treat them as equal for other reasons. In both cases, women run the risk of being curtailed in their self-determination.

What is important to note is that the modern transformation of the marriage market changed the way of finding a partner as well as individual women's possibilities. Structurally, however, it left the gender asymmetry untouched in spite of other ongoing social changes. Obviously, the gender hierachy remained a constant, which changed only in appearance[3]. That is why its elimination represents such a great challenge for the women's movement and society at large.

This kind of social transformations also heavily affected Arab countries since the beginning of the twentieth century. Kenneth Cuno has shown how the emergence of the »modern« conjugal family in Egypt since the nineteenth century went hand in hand with the enforcement of a domestic ideology that focussed on women's responsibilities for childrearing and motherhood—all of which had only »a limited connection with Islamic concepts of an earlier time«[4]. The invention of the personal status law, published in 1875, adapted Muslim social norms to this new family ideology. As the state restricted the application of Shari'a norms to family matters, the »domestic sphere« became a »domain of religion«[5]. According to the personal status law, the wife's obedience was not only contingent on receiving her husband's maintenance; the police could also enforce household obedience[6]. Whereas Muslims as well as non-Muslim observers often consider Muslim family law a domain of Islamic law, unaffected by modernizing changes, the transformation of both societal norms and Muslim law was in fact inter-connected and had a history entangled with colonialism. »Twentieth century advocates of women's rights denounced the enforcement of house of obedience as an un-Islamic custom, but it originated in France, whence it migrated to Algeria and became associated with Muslim culture, and from there it migrated to Egypt.«[7]

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3 Cf. Bourdieu, Männliche Herrschaft, pp. 144–192.

4 Kenneth M. Cuno, Modernizing Marriage. Family, Ideology, and Law in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Egypt, Syracuse, NY 2015, p. 2.

5 Ibid., p. 15.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

Hanan Kholoussy has shown how the Egyptian press discussed the so-called »marriage crisis« as a problem of the male middle class in the period between 1898 and 1936[8]. She shows that the public discussion about involuntary bachelorhood not only involved norms of masculinity and feminity, but also the changing practices of men and women with regards to the law; it was also a crystallization point of debates about modernity and anti-colonialism and confirmed the growing role of the print media. In this context, the media discourse helped construct the image of the modern Egyptian woman as a wife and mother, the narrative about a »divorce epidemic«[9], and the need for docile wives.

The transformation of the marriage market not only sharpened the feminist consciousness of gender hierarchies and differences, it also turned out to be a serious problem for the feminist activists of the pioneer generations themselves[10]. Hind Nawfal (1860–1920), whose *al-Fatāt* (*The Girl/Young Women*), published in 1882 in Alexandria (Egypt), was the first magazine publishd by an Arab woman, had to discontinue it, expressing her regret and referring to her marriage, after two years[11]. For some well-known women's rights activists of the first and second generation—the Turkish-Egyptian poet ʿAʾisha Taymur (ʿĀʾisha Taymūr, 1840–1902), the Lebanese poet Warda Yaziji (Warda Yāzijī, 1838–1924), and Huda Shaʿrawi—their husband's death was a precondition that enabled or at least made it easier for them to appear in public. If women worked as publishers, writers, editors or lecturers in the first decades of the twentieth century, they always had to expect harassment by men—which potential husbands did not like. Suhayr al-Qalamawi, professor and member of the Egyptian Parliament, and Fatima al-Yusuf (Fāṭima al-Yūsuf, 1889–1958), the first female editor in Egypt, said that because of the male behavior towards them, being a woman was the greatest difficulty in their lives[12]. Therefore, several publicly active women—such as Mayy Ziyada, Mary ʿAjami and the Egyptian Nabawiyya Musa (Nabawiyya Mūsā, 1886–1951)—did not marry at all. This had the effect that they as single women had sometimes only restricted access to public spaces and were subject to travel restrictions. Mayy Ziyada once complained to fellow writer Amin al-Rihani (Amīn al-Rayḥānī, 1876–1940) by saying that if she were a man, she would travel at least four months a year, but as a woman, she had

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8  Hanan Kholoussy, For Better, For Worse. The Marriage Crisis That Made Modern Egypt, Stanford 2010.

9  Ibid., p. 80.

10  For the following examples, see for example Zeidan, Arab Women Novelists, pp. 81–84.

11  Also compare, Sakākīnī, Sābiqāt al-ʿaṣr, pp. 160f. Hind Nawfal was a Lebanese of Greek Orthodox background.

12  Zeidan, Arab Women Novelists, p. 84. Lebanese born Fatima al-Yusuf established the cultural and later political magazine *Rūz al-Yūsuf* in Cairo in 1925, still existing today. The publishing house of the same name published Sakakini's short story collection *al-Sitār al-marfūʿ* (1955).

to be content with staying in Egypt or Syria[13]. Yet, these women did not marry, perhaps because they saw the restrictions as the lesser of two evils. Female writers who married had to adapt to their husband's understanding of gender roles and were often divorced—at that time, a divorce was considered socially unacceptable, especially for Christian women such as Hana Kurani (Hanā Kasbānī Kūrānī, 1870–1898), Habbuba Haddad (1897–1957) and Salma Sayegh; Siza Nabarawi, a close friend of Huda Shaʿrawi's, was also divorced four years after her wedding. The Egyptian Malak Hifni Nasif (Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif, 1886–1918) and Zaynab Fawwaz had to tolerate their husband's polygyny. Nazira Zayn al-Din, who had been so vigorously committed to unveiling and women's rights in her youth, published no more books after the scandal that she triggered at the age of 20 years; she finally agreed in 1938 to marriage to a man, who forbade her any engagement beyond household and her children's education[14].

Even in apparently ideal cases, the picture could be deceptive. Thus, the lifelong educator Insaf Sirri and her husband Mansur Fahmi (Manṣūr Fahmī, 1886–1959), professor of philosophy at Cairo University, represented to visitors »a new role model of the professional couple, a rarity in that day not only in Egypt, but everywhere«[15]. Sakakini also called them »partners in the intellectual life and the human message«[16]. In an interview, published shortly after his death, Fahmi, who had received his doctorate from the Sorbonne in Paris in 1913 with a dissertation on the role of women in Islam, answered the question of whether he still demanded more freedom for women:

> Never… We have to preserve some of the salient features of our Islam, Orientalism and Arabism… Some Egyptian families have renounced their Oriental identity under the name of renewal… Even Europe had no use for loosening the bonds of women (*iṭlāq quyūd al-marʾa*)… what happened there and here came at the expense of preserving femininity and family happiness… This preservation means that we should not be partners of women except where it is appropriate. Because if we make them partners without limits, we will lose the benefit of specialization between the two sexes… There is a competence for each sex. I give the Egyptians the advice that their rebirth (*nahḍa*) has to flow out of themselves and from their wish to be an excellent people, superior to those who ascribe

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13 Zeidan, Arab Women Novelists, p. 82.

14 al-Jawharī, Ramziyyat al-ḥijāb, pp. 66 and 68; Karam al-Halw, ʿĀida al-Jawharī fī kitāb ʿan Naẓīra Zayn al-Dīn … istiʿādat mashrūʿ tanwīrī li-kātiba nahḍawiyya majhūla, in: al-Ḥayāt (24.12.2007).

15 Margot Badran, Rosa Manus in Cairo, 1935, and in Copenhagen, 1939. Encounters with Egyptians, in: Myriam Everard/Francisca de Haan (eds.), Rosa Manus (1881–1942). The International Life and Legacy of a Jewish Dutch Feminist, Leiden/Boston 2017, p. 197.

16 Sakākīnī, Sābiqāt al-ʿaṣr, p. 56.

competency to women… and men are above women (*wa-l-rijāl qawwāmūn ʿalā l-nisāʾ*)[17]. And truly, I myself have been one of those, who—in my work and in my PhD—stood up for the liberation of women and called for it with Qasim Amin… Yet, this is the good faith of a (young) generation (*amānat jīl*)… and the experience of age confirms that we cannot imitate the Occidental in everything, yet we can benefit from their mistakes… I'm not a reactionary man… but I want everything to be appropriate to the fortunes and circumstances. And if Qasim Amin came back today and found all the extremism (*at-taṭarruf*), for which there is no justification, he would demand the *hijāb*![18]

Asked about his wife's work, he said:

When I married her, teaching was a necessity for girls like her. Yet, I suggested to her not to work. But since she was the one who started the girls' secondary school and wanted to do this job, I decided that I should let her go to work and that she should stop at the first opportunity, but she did not stop until she turned 60.[19]

When asked whether he allowed his daughter to work, he replied: »Basically, first and foremost at home. And if it is necessary, if she marries and her husband dies and she gets into trouble, it is possible that she will work.«[20]

Fahmi's statements connect the male control of »his« women (wife and daughter) to larger political and social issues and performs a conscious rethinking of his previous position; yet, he simply confirms the dominant double-track strategy that he formerly at least partially criticized.

Divergent marriage strategies for sons and daughters are not only connected to the control of female relatives, but also to divergent sexual behavior. While it is acceptable for sons to meet women in secret, daughters are strictly observed to prevent their behaving in the same way. Men try to prohibit their sisters and daughters from doing what they themselves are doing. The asymmetry even entails divergent strategies *after* marriage, in the case of the partner's death or divorce. Shaʿban writes about her home village in the 1980s that there is no single widower, living on his own, but several widows who do not want to marry again[21]. In interviews with various women, practical and ideological contradictions are clearly mentioned. Maqbula Shalaq (Maqbūla Shalaq, 1921–1986), who was the first female student to acquire a *licence en droit* at the University of Damascus, says:

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17  Qurʾan 4:34.

18  Naṣr, Udabāʾ, pp. 267f.

19  Ibid., p. 268.

20  Ibid., p. 270.

21  Shaaban, Both Right and Left Handed, p. 12.

What men say publicly in their lectures and meetings in connection with women's liberation is in most cases quite different from what they actually practise at home with their sisters and wives. A Syrian author whose writings I came to admire a lot once said to me he wouldn't marry an educated woman; he would marry a 14-year-old-girl who served him, looked after him properly and did not discuss things with him. And he did just that.[22]

Another interviewee describes the double standards of her father and other men with the words:

Socially, he was able to keep a good image of himself with everyone around him. You know, like all men; when you talk to them you think they are great, fair and progressive, but once you look into the way they treat their sisters, daughters, and wives you know exactly the kind of people they really are. […] Even men who speak using progressive political terminology turn out to be most reactionary once they are faced with a problem concerning their wives and their sisters. It is fashionable now among men to talk about women's emancipation, but a simple test would prove that those who believe in emancipation are really very few. I feel the most central problem of our lives in the Arab world is the problem of what seems to be and what actually is; of our public and personal lives. […] There is a real dichotomy between Arab men's political and social attitudes. You find so many of the educated, progressive men in the Arab world are the most reactionary socially, particularly in their attitudes to women.[23]

In her essays, Sakakini also reflected on these problems. In the already mentioned article on *The Multiple Personality*[24], she describes contradictory behavior as a psychological result of social circumstances. She writes that even for psychologists, these contradictions were not easy to explain. As examples, she mentions a writer who brilliantly analyses social misery, yet behaves exactly like the general public and mistreats his family members as soon as he puts his pencil aside. The healing of society depended on children who grow up under better circumstances because the reform of family and society is the only way to correct the divide between public persona and lived reality. A society in disharmony produces contradictory charcters, since the human being was the mirror of society. In her essay *Fattish 'an al-rajul* (*Search for the Man*), she turned the saying »cherchez la femme« on its

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22 Ibid., p. 44.

23 Ibid., pp. 66–68. The interviewee says that she was married at the age of twelve. She recounts how her husband abused her and treated her like a slave. After two months, she was allowed to return to her father's house. Because of the social pressure to re-marry, she tried to commit suicide, jumped from a building and suffered several broken bones. After this ordeal, she could contiue to go to school, graduated from high school, studied law and met her husband at university.

24 Sakākīnī, Taʿaddud al-shakhṣiyya, pp. 161–164.

head, by ironically pointing at the contradiction that men make women responsible for all evils, although they themselves claim and exercise social control[25].

This short overview of the transformation of Arab gender hierarchies in the twentieth century, expressed in changing marriage opportunities, would be incomplete without a short word about women's writing. The literary field was receptive for literary material that addressed the oppression of women in society[26]; Sakakini's success with her 1936 short story *Shaykh Ḥamadī* is a particularly striking example—not least because the jury was surprised to see that the story had been written by a woman. However, women writers often met with the suspicion that there was a male ghost writer hiding behind their names—this was the background for the story of al-ʿAqqad's initial disbelief in Sakakini's literary competence[27]; or, men used a female pseudonym (*ism mustaʿār*) to attract attention with outspoken words that were considered inappropriate for the female *ʿawra* (»sense of shame, pudendum«)[28] that was expected to remain covered in a physical as well as symbolic sense. Thus, writing women had to overcome the prejudice that the very act of writing already transgressed moral boundaries and compromised their impurity[29], which was connotated sexually.

Having said this, it should be clear that there were limits to a woman's criticism of the prevailing social conditions, that it was a risky investment, and that it could entail harsh reactions. In the 1950s, a younger generation of female writers, claiming their freedom, more directly rebelled against male-dominated institutions, patriarchal behavior, and control; the patriarchy was often embodied in (literary) father figures that obstruct the process of female liberation. In Layla Baʿlabakki's (Laylā Baʿlbakkī, b. 1936) *Ana aḥya* (*I Live*, 1958), as the protagonist's dreams of freedom are shattered at the end of the novel, »she is forced to return to her home, the symbol of closed space and patriarchal authority«[30]. Because of a collection of short stories, Baʿlabakki was charged with spreading obscenity and endangering public morality in Lebanon in 1963. She was finally acquitted, but never dared to write novels again, turning instead to journalism. Even more dramatic was the short career of Muna Jabbur (Mūna Jabbūr, 1942–1964), who lets her protagonists

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25  Eadem, Fattish ʿan al-rajul, p. 149.

26  Muhammad Husayn Haykal's novel *Zaynab* (1913), often considered the first authentic Arabic novel, depicts the unhappy arranged marriage of a peasant girl.

27  Filasṭīn, Widād Sakākīnī, p. 93.

28  See, for example, Baron, The Women's Awakening in Egypt, pp. 48f.; Ottosson Bitar, I Can Do Nothing, pp. 51 and 54f. Badran points to the fact that women's unveiling of their voices was accompanied by the literal unveiling of their faces. She notes that even women's (literary) voices had been considered *ʿawra*, something to be »covered«, Badran, Feminists, Islam and Nation, p. 16.

29  Cf. Badran, Feminists, Islam and Nation, p. 16.

30  al-ʿId, Lebanon, p. 25.

in her two novels (published in 1962 and 1966) express their dire need for their father's love. She committed suicide before the second novel was even published[31].

## 2.    Women as Bodies, Women as Partners

In her narrative work, Sakakini implicitly deals with the changes to the contemporary marriage market in a variety of ways by depicting the life stories of her female protagonists. Often there is no good ending for well-educated, artistically talented women because male behavior, traditional values, or other women make life difficult for them. In other stories, women do not shy away from devious plans and immoral acts. Sakakini openly criticizes terms of honor and ideals of beauty, which is rather significant. Insofar as women are primarily perceived as objects of exchange or bodies on the traditional and modern marriage market, the attribution of virtue and beauty is a central social act, determining the chances of marriage, in addition to the allotment of social capital (i.e. being from a good family). The reduction of women to their bodies is at the heart of every feminist social criticism. If being a woman means being looked at[32] in almost all societies, this also means that women *are* bodies, whereas men *have* bodies. This—visual and bodily—difference is at the heart of gender constructions, differences, and hierarchies; it explains the different self-use of male and female bodies as well as the different forms of danger, vulnerability, caution, and moral charge associated with these bodies.

These gender differences, which are not least constructed in literature, offer various possibilities of rewriting and subversion—even in reference to classical Arabic prose literature (*adab*). As Fedwa Malti-Douglas has argued: »The female, defined by her gender, is made to enter the pantheon of *adab* character types largely through her witty manipulation of the body.«[33] Although »the dangers inherent in the female body are never far away«[34], especially in classical, male and misogynist literature—and even the total absence of the female still refers to this danger—, the rich *adab* corpus gave birth to female »delightful trickster character types«[35] and »also begat the ›woman‹ as character type«[36]. Malti-Douglas shows how modern female scriptors use »age-old paradigms«[37] in their quest for women's right to

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31  On her, ibid., pp. 25f.
32  On this, see Bourdieu, Männliche Herrschaft, pp. 112–121.
33  Fedwa Malti-Douglas, Woman's Body, Woman's Word. Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing, Princeton 1991, pp. 6f.
34  Ibid., p. 7.
35  Ibid., p. 6.
36  Ibid.
37  Ibid., p. 8.

speak, permitting them »to challenge the sexist and patriarchal assumptions of the classical Arabic literary canon«[38]. Modern writers, as she argues, have to »work through this complex of inherited values, even when subverting them«[39]. What then links classical and modern literature are »woman's body and woman's word«[40]:

> Consciousness of gender and arguments about the roles of men and women were not brought to the Arab world by Western feminists, like serpents in the Garden of Eden. These issues have always been major and fully conscious preoccupations of Arab writers who have filled their literature with chapters and books on women, their roles, their problems, and the like.[41]

As Malti-Douglas further argues, for women, the world remains chained to their bodies, even if modern writers criticize this fact. In classical texts, women speak through their bodies, in modern texts, they speak in reaction to female corporality: »The woman Arab writer of the late twentieth century achieves her literary voice, but she too must do so through the body.«[42]

Questions of corporality and partner search are closely related to each other. Both subjects appear prominently in several of Sakakini's short stories. On the following pages, I give a short summary of the most striking examples.

In many instances, Sakakini sharpens women's reduction to their bodies to a conflict between internal and external values—or even between what one could call »spirituality« and »materiality«. Her first short story collection opens with the life of *Ḥājar al-ʿĀnis* (*Virgin Hagar*)[43]. The story deals with the happy and ingenious girl Hagar, who has acquired more education than her younger sisters and peers. Yet, the missing beauty in her face and the unfair treatment of her parents drive her into a crisis and prevent her from getting married and becoming a mother. Growing up, she senses forms of discrimination by her parents in favor of her beautiful sisters, as she is ordered to do most of the work at home. For example, her mother lets her prepare the younger sisters' bridal outfit, as if the issue was none of Hagar's business. Sakakini tells how Hagar withdraws into herself because she does not feel understood and respected by others. She is torn between her dreams and reality, which presents her with one disappointment after the other. Trapped between self-confidence and hopelessness, envy and jealousy slowly eat up her

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38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid., p. 6.

42 Ibid., p. 8.

43 SAKĀKĪNĪ, Hājar al-ʿĀnis, in: Eadem, Marāyā l-nās, pp. 11–27. For a brief summary and an interpretation, see SHAʿBĀN, Qirāʾa, pp. 113–119; OTTOSSON BITAR, I Can Do Nothing, pp. 133–137.

soul. When she thinks about the course of the world, she concludes that »there is no justice or fair treatment in the world«[44] (*laysa fī l-dunyā ʿadl wa-lā inṣāf*). She curses the beauty that has been wholly distributed to her sisters, leaving nothing for her. She even curses her own name Hagar, which announces impending mischief[45], while her sisters are named Suʿād (»The Happy«) and Malīḥa (»The Pretty«). Even in her job as a teacher, she feels envious of the pretty students and occasionally beats them.

The story *ʿĀshiqat al-Nīl* (*The Lover of the Nile*)[46] takes a happier turn. When her three girlfriends become engaged, the student character of the story asks herself whether she should also get married instead of gaining academic knowledge. When she discovers that a fellow student, Jād al-Mawlā, loves her, this discovery changes her attitude towards herself and her mirror image. In the central scene, her friend throws her mirror into the Nile exclaiming: »Your mirror is here, in the black of my eyes.«[47] Beauty is not seen as an ideal image, but is the result of an interpersonal encounter. In contrast to the story of Hagar, Sakakini's plot here says that striving for knowledge does not conflict with love and marriage.

In *al-Timthāl al-muthallath* (*The Triple Statue*)[48], Sakakini demonstrates the transformation and tribulations of the marriage market in an exemplary—and nationalist—way. This story tells how the Pasha—the honorable title refers to a higher social class and possible Ottoman-Turkish descent—divorces his wife and finally marries the educated, but poor teacher of his daughter. The two women are not only rivals for the favor of the man, their struggle also reflects different forms of capital[49]. The teacher Nabawiyya[50] is depicted as an independent woman, who takes charge of her own life and is interested in the welfare of her country. The child for whom she cares loves her more than she loves her biological mother. The mother, named al-Ḥasnāʾ, is called *al-Hānim*, Turkish-Osmanist (*hanım*) for »Madame« throughout the story, also a sign of her upper-class background, which marks her as belonging to a bygone age. She is further characterized as part of the

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44  Sakākīnī, Hājar al-ʿĀnis, p. 14.

45  This is not explained in the text, but it maybe refers to the Islamic version of the story of Abraham, who leaves Hagar and their son alone in the desert.

46  Eadem, ʿĀshiqat al-Nīl, in: Eadem, al-Sitār al-marfūʿ, pp. 26–33.

47  Ibid., p. 33. For an interpretation, see Shaʿbān, Qirāʾa, pp. 120f.

48  Widād Sakākīnī, al-Timthāl al-muthallath, in: Eadem, Nufūs tatakallam, pp. 5–72. The title of the story refers to a statue of »the three wise monkeys« (see no evel, hear no evil, speak no evil) on the Pasha's desk. Madame tries to explain the meaning of the statue to Nabawiyya, who discovers her infidelity. After her marriage to the Pasha, Nabawiyya throws it to ground and smashes it. For a summary and an interpretation see Shaʿbān, Qirāʾa, pp. 125–130.

49  Cf. Shaʿbān, Qirāʾa, pp. 126f.

50  The name might be a tribute to the Egyptian nationalist and feminist Nabawiyya Musa, who died in 1951, shortly before the short story was published.

superficially Europeanized elite, a Madame of high society, maintaining a high as well as decadent lifestyle. Being emotionally, intellectually, and culturally superficial, she is disinterested not only in the problems of the country but also of her husband. Thus, the poor, educated woman takes responsibility for the child, the family, and the nation, while the woman of higher social lineage and economic wealth acts in an egoistic manner. The educator's cultural capital beats Madame's social and economic capital, and the Pasha also values the cultural capital more highly and marries the educator in spite of the class barriers. The short story turns a social critique that Sakakini also formulated in her essays into a literary narrative, Sakakini is able to sketch a harmonization between feminism, class structure, and nationalism. The plot depicts social transformations and the possibility of overcoming social barriers in a positive light.

However, this ending is an exception. Often, social, family, or pair relations on the one side and women's education or artistic talent on the other side do not harmonize with each other. Shaykha 'Aṭiyya (Shaykha 'Atiyya) in the story of the same name[51] is a well-respected and pious woman. The residents of her neighbourhood send their children to her so that the shaykha can teach them to recite the Qur'an. Although her own talented daughter is predicted to have a great future, everything turns out differently than expected. The daughter runs away with a neighbor boy and becomes a singer, thus profiting in her own way from the opportunities that her mother unconsciously created for her. Yet, the daughter totally disappoints her mother's expectations by betraying her moral and religious standards and giving up Qur'anic recitation for profane music. The saddened shaykha has no other choice but to continue giving the neighbor children lessons in the Qur'an in order to make a living.

The plot of the short story *'Ayn al-shayṭān* (*The Devil's Eye*)[52] takes a reverse course. The heroine of the story Nahid (Nāhid) is at first depicted as a seductive and morally questionable character who has love affairs and remarries several times. When she gets older, she refrains from seducing other men, but is satisfied with spinning intrigues between other couples. Sakakini, however, does not attribute the formation of her character to her nature, but to her upbringing by her father, without her mother. Thus, Nahid took all her knowledge and her patterns of thought from her father, who is ahead of his generation, holds new ideas and follows »paths in which there is sometimes guidance and sometimes straying away« (*durūb fīhā*

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51 Widād Sakākīnī, Shaykha 'Aṭiyya, in: Eadem, Marāyā l-nās, pp. 29–36. For a summary and an interpretation see Sha'bān, Qirā'a, p. 130.

52 Widād Sakākīnī, 'Ayn al-shayṭān, in: Eadem, al-Sitār al-marfū', Cairo 1955, pp. 100–105. For a summary and an interpretation, see also Ottosson Bitar, I Can Do Nothing, pp. 172–176.

*hudan wa-fīhā ḍalāl*)[53]. When her father dies, he bequeaths her a ring with a blue stone, called the devil's eye. From then on, the devil tries to take control over her. As an old woman, she suddenly realizes that she has to get rid of the devil and sells the ring that she kept as a memory. It is as if a heavy burden falls off her and she sleeps a deep long sleep, she has never enjoyed in her long life. The next day, she explains to her husband that »I am redeemed and I have made my decision« (*khalaṣtu wa-ʿazmatu*)[54]. She puts on her white silk cover, joins the women for pilgrimage, waves crying to her husband on the stairs to the plane, and shouts: »Forgive me, Naẓmī, for I will not return«[55].

In *al-ʿŪd al-masḥūr* (*The Bewitched Oud*)[56], a talented woman is totally committed to her art. Her family marries her against her will to cure her of her mania for music. At some point, the husband can no longer stand the music and breaks the oud. As she then threatens him to commit suicide if he does not divorce her, the husband leaves her without any remorse. Thereupon, she lives on, gutted, confused, and distracted.

In *Talāqī l-fann* (*Rendenzvous of Art*)[57], the talented student Bahiyya and her music teacher Fāris Effendi decide to meet only as artists, not as partners because they come from different social classes. They agree that art alone should unite them. After a failed marriage to another man from a rich family—she is obviously unable to have children—, Bahiyya begins to play again and thus leaves the traditional role of wife and mother behind.

In *Waswās* (*Temptation*)[58], the painter Tuhani (Tuhānī) prefers her art to all worldly things and lives with complete devotion to it. However, two factors make her work more difficult. Firstly, her despair of achieving her artistic goals and, secondly, the desire to be successful with art. One day, she paints her friend as a beauty, but her picture lets her discover the friend's strange character, in which beauty is mixed with depression and reluctance. The friend tears up the portrait as soon as the painter leaves. The painter, however, has come to realize that art is a stronger force than friendship and that she can only express herself, if she does not take social conventions and the prospect of success into account.

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53 SAKĀKĪNĪ, ʿAyn al-shayṭān, p. 102. The wording has a clearly religious overtone, referring to the *fātiḥa*, the first sura of the Qurʾan 1:6–7.

54 SAKĀKĪNĪ, ʿAyn al-shayṭān, p. 105.

55 Ibid.

56 Widād SAKĀKĪNĪ, al-ʿŪd al-masḥūr, in: Eadem, al-Sitār al-marfūʿ, pp. 60–69. Cf. the summarizing interpretation by SHAʿBĀN, Qirāʾa, pp. 123f.

57 Widād SAKĀKĪNĪ, Talāqī l-fann, in: Eadem, Nufūs tatakallam, pp. 80–87. Cf. the summary and interpretation by SHAʿBĀN, Qirāʾa, pp. 130f.; OTTOSSON BITAR, I Can Do Nothing, pp. 163–167.

58 Widād SAKĀKĪNĪ, Waswās, in: Eadem, al-Sitār al-marfūʿ, pp. 16–35. Cf. the summary and interpretation by SHAʿBĀN, Qirāʾa, pp. 121–123.

In *al-Ḍarratān* (*The Two Second Wives*)[59], a husband's two wives form an alliance against him when they discover that he wants to divorce one of them to marry a third woman, who should give birth to a child for him—despite his obvious sterility. They sprinkle poisoned powder into his food until he is so tormented by pain that he eventually becomes an imbecile. The two women then live together in his house and scoff at their foolish husband.

These examples show that Sakakini's female protagonists do not stop at cunning or immoral behavior in order to defend themselves against men or to achieve their own goals. In *al-Masḥūr* (*The Bewitched*)[60], Umm Fahd succeeds in seducing Taysir Effendi; he marries her although she is older than him. In *Bint Iblīs* (*Devil's Daughter*)[61], the heroine Durriyya uses all tricks available to her to trap her milk brother[62] and his wife like a spider in her web. She aims to destroy the couple's happiness—for no apparent reason. The short story obviously plays with the incest taboo, suggesting that the relationship between Durriyya and her milk brother has an inextricable tension between simultaneous proximity and distance, attraction and rejection. The story *al-Dhiʼba* (*She-Wolf*)[63] is about Tafīda, who is raised by an aunt. Tafīda repays this kindness by seducing and kidnapping the aunt's son-in-law without any remorse. The title of the story goes back to a tale in which a Bedouin finds a little she-wolf and takes pity on the animal, who goes on to eat her ewe.

In her first novel *Arwā bint al-khuṭūb* (*Arwa, the Daughter of Mischief*, 1949), Sakakini formulates the sharpest criticism of the fact that men reduce a woman to her body and see it as their right to molest her. The novel is set in the tenth century CE and depicts it as a widespread social praxis that men harass women and regard them as fair game. When Arwa resists male assaults, she is once sentenced to death and once sold as a slave. Thus, male dominion over the female body encompasses everything from profitable enslavement to annihilation. The twists of Sakakini's plot and Arwa's final retreat from the world will be the subject of the next subchapter. Suffice it to mention here that the various attempts at harassment go so far that Arwa regards her own beauty as a curse and falls into self-loathing:

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59  Widād Sакāкīnī, al-Ḍarratān, in: Eadem, Marāyā l-nās, pp. 47–54. For a summary and an interpretation, cf. Sнаʿвān, Qirāʼa, pp. 119f; Оттоssоn Bitar, I Can Do Nothing, pp. 106–112.

60  Widād Sакāкīnī, al-Masḥūr, in: Eadem, Nufūs tatakallam, pp. 94–100. For a summary and an interpretation, cf. Sнаʿвān, Qirāʼa, p. 131.

61  Widād Sакāкīnī, Bint Iblīs, in: Eadem, Nufūs tatakallam, pp. 101–110. For a summary and an interpretation, cf. Sнаʿвān, Qirāʼa, p. 131; Оттоssоn Bitar, I Can Do Nothing, pp. 79–87.

62  Milk kinship creates a familial relationship between a breast feeding non-biological mother and the child's family. A man is not allowed to marry his milk mother or milk sister. The practice also involved Prophet Muhammad, who was nursed by his Bedouin foster-mother.

63  Widād Sакāкīnī, al-Dhiʼba, in: Eadem, al-Sitār al-marfūʿ, pp. 113–117. For a summary and an interpretation, cf. Оттоssоn Bitar, I Can Do Nothing, pp. 79–87.

Arwa was furious at the losses and corruption, which had befallen her, and the humiliation and agony, which beauty had brought upon her. Even the loser and the one who could not defend himself sought her. She wanted nothing more than to reach out to that face to disfigure its features and wipe out its glow. Nothing stopped her except her fear of God and doomsday and her belief that her beauty was a gift for her husband, who hurried through the desert towards Baghdad.[64]

Responding to the objection that the story was only about her own bad experiences with men[65], Sakakini replied that the reason she wrote this novel was the misogynistic reactions of the literati to the women's movement in the 1930s and 1940s: »It pains me that in the 1940s, even when Arab women shook off their lethargy and then educated themselves, made progress, entered university and contributed to society, they were still accused of inability and backwardness, and were characterized as if they were free of any talents and privileges«.[66]

Various contributions by Tawfiq al-Hakim, al-ʿAqqad, and al-Mazini, which had appeared in the Egyptian cultural journal *al-Risāla*, prompted Sakakini to swear that she wanted to write a novel in which she would depict the wrongs that women had suffered at the hands of men throughout the centuries as well as women's patience towards this humiliation.

> So I took it upon myself to write a novel that would show women's ability to bear pain, which they [these male writers] unjustly and falsely claim is antithetical to them. *Arwā bint al-khuṭūb* is a portrait of the slander and humiliation that women have endured. In it, I give expression to the misery of women, caused by the »curse« of men, and to the preservation of their [women's] dignity by taking refuge in the fear of God.[67]

Among the misogynistic statements that prompted Sakakini's reaction, she counted the following examples:[68] When Taha Husayn depicted Shahrazad's rhetorical talent in *Aḥlām Shahrazād* (*Shahrazad's Dreams*), writer and playwright Tawfiq

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64  SAKĀKĪNĪ, Arwā, p. 40.

65  Ḥusām AL-KHAṬĪB, Ḥawla l-riwāya al-nisāʾiyya fī Sūriyya, in: al-Maʿrifa 166 (December 1975), pp. 79–93.

66  Widād SAKĀKĪNĪ, »Arwa« wa-»l-Ḥubb al-muḥarram«, in: Eadem, Shawk fī l-ḥaṣīd, p. 209. Compare the slightly different translation in HADIDI/AL-QADI, Syria, p. 62.

67  SAKĀKĪNĪ, »Arwa« wa-»l-Ḥubb al-muḥarram«, p. 209. See the slightly different translation in HADIDI/AL-QADI, Syria, p. 62.

68  See Widād SAKĀKĪNĪ, Ilā l-duktūr Ḥusām al-Khaṭīb, in: Eadem, Shawk fī l-ḥaṣīd, pp. 211f. Obviously, these remarks are a repetition of her earlier criticism in *Inṣāf al-marʾa*, see, SAKĀKĪNĪ, Inṣāf al-marʾa, pp. 27f. and eadem, Aʿdāʾ al-marʾa, pp. 156–158. For al-ʿAqqad's and al-Hakim's misogyny, see also ZEIDAN, Arab Women Novelists, pp. 89f.

al-Hakim denied women any artistic talent: »They are not able to write plays and cannot become musicians who create melodies.«[69] In response, al-ʿAqqad published two articles, in which he claimed that women might master storytelling, but cannot write poems. Women were not creative, neither in painting nor in the theater, and even in so-called women's business such as cooking, embroidering, decorating and sewing men were superior[70]. According to Sakakini, Ibrahim al-Mazini's mockery did not even stop at his own wife and daughters, and Zaki Mubarak recounted that his father used to say that he liked to test the stability of his shoes on his wife's head, meaning that only violence and humiliation were adequate for a woman. Even the women's helper in Damascus, Muhammad Kurd ʿAli joined the chorus of men and supported al-ʿAqqad's point of view.

### 3. Women's Lines of Escape

As these examples from her narrative work show, Sakakini often creates irreconcilable contradictions between her women protagonists' aspirations in life and the social conditions, which are represented by both men and women. The escape paths that Sakakini draws for the protagonists, who are thrown into these difficult situations, differ fundamentally. She lets the women make decisions that are destructive for their relationships, partners or parents. She describes self-destructive behavior that fails to produce any positive results. Some women protagonists surrender disappointed to their fate, while others rebel against it; still others use all their cunning to get where they want to. In some cases, one can find disruptive, rebellious, and thoughtful elements combined with each other. Looking at these plots from the vintage point of final escape possibilities is inspired by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari who speak of »lines of flight«[71] (*ligne de fuite*). Such lines of flight represent ways out of a system of established codes and predefined paths, and the opening up of new territories, what Deleuze and Guattari call deterritorialization and detachment. They apply the concept to social and political life as well as to individual life. They understand it as a human right of every human being to have a

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69  Sᴀᴋᴀᴋɪɴɪ, Ilā l-duktūr Ḥusām al-Khaṭīb, pp. 211f.

70  Ibid., p. 212.

71  For the expression see Gilles Dᴇʟᴇᴜᴢᴇ/Felix Gᴜᴀᴛᴛᴀʀɪ, Anti-Ödipus. Kapitalismus und Schizophrenie I, Frankfurt a.M. 1974, p. 440; idem, A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia, Minneapolis 1987, pp. 9–15 passim, 55–56, 116–137 passim.

no man's land, a secret existence in which the human being has the right to remain detached, not to be exposed, and not to have to respond to others[72].

On the following pages, I will treat a peculiar solution that Sakakini sketched for some of her female protagonists: a woman's escape from patriarchal society to spirituality and God. I discuss this line of escape in detail using the example of Sakakini's novel *Arwā*. My interpretation is not only based on the idea that this escape route is a remarkable, yet not uncommon, answer to women's earthly humiliation[73]; I also aim to show that this line of escape represents a feminist rewriting of the motif of *al-ḥubb al-ʿudhrī* (»Platonic Love«), one of the most productive narrative structures in classical and modern Arabic literature. Sakakini's recasting of this narrative happens on two levels: an implicit critique of the concept of masculinity, laid out in the classical narrative; and a feminist reversal of the narrative that results in certain modifications of the narrative structure. In Malti-Douglas' sense, Sakakini thus works herself through a classical paradigm and changes its grammar.

In the classical version, the productive narrative of the unfulfilled, passionate love always has a male protagonist as its hero. A misunderstanding, circumstances, or social differences prevent the lover from uniting with the adored woman and present an insurmountable obstacle. The outer impediments create further psychological obstacles (doubts and distrust) for the lover. A chain of events turn the unattainable passion into platonic worship for the sake of love: the lover controls his feelings more and more, internalizes them and sublimates them to true love, which no longer requires a response from the adored woman. The events form a sequence of stages, with the lover finding death for the sake of love in the last stage. Love appears as an incurable disease or selfless sacrifice. The narrative warns of the dangers of passion or provides an example of devotion and willingness to make sacrifices[74].

Against this background, Sakakini's novels form a metatext to one of the most widespread Arabic narrative structures. Whereas the *ʿudhrī*-narrative implicitly claims that Arab women live among the most passionate lovers, Sakakini challenges the underlying grammar and confronts the idealized image of masculinity with

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72  Karl Anton Fröschl, Territorien und Fluchtlinien, URL: <https://homepage.univie.ac.at/karl.anton.froeschl/ ts_zgwi_material/muehlbergerco/Territorien_und_Fluchtlinien.htm> (11 December 2020).

73  There are also similiar examples of women's flight to God in Christian contexts, drawing inspiration from mystics like Catherine of Sienca (d. 1380) or Teresa of Ávila (d. 1582), see for example Susan Frank Parsons, Redeeming Ethics, in: Eadem (ed.), The Cambridge Companion of Feminist Theology, Cambridge 2002, pp. 206–223.

74  On the *ʿudhrī*-narrative, see Stefan Leder, The ʿUdhrī Narrative in Arabic Literature, in: Friederike Pannewick (ed.), Martyrdom in Literature. Visions of Death and Meaningful Suffering in Europe and the Middle East from Antiquity to Modernity, Wiesbaden 2004, pp. 162–189.

male behavior from a woman's point of view. Before further discussing the feminist subversion and modification the *'udhrī*-narrative, I give a short summary of *Arwā bint al-khuṭūb*.

Nuʿman (Nuʿmān) sets out to do business in Iraq, leaving his wife Arwa in Damascus in the care of his brother ʿAbid (ʿAbīd). ʿAbid, as his name suggests, is a »slave« of his desires and tries to seduce Arwa. She threatens to expose him, whereupon he realizes that he is not achieving his goal. Thereupon he wakes the residents of the district with the exclamation »oh shame« and accuses Arwa of having molested him. She must appear before a judge (*qāḍī*) and four bribed eyewitnesses, who testify to her misbehavior. The judge passes the *ḥadd* verdict of adultery and decides that Arwa will be stoned. She is believed dead and her body is thrown into an abandoned ruin, where animal carcasses are usually thrown. Bedouin, passing by, discover her and take her with them to Tadmur (Palmyra).

When her savior Ḥamdūn notices her beauty, he immediately tries to seduce her. As Arwa starts to cry, he lets go of her. Next his slave tries his luck with her. When she also denies him and insults him, he accuses her of theft, and she has to leave the Bedouin. On her way to another village, she takes pity on a bound man, whom she buys free with the money she got from Hamdun. She continues on her way through the desert, but the rescued man follows her to thank his savior. When he finally reaches her and realizes that she is a woman, he also tries to seduce her, but when he fails, he sells her to a caravan heading for Egypt. As one of the caravan members chases her, she goes insane and defends herself with a sword, giving him a fatal blow. She flees with her master to Egypt, where they take a ship to Crete because he wants to sell her off to one of the princes there. On the boat, the other passengers gather and overwhelm her owner to have their fun with her. In this moment, a heavy storm comes up, sinks the boat and kills all the passengers except Arwa, who saves herself on a wooden plank. She is washed up on an island, whose people—utterly divided—wait for the first man to arrive in order to entrust him to rule according to an oracle. As luck would have it, Arwa becomes the new queen, but after a few months, she lets the people build a mosque for her, where she continues to live as an ascetic and enters into a close friendship with a philosopher. As she is also able to heal all kind of diseases, she is soon recognized as a saint and her reputation spreads across the world. The news of this extraordinary saint also reaches her husband Nuʿman and he persuades his brother ʿAbid, who has lost his eyesight, to travel to her. They arrive together with all the other who have wronged Arwa, all of whom suffer from various diseases. She heals all of them after they confess their wrongdoings in front of her husband Nuʿman. As she lifts her veil, they feel ashamed, kiss Arwa's feet and ask her for forgiveness. Nuʿman wants his wife to return with him, she hugs him, but apologizes and withdraws to pray. The spirit leaves her body and she dies in peace. General grief is proclaimed and the inscription on her grave reads: »Here is a stranger resting for eternity, the purity of woman, after which men

have chased for ages« (*hā hunnā tarqudu gharība ṭahārat al-marʾa allatī ṭāradahā al-rijāl mundhu l-azal*)[75].

In this narrative, the female body undergoes a metamorphosis in status: wife – carcass – slave – saint. Arwa can only transcend her corporality on a utopian island that is geographically outside the patriarchal world. The male offenders are finally not held accountable for their evils, but are made to confess them. Sakakini presents these confessions as acts of awareness and healing. Only then does Arwa reveal her face so that for the first time the men do not see her female body, but an individual person. This female individual turns away from them and completely surrenders to prayer.

This reformulation of the narrative concept of *ʿuḏrī* love entails the following modifications:

(1) In the classical structure, the narrative focus is always on the loving man, who is affected by a chain of events. The woman merely plays the role of the passive and unreachable object of adoration. The narrative structure, superficially, revolves around the adored female principle, but even more so around the (sublimated) male principle. Sakakini's reformulation cannot simply reverse the object of adoration and the subject of sublimation because that would leave the phallo-centric division intact; she rather re-focusses the narrative on the female protagonist, her conflicts and feelings, and the relationship between the sexes. She does not depict a transformation/sublimation of love, but a woman's flight from male harassment to a love supreme.

(2) Although Sakakini's plot ends with the death of the protagonist, the association that is evoked is not heroism, but rather the finding of peace. Arwa's death does not represent an act of self-sacrifice, but a social catalyst. As soon as the men have gained awareness of the falseness of social order and have shown repentance, Arwa has fulfilled her task in the earthly world and can confidently enter into an otherworldly world.

(3) In the classical structure, social impediments are the driving force behind the story. The man, not the woman, is portrayed as the victim of patriarchal society. Yet, the hero does not rebel against the social structures that make the fulfilment of his love impossible. He overcomes the sorrows of love through self-sacrifice. This indicates that the man may sacrifice himself in exceptional cases and override certain social barriers—such as the prohibition on suicide—without calling the

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75  Sᴀᴋᴀ̄ᴋɪ̄ɴɪ̄, Arwā, p. 132.

social order as such into question. The *'udhrī*-lover affirms the social structures precisely by breaking them and sacrificing himself. In contrast, Sakakini's story revolts against social conditions. Her story shows that a liberated, spiritual and fulfilled life is not possible for women under the prevailing conditions.

With these modifications, the basic structures of the narrative are retained even in its feminist variant: the basic conflict between love and social conditions as well as the appearance of insurmountable obstacles determine the dynamics of the narrative, which ultimately leads to the renunciation of unattainable physical pleasure. In this sense, *Arwā* is a metatext. Sakakini confronts the idealized image of men inherent in the classical *'udhrī*-narrative with the way men behave in reality. Throughout the course of her wanderings, her belief in the goodness of men is disappointed again and again; the shipwreck and the ending on a utopian island—these motifs are strongly reminiscent of Voltaire's parable *Candide*, which he conceived as a satirical commentary on Leibniz's thesis that man lives in the best of all possible worlds. Sakakini's *Arwā* is a commentary on the *'udhrī*-narrative that Arab women live among the most passionate lovers in the world. The Arab literary critique has not seen Sakakini's reformulation of the narrative structure, insofar as all critics ponder about the extent of the realism in *Arwā* and accuse Sakakini of building up a plot based on unbelievable coincidences and exaggerations[76].

It is worth mentioning that Sakakini also used the *'udhrī*-motif for male protagonists, following the conventional plot structure. For example, in the short story *Sayyidunā l-Junayd* (*Our Lord Junayd*)[77], Hassun (Ḥassūn), a pious man from Tunisia,[78] wishes to die as a martyr—»which is better for him than to live an unimportant, docile life«[79], as the author wants us to believe. He has fought in Palestine, finds himself now in Cairo and will soon return to Tunisia to continue fighting for its independence. Although he falls in love with an Egyptian woman, his wish to fight and die for his country is stronger. Sakakini clearly marks the protagonist as a Sufi, but he is not someone who seeks »escape from life«. Instead, he is someone whose religious zeal is combined with nationalist fervour. In *'Arīf raqm 7* (*Corporal*

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76 See the criticism by Shuʿayb, Widād Sakākīnī; Ḥammūd, al-Khiṭāb al-qiṣaṣī; Imān al-Qāḍī, al-Riwāya al-nisawiyya fī bilād al-Shām. al-Simāt al-nafsiyya wa-l-fanniyya. 1950–1985, Damascus 1992; and al-Khaṭīb, Ḥawla l-riwāya al-nisāʾiyya fī Sūriyya. Shaaban's claim that *Arwā* is a sort of science fiction novel is not convincing, see Shaʿbān, Qirāʾa, p. 136.

77 Widād Sakākīnī, Sayyidunā l-Junayd, in: Eadem, al-Sitār al-marfūʿ, pp. 7–15. For a summary and an interpretation, see also Ottosson Bitar, I Can Do Nothing, pp. 188–191.

78 The title of the story is the nickname that the people give to him in reference to the early Islamic mystic Junayd of Baghdad (d. 910).

79 Sakākīnī, Sayyidunā l-Junayd, p. 9.

*Number 7*)[80], two young Syrian men are competing for the hand of the daughter of a Palestinian mother by showing their courage on the battlefield. »What's the point with me and those two, who seek an engagement with me, when each of them in military service is preoccupied with feelings of heroism and sacrifice out of love and marriage?«[81], the annoyed girl asks her parents. Their deathly »sacrifice« (*fidā'*) in defending the borders against »the perfidious enemy« (*al-ʿadū al-ghaddār*)[82] is ultimately equated to »her silent sacrifice«[83], the medical care for the wounded and sick, to which she dedicates her new life[84].

The basic model for *Arwā* is obviously the saintly vita of the love mystic Rabiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya (d. 801), who embodies the role model for the escape from the patriarchal world and the devotion to divine love. Rabiʿa also loses her husband, becomes enslaved, and frees herself by founding a new mystical movement. Sakakini dedicated a biography and an essay to her[85]. In so doing, she maintained a critical distance from Rabiʿa's mystical immersion, but distinguished her from other ascetics. In her book, Sakakini is at pains to explain why Rabiʿa refrained from marriage and motherhood, although Muhammad had many wives and Islam knows no priesthood[86]. Sakakini castigates the ascetics' general detachment from the world, explains it as a phenomenon of the epoch, traces it back to non-Islamic influences from Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism[87], and goes even so far as to call it a *bidaʿ* ([illicit] »innovation«)[88] in relation to the aims of Islam. Here, she also draws a line of comparison to similar contemporary conditions and people, who call for asceticism and the neglect of the world, something she understands as »confusion and deviancy« (*iḍṭirāb wa-nḥirāf*)[89]. She further writes that every man and every woman has the right to live according to his/her wishes as long as s/he does not harm other people and transgress the customs (*al-ʿurf*) and the social system[90]. »In spite of the Islamic and social norms (*al-aḥkām al-sharʿiyya wa-l-ijtimāʿiyya*) we cannot intervene in a

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80 Eadem, ʿArīf raqm 7, in: Eadem, Aqwā min al-sinin, Damascus 1978, pp. 37–44.

81 Ibid., p. 43.

82 Ibid., p. 44. The word »Israel« does not appear, and the occupied Golan heights are of course *arḍ mughtaṣib* »usurped/raped land«, ibid. The end of the short story suggests that both men died on the battlefield.

83 Ibid.

84 See ibid., p. 43.

85 Eadem, al-ʿĀshiqa al-mutaṣawwifa; eadem, Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya, in: Eadem, Suṭūr tatajāwab, pp. 139–145.

86 Eadem, al-ʿĀshiqa al-mutaṣawwifa, pp. 37–45.

87 Ibid., pp. 26–33.

88 Ibid., p. 31.

89 Ibid., p. 33.

90 Ibid., pp. 44f.

person's freedom as long he does not break the rules«[91]. In this context, she praises Rabi'a as the model of a conscious, pious, and experienced woman because she was not known for »irresponsibility, thoughtlessness and exaggeration in asceticism«[92] although »asceticism in itself was a transgression of the familiar and a deviation from the well-known (*tajāwuz li-l-ma'lūf wa-shudhūdh 'an al-ma'hūd*), but what may come from the deviation of the reasonable people (*al-'uqalā'*) is most probably healthier for the social human life than the restraint of the crazy ones (*al-majānīn*)«[93].

Sakakini understands Rabi'a's retreat from worldly affairs for the sake of the worship of God's beauty as an admirable and distances her practice from exaggerated sacrifice. In another article, she concludes:

> Sufism, whatever its nature or school, is only an escape from life, when man was created to confront it face to face, with a strong consciousness and noble soul, with belief in God and in himself, with participation in the building of society according to his energy. We, the association of the Arabs, have come to a time that does not allow us to escape from the battle of life because the victory therein belongs to the eagerly stronger among men and women. It is incumbent on us that we take only the clarity of mind (*ṣafāʾ al-rūḥ*) from Sufism.[94]

Based on Rabi'a's case, I therefore deduce that the lines of escape that Sakakini draws for her female protagonists have to be understood not as escapism or religious immersion in a literal sense, as she deplores the fact that spirituality often seems to induce escapism. Instead, she pleads for a Sufi-like devotion and sacrifice such as in the case of the male protagonists in her short stories. However, misogynistic society and women's reduction to their bodies prevent women's devotion to something higher, spiritual or intellectual. From the curse of gender to the escape from society, the path leads upwards to the disclosure of women's intellectual and spiritual qualities. In the above-mentioned short-story *'Ayn al-shayṭān*, the plot leads Nahid away from her husband, but not only to the *ḥajj*, but also to the purification of her soul. In this sense, the protagonists' various—destructive, self-destructive, cunning, or uplifting—escape routes in Sakakini's short stories can be interpreted as variations of the same quest for fulfilment and salvation against the background of male domination. In an interview, Sakakini tried to explain the flight motif in the following way:

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91  Ibid., p. 45.

92  Ibid.

93  Ibid.

94  Eadem, al-Taṣawwuf tahajjud wa-ta'abbud wa-fanāʾ, in: al-'Arabī 4 (1959), p. 137. This is also quoted by AL-JUNDĪ, Widād Sakākīnī, p. 800.

My attempt to entrust women to the care of God, the Exalted, in face of the oppression (*ẓulm*), injustice (*'asf*) and tyranny (*jawr*) of society, to which they see themselves exposed, happens to save them from their own lapses and from the deeds, to which society drives them—and [in face of] the rule of habits and blind conventions, which prevent them from exercising even the slightest rights in many cases, exert pressure upon the spirit and the abilities of women and prevent them from displaying their hidden open-mindedness and consciousness of themselves. You certainly see that I guided them to the effective goal that revives them and covers their spirit with self-confidence, (God-inspired) peace of mind (*sakīna*) and calmness and cleanses them from faults, sins, and mistakes, if they exist in their lives. Of course, in this, I have not distanced myself from the spirit of the religious, Oriental upbringing of the women, which they receive in our countries and which you (also) see in the process of returning to God as a refuge, by means of which they fear being dishonored (*hatk al-sharaf*) and approach virtue and trust in God, especially when they are exposed to men's desire (*maṭmaʿ al-rijāl*) for them only for sex (*ka-jins faqaṭ*), without any thought for the fact that this woman carries within herself that which is lofty and sublime, her mind and her thoughts. [...]

Indeed, all the heroines of my stories showed this reaction in their orientation towards God, the Exalted, so that he sees that justice is done to them (*li-yunṣifahunna*) in the face of injustice. They never took revenge against men or society, which injured their shame and pride and plunged their souls into the perpetual curse of sex (*laʿnat al-jins al-mustamirra*), which haunts their lives. They are satisfied with their return to God's care. [...]

Maybe with the help of all of my publications, I can call for social justice and human dignity for men and women alike.[95]

Thus, women's return to God is an act of seeking help and compensation in the face of men's attacks on them. Implicitly, the return to God is a cipher for the impediments, delay, or unattainability of women's desires on male-dominated earth.

With these remarks, it is also possible to better interpret Sakakini's second, more complex novel *al-Ḥubb al-muḥḥarram* (*Forbidden Love*, 1953).

When Suhayl's mother learns of his son's love for Nadida (Nadīda, »Equal«), she reveals to him that she is his milk sister. They are therefore considered brother and sister, and a marriage between them is impossible. The motivation for this lie is that Suhayl's mother is jealous of the »educated« Nadida who wants to marry her son, a future doctor, while her two »uneducated« daughters are still waiting for a groom. The mother's revelation plunges the couple into serious conflicts of conscience and they don't know how to go on. Suhayl starts studying mental illness in Paris. There, he meets the nurse Josephine

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95  Mārdīnī, al-Adība.

(Jūzifīn) and falls in love with her. The relationship ends abruptly, when Suhayl has to work in another clinic. Due to the failure of his second love affair, Suhayl goes through a serious crisis. When he gets back home, he agrees to marry a pretty, but illiterate woman upon his parents' suggestion and opens a doctor's practice. However, since his wife has no understanding for his work, he soon divorces her and travels to Egypt to visit a colleague he met in Europe. He meets Josephine again, but discovers that she has become a nun. Meanwhile, Nadida has moved with her brother to Dayr al-Zor to work as a teacher there and be as far away as possible from her beloved, from whom she cannot get away otherwise. At the same time, Suhayl's dying mother confesses to her son that she made up the milk kinship in order to prevent his marriage because she thought that Nadida was not a good match. The mother's rapid death prevents Suhayl from speaking to Nadida. Thus, the last opportunity for the two to get together is wasted. Nadida makes the decision to marry a wealthy, middle-aged man and gives birth to a child from her new husband.

In this narrative, Suhayl's mother acts as the voice of »worn-out traditions«[96]. She fabricates a social convention that prevents the lovers from marrying. The convention is a variant of the incest taboo. In Freudian psychology, the incest taboo is considered the archetype of suppressed desire. Sakakini takes up this point because all of Suhayl's relationships only appear as displacements of his original, suppressed desire for Nadida. The same displacement happens with Nadida's choice of partner: after she cannot marry her alleged milk brother, she decides to marry an older man.

In contrast to *Arwā*, the structure of the novel is more complex because all the lines of flight—for Nadida as well as for Suhayl—turn out to be dead ends, whereas Arwa finally found her peace. Moreover, Sakakini does not merely focus on external social pressures, as she did in *Arwā*. Instead, she reflects on the embodied forms of social pressure. Thus, Nadida realizes that beauty is not the key to happiness and that the new woman has to strive for knowledge and education in order to attain fulfilment. Yet, her educational aspirations cannot substitute for her missing love relationship. The conflict in which the main character finds herself is that she is satisfied with neither the traditional nor the modern female role. Moreover, the suppression of her desire inscribes itself in her body, her body appears strange to herself, her smile disappears, her manner of speaking becomes stricter, her gait appears harder, and her lips look pressed together. She even finds it difficult to confess her »oppressed secret« and »hidden feeling«, which »is called love«, to herself: »It is not part of our habits to consider pronouncing this word legitimate because love is a shame (ʿayb) and offense (ḍanb) according to our habits and

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96 Ḥammūd, al-Khiṭāb al-qiṣaṣī, p. 17.

traditions. So, I write this expression down with my pen and do not move my mouth to form it.«[97]

Talking about love is thus presented as a general, social taboo, whereby the fabricated incest taboo only appears as a special case of a more extensive taboo. Sakakini's story also describes Suhayl's sufferings, but she makes clear that the socialization of women and thus the social and psychological pressures on women are far more serious. The literary critic Mājida Ḥammūd puts this vividly: »The man may not find the courage to declare his love for the woman, whereas the woman still does not have the courage to express her love for herself.«[98]

A crucial factor in the novel is the lovers' surrender to their fate. They neither rebel nor talk about their problems with each other. Instead, they hide their pain from each other. They do this to avoid hurting one another. Paradoxically, their speechlessness gives the invented taboo its normative—unquestioned and accepted—power. Through the lovers' silence, they reproduce the social taboos that prevents their love. Sakakini's novel grapples with this internalized taboo through the depiction of its main protagonist, who can only write, but not talk about her feelings. This point marks an essential difference, namely between abstraction and life, ultimately between breaking a taboo and mere criticism of a taboo. In the same way, Nadida refuses to respond to the various forms of injustice towards her with negative, »female« feelings, such as hatred and anger, because she believes that these cannot be reconciled with her femininity. Ḥammūd criticizes Sakakini's depiction of Nadida as unrealistic, a heavenly being, who even moves towards a kind of »spiritual nunhood (*ar-rahbāniyya ar-rūḥiyya*)«[99], when her love relation fails.

As Sakakini's novel is an attempt to describe unfulfilled desires and their renunciation from a woman's perspective and embed this understanding in a feminist narrative of an *ʿudhrī*-love, it should once again be clear that the plot does not simply aim at realism. Rather, the expansion and modification of the narrative grammar serves a double social criticism, the representation of external and internalized social coercion. In this sense, Ḥammūd gets it right when she states that love in female novels of the 1950s is rarely associated with joy, but usually appears as a synonym for »weariness, grief, and fear«[100], especially when a relationship is surrounded by social and religious taboos. Sakakini certainly belonged to those female writers who placed their female protagonists in relationships where there is often no hope for a happy life.

Finally, a comparison between Sakakini's two novels underlines how she used the productive *ʿudhrī*-narrative in very different ways:

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97 SAKĀKĪNĪ, al-Ḥubb al-muḥarram, p. 58.

98 ḤAMMŪD, al-Khiṭāb al-qiṣaṣī, p. 20.

99 Ibid., p. 22.

100 Ibid., p. 150.

(1) In *al-Ḥubb al-muḥarram*, the female protagonist does not flee from male harassment, but from her own feelings and the beloved man, whom she cannot marry.

(2) Whereas the *Arwā* plot ends with the peaceful death of the female *ʿudhrī*-lover, Nadida cannot find a way to transcend her situation. Yet, Nadida creates new life at the end of the novel. The child as a new object of love represents the last link in the chain of displacements for the original love. Moreover, birth accentuates another meaning of Nadida's female body in contrast to Arwa's, who is permanently assaulted by men and merely heals ill male bodies in the end; Nadida's female body also contrasts with male *ʿudhrī*-lovers, who are limited to taking their own lives.

(3) Whereas Sakakini's *Arwā* plot revolts against the social, male-dominated order that gives men the permanent possibility of violating women's bodies, *al-Ḥubb al-muḥarram* focusses on the fabrication of a social taboo and the inner, psychological struggles in the female protagonist's mind. Whereas Arwa is deprived of the possibility of leading a fulfilled life, Nadida—comparing herself to her peers or older generations—is unable to figure out which expectations she should fulfil. The choice is difficult for her, not only because fabricated traditions block her way, but also because she has internalized conflicting role models and expectations.

## 4. Summary: Man-Hating, Illogical, Ambivalent, Misogynist, or Feminist Plots?

The literary critique has discussed Sakakini's narrative work with some reservations in spite of her generally accepted pioneering role. The main points of criticism are that her plots reveal man-hatred, are fabricated in an illogical way, and have ambivalent effects in relation to women's liberation[101]. I discuss these points by summing up the representative critiques of Ḥusām al-Khaṭīb, Yumna al-ʿId, Subhi Hadidi, Īmān al-Qāḍī, and Astrid Ottosson Bitar.

In 1975, al-Khaṭīb criticized the novel *Arwā bint al-khuṭūb* »in very harsh words, saying that Widād Sakākīnī has completely failed to convince the reader of the events and characters«[102] in the Syrian cultural journal *al-Maʿrifa*. He suggested that she merely treated her own bad experiences with men and concluded that the novel »offers us a valuable case-study of the mentality represented by the term

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101 Only Bouthayna Shaaban stands out with her—certainly overblown—judgement that Sakakini was the first Arab women to discuss the notions of women's literature and feminist criticism in seriousness and objectivity, see Sʜᴀʿʙᴀ̄ɴ, Muqaddima, pp. 16f.

102 Thus the summary in Oᴛᴛᴏssᴏɴ Bɪᴛᴀʀ, I Can Do Nothing, p. 70.

women's literature«[103]. Sakakini re-printed parts of this critique in her collections of essays *Shawk fī l-ḥaṣīd* (1981) and replied to it, as quoted above. She pointed at the context of the 1940s and various misogynistic statements by Arab writers and explained that she wanted to oppose to these statements by erecting a lasting literary monument to the vilified woman.

In the »critical reference guide« *Arab Women Writers*, edited by Radwa Ashour et al., Sakakini's novels are criticized three times in the chapters on Lebanon and Syria. The leftist critic Yumna ʿId writes about Arwa's becoming a saint and giving blessings even to those who have wronged her: »The novel stands in stark contrast to women's struggle in Lebanon to change the predominantly masculine collective consciousness«[104]. Subhi Hadidi characterizes Arwa as »virtuous, submissive married woman satisfied with her life«[105] and the pivotal point of the novel as »the social injustice experienced by a virtuous woman«[106]. He thinks that the novel »progresses according to a traditional, set plot, which in scene after scene relates the persecution of Arwa until she obtains her final vengeance on this type of man, or perhaps all men«[107] and he wonders that »Sakakini did not flinch from her stance and even unapologetically justified it«[108]. Finally, Iman al-Qadi opines that Sakakini's novel »embodies a problematic stance of men«[109] and judges: »The plot of the novel—which is melodramatic, contrived, and filled with fantastic coincidences—is constructed solely to condemn men and illustrate their cunning and treachery. The novel denies men the simplest virtues of religion and probity«[110].

She already had discussed both of Sakakini's novels in her Arabic study on women's novels in Syria in 1992[111]. With regard to *Arwā*, she also stated here that Sakakini is unsuccessful in convincing her readers of the chains of events that are far from every logic[112]. The linkage of coincidences had not the slightest level of credibility and was far from reality[113]. Coincidence was thus the major factor in this novel, which was far from being a literary achievement in a technical sense[114]. The whole story was merely fabricated to indict men for their vices and present women

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103 Ibid. with slightly revised translation.
104 AL-ʿID, Lebanon, p. 22.
105 HADIDI/AL-QADI, Syria, p. 61.
106 Ibid.
107 Ibid.
108 Ibid. He quotes Sakakini's statement about male authors' misogynistic remarks in the 1940s.
109 Ibid., p. 78.
110 Ibid., p. 77.
111 AL-QĀḌĪ, al-Riwāya al-nisawiyya, pp. 74–80 and 256–261.
112 Ibid., p. 79.
113 Ibid., p. 357.
114 Ibid.

as their victims in an exaggerated way[115]. In *al-Ḥubb al-muḥarram*, al-Qāḍī sees the main contradiction in the fact that the originally well-educated protagonist loses her mental balance and clarity due to the prevention of her marriage to Suhayl[116]. She turns into an ignorant, superficial girl, visits fortune tellers, and behaves like a »doll«[117]. Al-Qāḍī also criticizes that Sakakini puts unadequate words in Nadida's mouth. Thus, Nadida thinks that knowledge has corrupted her nature and taken her off the path of other girls. Nadida even starts to hate books, as if they had taken Suhayl away from her. She thinks of marriage as a way to avoid having to go to work. She believes that she would have won a victory if other women considered her more beautiful than the bride when sitting next to the bride at a wedding. Therefore, al-Qāḍī asks whether Sakakini's really describes a transformation of Nadida's personality or whether the mask of Nadida's cultural education simply falls off in the course of events. The critic argues that the fundamental contradiction in the novel

> shows that a new view of women has not yet taken roots in the depths of the writer's [i.e. Sakakini's] consciousness. She sometimes talks with the tongue of her heroine, although she raised her voice to defend women in the 1950s and hurried to refute wrong statements about them, (but) she now unintentionally emphasizes them in her novel[118].

Astrid Ottosson Bitar picks up this line of criticism. Although she does not discuss *al-Ḥubb al-muḥarram*, she calls the plot of *Arwā* »completely fabulous with no connection to real human life«[119]. Moreover, as she focusses in her study on 17 short stories written by Sakakini, she identifies a fundamental contradiction in Sakakini's work: »My point of departure is the ambivalence that can be found in much of her written work.«[120] Accordingly, this ambivalence has two levels. On the first level, Sakakini »argues against rumours and anecdotes that defame women« in her essays; »these same anecdotes and misogynic themes are, however, also used by the writer herself as a basis for several of her fictional text«[121]. On the second level, Ottosson Bitar finds the ambivalence »within the limits of one text«, where »the conservative narrating voice seems to contradict the plot in the story«[122]. Although the literary critic acknowledges that Sakakini understands her texts as

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115  Ibid., p. 80.
116  Ibid., pp. 74–76.
117  Ibid., p. 76.
118  Ibid.
119  Ibid., p. 70.
120  Ottosson Bitar, I Can Do Nothing, p. 20.
121  Ibid.
122  Ibid.

»arguments against men«[123], she finds several clues for »feminist misogyny«[124]. She explains this by the fact that Sakakini and other women of her generation »had to conform to the male-dominated literary tradition, with all its misogynic elements, at the same time as they tried to preserve their own identity as creative women writers.«[125] Ottosson Bitar identifies, for example, the trope of the »unfaithful wife« or the »jealous woman« who destroys the man's objects of interest. Another point of criticism is that Sakakini often used a male narrative voice in her short stories. In cases when she used a female narrative voice, on the other hand, this created problems in the text and necessitated the author to discuss the reasons for telling a story or even to apologize for relating the story at all (because of its female perspective)[126]. Furthermore, Sakakini liked to record popular Arab customs and traditions, yet »was very critical of bad, man-made traditions that presented a distorted interpretation of religion and morality«[127]. Like other women writers who were »torn between the conventions of society and the demands of their creativity«[128], Sakakini managed to be »conventional at the same time as she was subversive«[129].

To my mind, these points of criticism largely miss the essence of the matter. Literary plots can be illogically constructed, bear different layers of meaning, and convey contradictory ideas, but still, they can grapple with—no less ambiguous—social realities and transport a critical message. Even imperfect texts can serve as a probe to understand the social problems the author addresses and processes in literature. Moreover, the accusation that the author falls behind her feminist insights in parts of her literary work equates the author, her social criticism, and her narrative strategies too easily. It overlooks that the author has to find solutions for the structures and constraints of storytelling, especially if she wants to deal with complicated realities and intertextual references and turn existing prejudices against women on their head. In one instance, Ottosson Bitar clearly works this point out[130], whereas in other instances she fails to do so.

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123  Ibid., pp. 22, 62, and 72.
124  Ibid., p. 55.
125  Ibid., p. 192.
126  Ibid., pp. 193f.
127  Ibid., pp. 196f.
128  Ibid., p. 197.
129  Ibid., p. 198.
130  Ibid., pp. 103f. In *Hal al-mar'a wafiyya?* (*Are Women Faithful?*, 1950), Sakakini deals with husbands on their deathbed, who demand of their wives to remain »faithful« and not remarry after their deaths. She compares such stories, provided by Chiang Kai-shek and Voltaire, to snakes and their deadly poison, see Sakākīnī, Hal al-mar'a wafiyya?, p. 65. Ottosson Bitar shows that the plot of Sakakini's short-story *Dhat al-wishāḥayn* (*The Woman with Two Scarves*, 1955) superficially resembles such stories, but differs in the narrator's compassion with the wife.

As to the novels, I already mentioned above that the composition of incredible accidents (as in *Arwā*) is not without literary precedent; rather, it has a long tradition and serves a certain didactic aim, combined with subversive irony—in this case the feminist reformulation of the *ʿudhrī*-narrative. The accusation that Sakakini's plot seems totally unrealistic depends on the measure for realism; male *ʿudhrī*-stories are certainly no less unrealistic and they fill many bookshelves of classical and modern Arabic literature. The »reality« that Sakakini creates here for her readers is certainly different from her depictions of life in Cairo or a neighbourhood in Damascus, yet it is not illegitimate. Moreover, the novel is not a means to condemn men, but to the contrary, it shows that Arwa seeks redemption for herself as well as for the men who chased her, a spiritual and feminist challenge. Therefore, the novel tries to show the transformative impact of the love in God and thus perfectly reflects Susan Frank Parsons' comment on the fourteenth-century Christian mystic, Catherine of Siena: »For how could she know the goodness of God to her own life unless she was also claiming this for others. […] What she learns is that she, too, is to become a redeeming one, in whom redemption is to be performed.«[131]

Blaming the author for the contradictory picture of the main female character in *al-Ḥubb al-muḥarram* means, firstly, denying her the right to create such a personality. Secondly, I think that al-Qāḍī falls into a trap herself when she argues that Nadida must either be a well-educated girl thirsting for knowledge and emancipation or a superficial doll longing for marriage, beauty, and fortune without work. Emancipation is not achieved through an act of consciousness alone, it is hampered by the structural conditions that affect women regardless of whether they are aware of their structural disadvantages or not. Due to the symbolic power of male domination, these gender asymmetries are also internalized by women, which is visible, for example, in their choices of professions and partners, but also in the conflicting expectations placed on them. In my reading, what Sakakini does in her novel, in a conscious or subconscious way, is that she shows women's contribution to the preservation of the gender hierarchy. Firstly, Suhayl's mother is depicted as the responsible person, who ensures the preservation of a fabricated convention. Secondly, Nadida is put in between her respect for the tradition and both her desire for Suhayl and a liberated life, both of which are prevented by the tradition.

In Sakakini's view, the preservation of the patriarchal order is not only linked to the older generations. In her short story *Shudhūdh* (*Perversion*), published for the first time by Ottosson Bitar[132], a daughter—once again called Nadida—discovers her mother's lesbian relationship with a neighbour, cannot bear this secret, and commits suicide. The over-arching theme of this story is that the father's pious and

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131  Parsons, Redeming Ethics, p. 207.

132  See Ottosson Bitar, I Can Do Nothing, pp. 224–230; for her interpretation, see ibid., pp. 126–132.

conservative lifestyle, combined with his loveless, harsh control over »his« women, is the true perversion. The mother is rarely allowed to leave the house, and the daughter is taken from school in spite of her talents. Thus, the father's regime is depicted as the main reason behind his wife's behavior and her daughter's reaction. »The daughter fell victim to harsh traditions, ugly chauvinism, and concealed perverse indecency, yet her death remained a secret among the buried secrets«[133], Sakakini's story concludes. Suspecting that the reason for his daughter's suicide was a love affair, her father praises God for her death, which saved him from dishonour: »May God curse the girls! If she was in love, I praise God, who hastened her end and protected me for the rest of my life!«[134] Although the daughter's suicide bears the potential of being a disruptive event, her father and mother continue their lives, as if nothing had happened. Thus, paradoxically, the daughter's suicide stabilizes the existing order.

As for Sakakini's short stories in general, I have doubts that »ambivalence« is a good starting-point to capture the meaning of Sakakini's work because ambivalence is everywhere and even Ottosson Bitar's final judgement about Sakakini's work (»conventional/subversive«) is nothing other than ambivalent. What is that supposed to tell us? I concur with the idea that women's writing takes place »within a dominant male discourse, through acts of revision, appropriation and subversion«[135]. Yet, this is neither particular to Sakakini's oeuvre nor is it a clue for ambivalence. Trying to rewrite a misogynistic trope is not in itself a misogynistic act, especially not when the women protagonists have agency, for better or for worse—although the motif in itself retains misogynistic layers of meaning. In so far as Sakakini tries to reformulate social and textual conventions, she cannot avoid reproducing negative layers of meaning at least partially. It is the readers' and the critics' responsibility to capture the various layers of a literary palimpsest. By identifying various female lines of flight, I have tried to explain Sakakini's protagonists' behavior as divergent types of reaction to unfavorable social conditions.

Ottosson Bitar does roughly the same thing, when she divides the short stories thematically into stories about »women with unfulfilled lives« and stories about »women with fulfilled lives«[136] and then further subdivides these categories into yet another set of different female types. The first category describes, in her words, women with a feeling of dissatisfaction to whom no solution is given; the stories

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133 Ibid., p. 230.
134 Ibid.
135 Ibid., p. 193. The quote is taken from Elaine SHOWALTER, Introduction. The Rise of Gender, in: Eadem (ed.), Speaking of Gender, New York/London 1989, pp. 4f.
136 See OTTOSSON BITAR, I Can Do Nothing, pp. 77–142 (chapter 4: Women with Unfulfilled Lives) and 143–176 (chapter 5: Women with Fulfilled Lives).

have »no happy ending«[137]. The fulfilment that Sakakini offers for the women of the second category are motherhood, art, and religiosity, as Ottosson Bitar succinctly puts it:

> Motherhood is the primary and over-all ruling vocation for women. For some women endowed with special talents, religion and art can serve as alternative ways for a fulfilment of their lives. These three ways for the fulfilment of a woman's life exclude each other. In the fiction of Widād Sakākīnī a woman with a child does not devote herself to art or religion.[138]

In this ranking, marriage is of secondary importance; its main function for the woman is to become a mother, but marriage does not lead to fulfilment in itself, according to Ottosson Bitar[139]. Although motherhood certainly is an important point in many plots, I again doubt the over-all picture. The relationships between children and parents are often depicted as strained and burdened with sorrow or unspoken expectations. The plot of *al-Ḥubb al-muḥarram* begins with the lie of Suhayl's mother, whose affection for him is described as unnaturally strong, which is why she does not want to let him go. Moreover, it is the prevented marriage that sets the whole story in motion and is the driving force behind it.

It is therefore no arbitrary decision that I contextualized my analysis of Sakakini's narrative work through the transformation of the Arab marriage market. This is because I see the treatment of gender relations as the main subject of her work. My contextualization is based on the consideration that the shifts in the marriage market affected the lives and choices of most women, while women's choices in turn affected their marriage prospects. With increasing educational opportunities and cultural capital for women, the gender hierarchy was increasingly put into question, yet also defended by both men and women. The gender hierarchy most obviously appears on the marriage market (as evidenced by the unequal opportunities for women and their reduction to objects) and in the family (as a routinely »natural« division of work on a daily basis). Finding an adequate partner constituted a major problem for Arab women in the first half of the twentieth century and determined whether they could pursue other kinds of »fulfilment« as well—a theme that is reflected in many of Sakakini's plots.

Therefore, I rather tend to see the women's devotion to family, art, and spirituality as different forms of devotion that do not go together well because they are linked with conflicting expectations directed at women. Bringing these different

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137 Ibid., p. 77.
138 Ibid., p. 143.
139 Ibid.

expectations together is trying to square the circle. In this sense, Sakakini—herself a writer and mother of three—held a rather realistic position, true to life. The blame that Sakakini's literary mothers do not excel in art and religion amounts to accusing her of not having created idealized images of mothers, when at the same time she is blamed for writing plots that are not realistically enough.
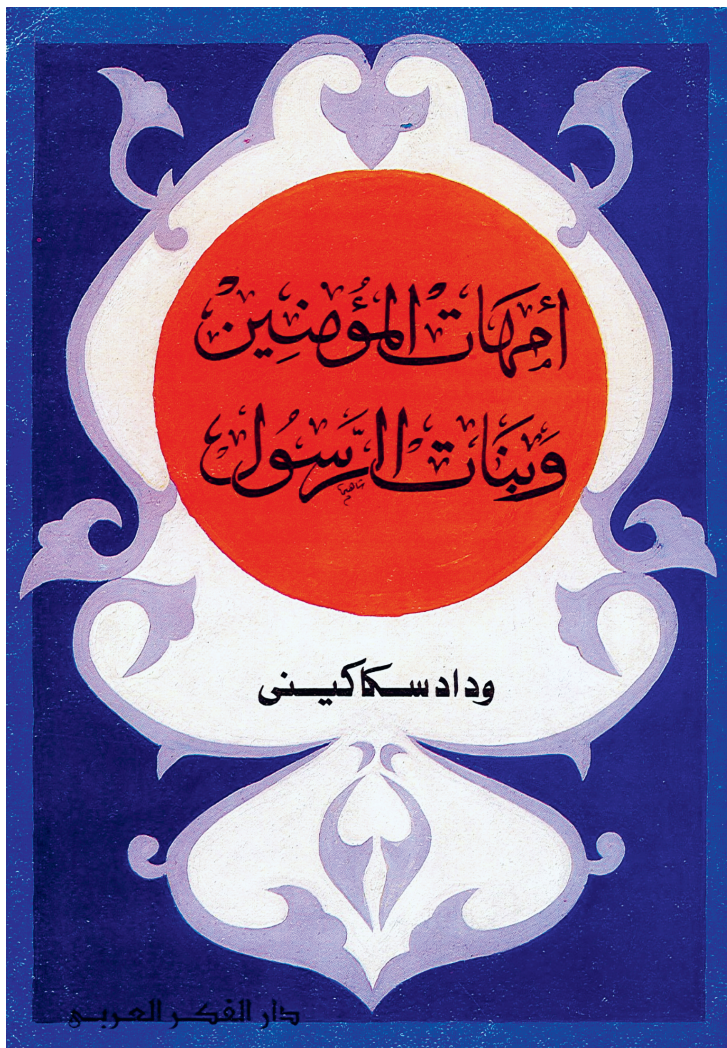
# IV. The Debate about the Prophet's Wives



Fig. 8  Book cover: With her book *Ummahāt al-muʾminīn wa-banāt al-rasūl* (*The Mothers of the Believers and the Daughters of the Messenger*, 1962), published by Dār al-Fikr al-ʿArabī in Cairo, Widad Sakakini rooted current demands for women's emancipation in early Islam.
Source: Printing permission by @Dar al-Fikr al-ʿArabi in Cairo.

Sakakini's writings on early Muslim women form an important point in her line of argumentation that women lived a liberated life in early Islam, became prisoners of their homes in later centuries and are now regaining the rights that have already been granted to them. The figures of the Prophet's wives served two purposes: they exemplified an idealized past that was different from the traditional picture and they showed that current demands for women's emancipation were rooted in early Islam. ʿAʾisha ʿAbd al-Rahman's objection to Sakakini's book is therefore not only an attack on the way in which Sakakini portrays early Muslim women. It is an attack on her emancipatory programme as a whole as it rests on an Islamic authentication. This is the reason why the controversy between the two authors became so bitter and why Sakakini could not refrain from criticizing Bint al-Shatiʾ until her final days. In this chapter, I first of all explain the context of the controversy and give an overview of ʿAʾisha ʿAbd al-Rahman's (Bint al-Shatiʾs) biography and women's role in the Qurʾan and the tradition (IV.1). Then I describe the arguments and the different stages of the controversy between the two authors (IV.2). After that, I turn to the question of how both of them explained Muhammad's polygyny and how they draw on other modern Arabic biographies of Muhammad (IV.3). Finally, I compare their treatments of ʿAʾisha (ʿĀʾisha bint Abī Bakr) and Fatima (Fāṭima bint Muḥammad), who form, as favorite wife and favorite daughter, the center of Muhammad's house and whose actions are traditionally closely connected to the conflict between Sunna and Shiʿa (IV.4). I take a comprehensive look at the other female figures in Sakakini's work, who were not directly the subject of the controversy, in chapter V.

## 1. The Contexts: The Uses of Early Muslim Women—Bint al-Shatiʾs Social Position

The depiction of famous female characters in history had been an established practice in the Arab women's press since the end of the nineteenth century. The function of such portraits was, on the one hand to emphasize the high position of selected (Arab) women in principle, and on the other hand to criticize all kinds of actual discrimination. Usually, portraits of Muslim women were supplemented by female role models from other cultures, especially from the West[1]. Columns about famous pre-Islamic, Islamic, Western, and Oriental women figures also appeared regularly in the increasing number of women's and general interest magazines in the first half of the twentieth century. Widad Sakakini's depiction of the diversity of

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1 In this way, Maryam al-Nahhas (Maryam al-Naḥḥās, d. 1888) and Zaynab Fawwaz (d. 1914) already composed biographical encyclopedias of women, see ZAYDĀN, Maṣādir al-adab al-nisāʾī, pp. 571 and 687; on Fawwaz, see BRÄCKELMANN, Zaynab Fawwāz, pp. 153f. Also compare, BOOTH, The Egyptian Lives of Jeanne d'Arc, pp. 171–211.

women's lives using the example of early Muslim women was based on an already established practice. As Marilyn Booth has argued, the motif of famous women in literature has been decreasing since the 1950s and changed significantly at the end of 1970s[2]. Islamic female voices only allowed Muslim women to be role models and portrayed them in a stereotypical way, Booth speaks of the image of »famous wombs«[3]. A series of articles on early Muslim women (1979–1981), written by the Egyptian Zaynab al-Ghazali and published in the Muslim-Brotherhood-associated periodical *al-Da'wa* (*The Call*)[4], can be seen as the beginning of this Islamist turn, in which only the Prophet's wives could be famous women, Western women no longer qualified because they were considered sexually exploited. Booth points out that this narrowing of the motif already began in the 1950s with populist male and female writers such as Anwar al-Jundi and 'A'isha 'Abd al-Rahman[5], among others. She describes the difference as follows: »Once woman was the metaphor for nation-building; now she is the metaphor for a family-centered and Islamically defined social cohesion«[6].

Against this background, the controversy between Widad Sakakini and 'A'isha 'Abd al-Rahman is a crystallization point of the changing image of famous women. The controversy thus reflects changing gender relations and the corresponding search for orientation.

'A'isha 'Abd al-Rahman was among the first women to earn a doctorate in Arabic literature at the University Cairo, earning her degree in 1950. At the beginning of the controversy, she was still a PhD candidate, having achieved her licence in 1939 and her master's in 1941. In spite of her doctorate, it must have been difficult for her to find recognition in the academic world. Probably for this reason, too, she agreed to marry—after an affair lasting several years—her supervisor, the Professor of Arabic literature Amin al-Khuli (Amīn al-Khūlī, 1890–1966), as a co-wife; she probably saw this marriage as a step towards securing her social position. The wedding coincides with the period of the polemics against Sakakini. There are indications that the marriage was not particularly happy, but in her later autobiography, 'A'isha 'Abd al-Rahman describes it as the God-given goal of her life[7]. In the years that followed,

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2 Booth, May Her Likes Be Multiplied, pp. 281–310 (chapter 8: Famous Wombs and Women's Memories).

3 Ibid., p. 281.

4 Ibid., p. 289.

5 Ibid., p. 283.

6 Ibid., p. 307.

7 Tez Rooke, In My Childhood'. A Study of Arabic Autobiography, Stockholm 1997, p. 266.

she published copious articles[8] as well as numerous books and finally became Professor for Arabic Literature at the University College for Women in 1962[9]. She also taught at the University in Fez (Marocco) and was invited to numerous international conferences[10].

Her growing prestige throughout the Arab and Islamic world was based on her scholarship on the Qurʾan. In her Qurʾanic commentaries, she used the literary method developed by Amin al-Khuli to interpret the Qurʾanic verses by themselves[11]. While the Qurʾanic interpretation of Muhammad Ahmad Khallafallah (Muḥammad Aḥmad Khallafallāh, 1916–1991)[12], another student of Amin al-Khuliʾs using the same method, triggered a storm of indignation among religious scholars, ʿAʾisha ʿAbd al-Rahmanʾs conservative interpretation was completely acceptable to the religious establishment. In her exegesis of the Qurʾan, she applied great care to an analysis of stylistic peculiarities, while the results of her analyses more or less confirmed traditional views. In the 1960s, she was the only woman appointed to the Egyptian Civil Rights Review Committee, probably because she was known for her conservative stance and defense of polygyny[13]. Her work on »the Islamic personality« (*al-Shakhṣiyya al-islāmiyya*), written at the end of the 1960s, is considered an open expression of anti-Semitism due to its demarcation from everything Jewish[14].

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8  She regularlay wrote articles for the Egyptian daily *al-Ahrām*, in which she had also published her first article in 1926, see Widād Sakākīnī, al-Duktūra ʿĀʾisha ʿAbd al-Raḥmān. Rāʾida shadīda, in: Eadem, Sābiqāt al-ʿaṣr, p. 114.

9  William M. Brinner, An Egyptian Anti-Orientalist, in: Gabriel Warburg/Uri Kupferschmidt (eds.), Islam, Nationalism and Radicalism in Egypt and the Sudan, New York 1983, p. 231.

10  C. Kooij, Bint Al-Shāṭiʾ. A Suitable Case for Biography?, in: Ibrahim A. El-Sheikh et al. (eds.), The Challenge of the Middle East. Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam 1982, p. 67; Sakākīnī, al-Duktūra ʿĀʾisha ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, p. 116.

11  Johannes J.G. Jansen, The Interpretation of the Koran in Modern Egypt, Leiden 1974, pp. 68–76; Issa J. Boullata, Modern Qurʾan Exegesis. A Study of Bint al-Shatiʾs Method, in: The Muslim World 64 (1974), pp. 103–113; Rotraud Wielandt, Wurzeln der Schwierigkeit des innerislamischen Gesprächs über neue hermeneutische Zugänge zum Korantext, in: Stefan Wild (ed.), The Qurʾan as Text, Leiden 1996, p. 258.

12  His doctoral dissertation, in which he suggested that the Qurʾanic text should be understood allegorically, was not accepted. The work was published under the title *al-Fann al-qiṣaṣī fī l-Qurʾān* (*The Art of Storytelling in the Qurʾan*) after »some revision« in 1951 and he earned his doctorate with a dissertation on a literary subject, see William Shepard, Khalafallāh, Muḥammad Aḥmad, in: Fleet et al. (eds.), Encyclopaedia of Islam Three.

13  Roded, Bint al-Shatiʾs Wives, p. 57; see also Muḥammad al-Nuwayhī, Naḥwa thawra fī l-fikr al-dīnī, in: al-Ādāb 5 (May 1970), p. 106, who complains that the Nasserist system was unable to fundamentally change the personal status laws.

14  Even in Egypt, she was accused of not distinguishing between Zionism and Judaism, see Kooij, Bint Al-Shāṭiʾ, p. 71; Roded, Bint al-Shatiʾs Wives, p. 61; Brinner, An Egyptian Anti-Orientalist, pp. 233–244 passim.

She kept her distance from the secular and nationalist groups of the Egyptian women's movement. Since 1929, she had been writing for the conservative Islamic magazine *al-Nahḍa al-Nisā'iyya*, which was founded by Labiba Ahmad. She later went on to become the editor-in-chief there[15]. As an author, she adopted the art name Bint al-Shāṭi', »Daughter of the river bank«, »for fear that her father might see her articles and forbid her to engage in this type of activity;«[16] her pen name also expressed her attachment to the traditional and religious milieu of her home village Damiette, which is situated on the banks of the river Nile.

An important factor in her rise was the conservative and anti-left-wing habitus[17], which, however, cannot be reduced to proximity to the ruling political elite, as some critics have done[18]. The fact that she was honored by the Presidents 'Abd al-Naser, Sadat, and Mubarak not only means, that she sided with the authorities, but also that the rulers were trying to use her for their own needs. Her handling of authority is evident in her second autobiography from 1967, where she explains how she dealt with her father's accusations that school and university were »devilish«, by justifying her studies as part of a divine mandate[19]: »In the end, the girl 'Ā'isha manages to be both a dutiful and a rebellious daughter. She disobeys her father and challenges his authority, but she also fulfils his vow to God to make of her a religious scholar.«[20]

When she sided with the government in the reform of Egypt's most important religious institution, al-Azhar, in 1959, she became the first woman to speak there before a crowd of 6,000 people[21]. Before she took the podium, two sheikhs approached her, the one requesting that she withdraw »so as not to set a *bid'a* (religious innovation)«[22], the second covering her head with his shawl, suggesting that she was not adhering to the proper Islamic dress. She sat aside the shawl and delivered

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15 Sakākīnī, al-Duktūra 'Ā'isha 'Abd al-Raḥmān, p. 114.

16 Mervat F. Hatem, 'A'isha Abdel Rahman. An Unlikely Heroine. A Post-Colonial Reading of Her Life and Some of Her Biographies of Women in the Prophetic Household, in: Journal of Middle East Women's Studies 7, 2 (2011), p. 6.

17 This is a consensus among people studying her biography, see Kooij, Bint Al-Shāṭi'; Rooke, In My Childhood; Elsadda, Discourses. In a 1977 article in *al-Ahrām*, she denied the right to free speech for the political left, see Kooij, Bint Al-Shāṭi', p. 70.

18 The »leftist Islamist« Hasan Hanafi (Ḥasan Ḥanafī) counted her among the *fuqahā' al-ṣulṭān* (»the sultan's jurists«) and accused her of legitimizing Sadat's policies—even though she had criticized him—because she represented a conservative version of Islam, just like the government. On this see, Kooij, Bint Al-Shāṭi', p. 70.

19 See ibid., pp. 68f.; Rooke, In My Childhood, p. 265.

20 Rooke, In My Childhood, pp. 262f.

21 Hatem, 'A'isha Abdel Rahman, p. 11.

22 Ibid.

an impassioned speech, »arguing that even though her head was uncovered, she was indeed modestly dressed and so could address her mixed audience«[23].

'A'isha 'Abd al-Rahman shares with Sakakini a relatively high cultural capital as well as a socially exposed position. In their respective fields of expertise, both women were dependent on the ambivalent consecration by men. The controversy about the Prophet's wives provided both opponents with an opportunity to formulate justifications for their own place in the social order. The conflict reflects the different paths of life and worldviews of the two authors, one of whom saw herself as a writer, while the other presented her career in the religious world as an expression of divine predestination. Sakakini saw the Prophet's wives as relatively autonomous players, whereas 'A'isha 'Abd al-Rahman, herself married as a co-wife, put the focus of her consideration on the subaltern position of women in the Prophet's harem and the social order itself, thereby legitimizing polygyny. Moreover, the logics of the literary and religious—the differing rules of the game, dispositions, argumentations, and intentions—were brought into conflict during the controversy. As a writer, Sakakini had to grapple with tradition and social constraints in terms of form and content in order to be considered a creative and modern author. As a literary and Qur'anic scholar, 'A'isha 'Abd al-Rahman was committed to conservative positions in order to be able to advance as a woman in the academic and religious field. Following the logic of each field, Sakakini reinterpreted religious women in an innovative and emancipatory way, while her conservative opponent was satisfied with the indication that women found their true purpose and real freedom in their traditional and religiously based role.

The material on which both Sakakini and 'A'isha 'Abd al-Rahman relied when rewriting early Muslim women's biographies came primarily from the biography of the Prophet, the Sunna, and historiographical texts. Without bothering to making concrete reference to their sources[24], they combined the available historiographical material to write more or less consistent life stories. The fact that both authors proceeded in a similar way is partly due to the fact that only a few women are mentioned directly in the Qu'ran. Based on the literature on the occasions for revelations, only a few verses can be associated with certain women and events[25].

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23 Ibid.

24 SAKĀKĪNĪ, Ummahāt (1947), p. 173, merely lists ten sources in the appendix, all of which one would expect to find because they belong to the most important reference works for early Islam. Apart from the *Sīra* by Ibn Hishām and *Balāghāt al-nisāʾ* by Aḥmad b. Abī Ṭāhir, these are: *Kitāb al-aghānī* by Abū l-Faraj al-Isbahānī, *Kitāb al-bayān wa-l-tabyīn* by al-Jāḥiẓ, *al-Ṭabāqāt al-kubrā* by Ibn Saʿd, *Tārīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk* by al-Ṭabarī, *Futūḥ al-Shām* by al-Wāqidī, *al-ʿIqd al-farīd* by Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih, and *al-Kitāb al-kāmil* by Muḥammad Ibn Yāzīd al-Mubarrad. As she further mentions having used *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, I primarily trace quotations or paraphrases to the Ḥadīth there.

25 See RODED, Women in Islamic Biographical Collections, pp. 25–27.

Muhammad's marriage to his adoptive son's former wife, Zaynab bint Jahsh (Zaynab bint Jaḥsh), was approved by the revelation (Qur'an 33:4 and 33:37). The story connected with these verses plays an outstanding role in the assessment of the married life of the Prophet—especially in the controversy between Sakakini and 'A'isha 'Abd al-Rahman (see below). In another well-known passage from the Qur'an, 'A'isha, who is not mentioned by name, is indirectly acquitted of the defamation of having committed adultery; at the same time, severe punishments for adultery and for the incorrect accusation for adultery are announced (Qur'an 24:2–20).

An important source for both authors were biographical collections, which had been a classic genre of Islamic scholarship since the ninth century CE[26]. The proportion of women in these collections varies between less than one and 23 percent; in biographies that originated after the tenth century, the proportion of women drops drastically[27]. The texts on the 1,200 women who are said to have lived around the Prophet and for whom there are entries in the biographical collections make up about ten to 15 percent of all entries about the Prophet's companions (the percentage of women in the remaining biographies is four percent)[28]. When Muslim women began to write women's biographies from the nineteenth century onwards, the focus was primarily on these early Muslim female figures. Women such as 'A'isha generally play an important religious role as transmitters of prophetic sayings and deeds[29]—however, as in other cases, women often only act as transmitters of a famous man's act—be it the Prophet, a scholar, a Sufi master, a ruler, or a poet.

It is of decisive importance for the depiction of the Prophet's wives in modern Islamic narratives that, according to tradition, the cohabitation of the wives was anything but harmonious. Jealousy, intrigues, rank fights, envy, and resentment among women are said to have been the order of the day. According to the tradition, the Prophet tried to reduce these tensions by making arrangements and regular visits. This constellation, in which the wives were obviously dependent on the Prophet and sometimes quarrelled with each other, is a great challenge for an emancipatory interpretation. The verses in the Sura *al-Taḥrīm* (*The Prohibition*) refer to the Prophet's threat to withdraw from his wives and divorce them (Qur'an 66:1–4)[30].

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26  Sakakini, for example, refers to Ibn Sa'd's (d. 845) *Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*.

27  Roded, Women in Islamic Biographical Collections, p. 11.

28  For the problem of a quantativeanalysis of the biographies, see ibid., p. 19.

29  Ibid., p. 28. Compare also Geissinger, who shows that Bukhārī treats 'A'isha as an exegetical authority and »medieval Sunni Qur'an-interpreters generally recognise traditions credited to her as authoritative, although the degree to which they do so varies for a number of reasons«, see Aisha Geissinger, The Exegetical Traditions of 'Ā'isha. Notes on Their Impact and Significance, in: Journal of Qur'anic Studies 6, 1 (2004), p. 1.

30  The Qur'an admonishes the Prophet not to impose a prohibition on himself for something that was permitted to him by God: »O Prophet! Why do *you* prohibit [yourself] what Allah has made lawful for *you*, seeking to please *your* wives?« (Qur'an 66:1).

These verses and related narratives accuse the women of being jealous, scheming, and gabby. Yet, the tradition also conveys images of the Prophet's wives as models of compassion, faith, and charity to be followed, especially when it comes to modesty, veiling, seclusion, and asceticihm[31].

## 2. The Controversy between Sakakini and Bint al-Shatı̌

The controversy took off with three texts by ʿAʾisha ʿAbd al-Rahman on Sakakini's *Ummahāt al-muʾminīn wa-akhawāt al-shuhadāʾ* (*The Mothers of the Faithful and Daughters of the Martyrs*, 1947) within one month, as Sakakini later claimed[32]. According to Sakakini, the first critique in the journal *al-Ahrām* was positive[33], in contrast to the two further texts which were published in April 1947, the second in the Egyptian literary journal *al-Hilāl* under the title *Sitt al-bayt* (*The Housewife*)[34], and the third, a review article, in the Egyptian journal *al-Kitāb*[35].

In the *Hilāl* text, ʿAʾisha ʿAbd al-Rahman recounts that a woman, whose work she admired, visited her and started singing the praises of the Arab heroines of the past, presenting them as role models of dignity to today's girls. ʿAbd al-Rahman instead praised the ordinary life of a housewife—her mother may have served as an example—and recommended her as a more appropriate model. She did not mention any name in this text, but since the women knew each other, it was not difficult for Sakakini to recognize herself in the description, and she wrote a direct reply to this criticism[36].

Following this, ʿAbd al-Rahman also began to publish biographies of women of early Islamic times, and she wrote around a dozen of them in the years to come. The first one was *al-Sayyida Zaynab baṭalat Karbalāʾ* (*Zaynab, the Heroine of Karbala*, 1950)[37]. Yet, especially *Nisāʾ al-nabī* (*The Prophet's Wives*, 1954)[38] with its many editions and translations can be seen as the counterpart to Sakakinis *Ummahāt*

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31  Stowasser, Wives of the Prophet, pp. 515f.

32  Sakākīnī, Niqāṭ ʿalā l-ḥurūf, p. 210.

33  Ibid. This article was not available to me.

34  ʿĀʾisha ʿAbd ar-Raḥmān, Sitt al-Bayt, in: al-Hilāl 55, 6 (June 1947), pp. 150–154.

35  The text appeared in the May edition of *al-Kitāb* and was reprinted by Sakakini as ʿĀʾisha ʿAbd ar-Raḥmān, Naqd al-Duktūra Bint al-Shāṭiʾ, in: Widād Sakākīnī, Niqāṭ ʿalā l-ḥurūf, Cairo 1962, pp. 202–209.

36  Widād Sakākīnī, Radd ʿalā naqdihā, in: Eadem, Niqāṭ, pp. 210–214.

37  ʿĀʾisha ʿAbd ar-Raḥmān, al-Sayyida Zaynab, baṭalat Karbalāʾ, Beirut 1964. The work is about Zaynab, Muhammad's granddaughter and Ali's daughter, who survived the Battle of Karbala.

38  See eadem, Nisāʾ al-nabī, Cairo 1973; for the English translation see eadem, The Wives of the Prophet, Lahore 1971.

*al-mu'minīn*. Sakakini reviewed both of Bint al-Shāṭi''s works[39], picking up Bint al-Shāṭi''s accusations from her review of 1947 and arguing that she did not conform to the standards she had established earlier.

In *Ummahāt al-mu'minīn* (1947), Sakakini published portraits of wives[40], daughters[41], a granddaughter[42], und a great granddaughter[43] of the Prophet. She added the biographies of further women of the early Islamic period, such as Asmā' bint 'Umays[44], the poet Khansā'[45], Zubayda bint Ja'far[46], the fighter Khawla bint Ḥakīm[47], and the controversial figure Hind bint 'Utba[48]; she had already written articles about two of these women before[49]. Sakakini told the life stories of these women by condensing the information scattered through various traditions and enriched them with atmospheric, social, and psychological details. The chapters usually begin with an introduction *medias in res*, which is often reminiscent of a cinematic close-up. A distinctive event or a special situation in the life of the respective woman is picked out, whereby the general atmosphere or a personal characteristic is captured. In this

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39 Widād Sakākīnī, Zaynab baṭalat Karbalā', in: Eadem, Niqāṭ, pp. 124–130; eadem, Ḥawla kitāb Ummahāt al-mu'minīn, in: Eadem, Niqāṭ, pp. 62–72. The second review also became the second preface of the revised version of her own book: Eadem, Ummahāt al-mu'minīn (1962), Cairo 1962, pp. 6–18.

40 Sakakini selected Khadija, 'Ā'isha, Umm Salama, Zaynab bint Jahsh, Māriya al-Maṣriyya.

41 Sakakini selected Fāṭima and Zaynab bint Muḥammad.

42 Zaynab bint 'Ali, who was the subject of Bint al-Shati''s first work, see fn. 37 of this chapter.

43 A. Arazi, Sukayna bt. al-Ḥusayn, in: EI² IX, p. 802.

44 After the death of her first husband, Asmā' married Abū Bakr. After his death and Fatima's death, she married 'Ali, see Ch. Pellat, Asmā', in: EI² XII, p. 92.

45 For her see F. Gabrieli, al-Khansā', in: EI² IV, p. 1027.

46 Zubayda was the wife of the Caliph Harun al-Rashid (Hārūn al-Rashīd) and mother of the Caliph al-Amīn, well-known as a patron of literature and art as well as a political actor, see Renate Jacobi, Zubayda bt. Dja'far, in: EI² IX, pp. 547f.

47 When the Byzantins captured her brother Ḍarār, Khawla threw herself into the battle in man's clothing and was met with great admiration by Muslim fighters, who held her for a man. Sakakini's depiction is based on the classical report attributed to al-Wāqidī, see Muḥammad al-Wāqidī, Futuḥ al-Shām, Cairo n.d., vol. I, pp. 24f.

48 She was the wife of Abū Sufyān and one of Muḥammad's arch enemies in Mecca before converting to Islam. However, she is mostly depicted as clever and prudent, rather than fanatical. After she lost her father, a brother, a son, and an uncle during the battle of Badr (624), she took revenge in the battle of Uḥud (625), by having killed Muhammad's uncle Hamza who had killed her father. She then mutilated him on the battlefield by chewing or eating his liver, according to some traditions; hence her epithet *ākilat al-akbād* (»liver eater«). Sakākīnī, Ummahāt (1947), p. 150, depicts the scenario without mentioning the epithet. For Hind, see Renate Jacobi, Porträt einer unsympathischen Frau. Hind bint 'Utba, die Feindin Muhammeds, in: Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes 89 (1999), pp. 85–107; and Fr. Buhl, Hind Bint 'Utba, in: EI² III, p. 455.

49 Widād Sakākīnī, al-Khansā', in: Eadem, al-Khaṭarāt, pp. 104–122; eadem, Umm Mu'āwiya, in: al-Thaqāfa 8 (1942), pp. 992–994.

way, Sakakini mixed the narrative techniques that she used in her short stories with a more sober historical-biographical account. She idealized the women, but she also tried to depict them in a historically correct setting. In the preface, Sakakini stated that she had drawn »exemplary human images (*ṣuwar insāniyya mithāliyya*)«[50], which should also convey »the truth« and historical facts.

In the revised 1962 version of *Ummahāt al-muʾminīn wa-banāt ar-rasūl* (*The Mothers of the Believers and the Daughters of the Messenger*), Sakakini limited herself to the Prophet's harem, focussing on portraits of eleven of Muhammad's wives and four of his daughters. She adopted the seven chapters on the Prophet's wives and daughters from the first edition unchanged, but rearranged them[51] and added eight more portraits. She tried to treat these women exhaustively, squeezing out the last drop of the sometimes rather scarce information in the historiographical traditions. It must be assumed that the controversy with Bint al-Shatiʾ prompted Sakakini to revise and re-focus her work.

The conflict between the two authors subsequently went beyond the topic of the Prophet's wives. Sakakini published sharp commentaries on literary lectures delivered by Bint al-Shatiʾ in Aleppo (on her doctoral thesis, al-Maʿarrī's *Risālat al-Ghufrān*) and in Damascus (*The Woman in the Life of Contemporary Writers*), stating that Bint al-Shatiʾ had already published on both subjects and had nothing new to say[52]. She also criticized Bint al-Shatiʾ's lecture on Arabic women's literature at an international conference in Rome[53] in 1961 as a »confused and unjust report« (*taqrīr ḥāʾir wa-jāʾir*)[54]. Ironically, she noted that Bint al-Shatiʾ had opened her talk about women's literature with explaining that literature should not depend on »gender« (*jins*) since its subject, means, and culture were the same, whereas only the pens, characters, talents, and experiences were different[55]. Sakakini's accusation that Bint al-Shatiʾ forgot to mention many authors and dedicated most of the lecture to her own achievements was certainly unjust[56].

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50 Eadem, Ummahāt (1962), p. 4. Oᴛᴛᴏssᴏɴ Bɪᴛᴀʀ, I Can Do Nothing, p. 61, appropriately calls these life stories »fictional biographies«.

51 In the first edition of 1947, the portraits of Khadija, Fatima, and ʿAʾisha form the first three chapters. In the revised edition, Muhammad's wives are ordered according to their presumed date of marriage. The daughters follow the wives. Thus, Khadija stays in the first place and ʿAʾisha in third place. The chapter about Fatima moves to the end and closes the book.

52 Sᴀᴋᴀᴋɪɴɪ, Tasāʾul wa-taʿqīb, in: Eadem, Niqāṭ ʿalā l-ḥurūf, pp. 243–245.

53 Bɪɴᴛ ᴀʟ-Sʜᴀ̄ᴛɪʾ, al-Adab al-ʿarabī l-muʿāṣir, in: Aʿmāl Muʾtamar Rūma [Rom] al-Munʿaqad fī Tishrīn al-Awwal 1961, pp. 132–152.

54 Widād Sᴀᴋᴀᴋɪɴɪ, Taqrīr wa-qāʾima fī adabinā l-nisawī l-muʿāṣir, in: Eadem, Suṭur tatjawwab, Damascus 1987, pp. 126–129.

55 Ibid., p. 126.

56 Bint al-Shatiʾ's lecture contains only one paragraph about herself.

The end of the controversy forms the entry on Bint al-Shatiʾ in Sakakini's biographical collection *Sābiqāt al-ʿaṣr* (*Pioneers of the Century*, 1986)[57]. Here, Sakakini referred to Bint al-Shatiʾ as *rāʾida shadīda*[58], »a powerful pioneer«, and »a self-made woman (*ṣanaʿat nafsahā bi-nafsihā*)«, who was known for her courage in voicing her own opinions and contradicting great scholars and »an important official« (*muwazzaf khaṭīr*)[59]. In addition, Sakakini also mentioned that Bint al-Shatiʾ saw herself as a *fallāḥa* (»country girl«), hated the »noise of civilization (*ḍajīj al-ḥaḍāra*)«, and made her »conservative« nature a benchmark for the world and its people[60]. She therefore believed that the core of liberation was »the preservation of authenticity (*muḥāfaẓā ʿalā l-aṣāla*)«[61]. This portrait of conservatism entirely corresponds to the self-image that Bint al-Shatiʾ wanted to convey[62]. Sakakini, however, notes critically that Bint al-Shatiʾ incurred the resentment of educated and intellectual women because she had consented to a marriage as a co-wife with Amin al-Khuli and saw her own mother, a housewife, as an ideal, who she preferred to all other women in the world[63]. These words clearly reflect the starting-point and a central subject of the controversy, as will be shown below.

The central terms that Bint al-Shatiʾ criticized in her 1947 review of Sakakini's work were the »excellence« and »humanity« of the Prophet's wives that Sakakini claimed in the preface as an ideal[64]. Bint al-Shatiʾ criticized Sakakini's suggestion that contemporary women should take these women as an example. She did not directly attack Sakakini's emancipatory viewpoint, but accused the »esteemed sister« of »methodical errors« in her historiographic approach because she dealt with history from a preconceived point of view; this approach overrode the »freedom of thought«, prevented the analysis of the selected personalities and made the just

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57 Widād Sakākīnī, al-Duktūra ʿĀʾisha ʿAbd al-Raḥmān. Rāʾida shadīda, in: Eadem, Sābiqāt al-ʿaṣr, pp. 113–116.

58 The semantic field of *shadīd*, however, covers a wide field from strong, powerful, rigorous, and harsh to violent, bad, evil, and difficult.

59 Maybe a hint at Bint al-Shatiʾs criticism of Sadat's restrictions on press freedom, see Kooij, Bint Al-Shāṭiʾ, p. 71.

60 A hint at Bint Shatiʾs statement: »I am a *fallāḥa*, which means simplicity, indifference to social life and to the noises of the city and its dazzlement. I judge the world and people with natural peasant standards, and these are not modern«, quoted ibid., p. 70.

61 Sakākīnī, al-Duktūra ʿĀʾisha ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, p. 116. She also quotes—ibid., p. 114—Bint al-Shatiʾs statement: »I have never in my life used the ›toilette‹, went to the ›coiffeur‹, and have never worn an evening dress on my body.«

62 For example, she said about herself that she was »conservative to a degree which you would not expect from a woman«, quoted by Kooij, Bint Al-Shāṭiʾ, p. 69, who calls such statements part of the myth that Bint al-Shatiʾ had created for herself; for a similar judgement also see Rooke, In My Childhood, pp. 265f.

63 Sakākīnī, al-Duktūra ʿĀʾisha ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, p. 116.

64 Bint al-Shāṭiʾ, Naqd al-Duktūra Bint al-Shāṭiʾ, pp. 202–209.

treatment of truth and history impossible[65]. The problem thus was that Sakakini cast a fascinating, admiring look at »this group of mothers«: »Therein lies an exaggeration, in which I disagree with the sister, as well as an assertion, with which the scientific truth does not agree«[66].

In her reply to this review[67], Sakakini expressed her surprise that »the woman critic makes fun of my admiration for the Prophet's wives and the excellent (fuḍlayāt) female companions of the Prophet and accuses me of a methodical error«[68]. The critic obviously expected that she should have studied »missteps and deviations« (hafawāt wa-nḥirāf )[69] instead of »virtues and excellent qualities« (mazāyā wa-maḥāsin)[70].

When Bint al-Shati' presented her first work on women from early Islam, al-Sayyida Zaynab baṭalat Karbalā' (1950), Sakakini complained that the core of the book was no longer than 20 pages, full of digressions and lacking any analysis. Its author was neither interested in historical facts, nor did she write anything new; she had neither her own standpoint nor did she draw conclusions; thus, the book did not meet the standards that the author had forcefully proclaimed earlier[71].

After the publication of Bint al-Shati's Nisā' al-nabī (1954), Sakakini changed the overall direction of her critique[72]. Apparently, she had realized that the conflict was not about the literary and academic rules of the game or about objective facts and value judgments, but primarily about a moral and political concern, which in Sakakini's case was to contribute to the criticism of the gender hierarchy using the example of the Prophet's wives. She now identified that the different explanations for Muhammad's polygyny stood at the heart of the controversy. While Sakakini justified polygyny as part of Muhammad's prophetic and social mission and thus as an exception, her rival attributed polygyny to the »human« qualities of the Prophet. Bint al-Shati' thereby legitimatized male rule and the gender hierarchy since both corresponded to »human« nature—man's natural sexual desire and leadership in the face of women's jealousy and intrigue.

Already in her 1947 review to Ummahāt al-mu'minīn, Bint al-Shati' had criticized that Sakakini's neglect of women's »human (basharī) side«[73] was a methodical mistake. Bint al-Shati' had argued that there was only one »human passage« in

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65  Ibid., p. 204.

66  Ibid.

67  Sakākīnī, Radd ʿalā naqdihā, pp. 210–214.

68  Ibid., p. 210.

69  Ibid., p. 211.

70  Ibid.

71  Eadem, Zaynab baṭalat Karbalāʾ, pp. 124–130.

72  Eadem, Ḥawla kitāb Ummahāt al-muʾminīn, pp. 62–72.

73  Bint al-Shāṭiʾ, Naqd al-duktūra, p. 206.

Sakakini's entire book, namely a paragraph about Sukayna bint al-Husayn, in which Sakakini described that, unlike men, women did not talk about Sukayna's literary meetings, but about her beauty and appearance[74]. Bint al-Shati' quoted the full paragraph from Sakakini's work[75], which in itself was an affront since Sakakini took great care to present Sukayna as an early feminist: self-confident, unveiled, quick-witted, and mocking towards men. Elsewhere, Bint al-Shati' wrote, Sakakini had »forgotten« the human, for example, she did not describe the married life of Fatima and ʿAli »as a couple«[76].

As for Fatima, Sakakini had actually built on traditions saying that Fatima's marriage to ʿAli was sometimes not very harmonious and her everyday life characterized by poverty and arduous work. Sakakini had also noted that Fatima stood up for the poor, whereas ʿAli, despite his great knowledge (in matters of Islam), could not »surpass Fatima«[77]. He did not take the oath of allegiance (*bayʿa*) to the first Caliph Abū Bakr because »he resisted as a sign of honor for Fatima, who considered her husband more worthy of the caliphate and treated Abū Bakr harshly and was angry with him«[78]. Sakakini also devotes half a page to the episode where ʿAli met with members of a powerful Qurayshite tribe—the Banū Ḥāšim b. al-Mughīra—to take another wife from their ranks. She briefly recounts the story that Muhammad descended from the pulpit of his mosque and condemned the agreement with the *ḥadīth*, that has been handed down several times: »Fatima is a part of me, what annoys me, annoys her, what hurts me, hurts her«[79]. He also told ʿAli that if he wanted to take a second wife, he had to divorce Fatima first. In her review, Bint al-Shati' again cited this passage in full, yet this time as further evidence of how much Sakakini neglected the human side in her work. Thus, Bint al-Shati' did not judge Muhammad's anger, as a feminist pre-understanding of this episode would have it, as criticism of the institution of the polygyny, but as an evidence of his »humanity […] the cry of a merciful father, […] even though he was the one who had brought (the Muslims) the legal right to multiple marriages!«[80]

In *Nisāʾ al-nabī*, Bint al-Shati' continued to dwell on this—human—point by explaining right away that her motivation to write the book was that she had realized that the Prophet's intimate life was not part of his prophecy, but of his

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74  Ibid.
75  Sakākīnī, Ummahāt (1947), pp. 142f.
76  Bint al-Shati', Naqd al-duktūra, p. 206.
77  Sakākīnī, Ummahāt (1947), p. 26.
78  Ibid., p. 33.
79  See Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim IV, pp. 1304f. (No. 5999, 6000, 6001, and 6002). Also compare Verena Klemm, Die frühe islamische Erzählung von Fāṭima bint Muḥammad. Vom ḫabar zur Legende, in: Der Islam 79 (2002), p. 63.
80  Bint al-Shāṭiʾ, Naqd al-duktūra, p. 208.

human nature. The term *bashariyya* (»being human«, »humanity«) that Bint al-Shati' used throughout her book bears different meanings for women and men. The Prophet's wives' *bashariyya* is characterized by a chain of female qualities that add minor or major human weaknesses such as jealousy, passion, intrigue, and hatred to their established excellent qualities[81]. Muhammad's *bashariyya*, in contrast, is a complement to prophecy. He is a person with two sides: family, privacy, intimate life, and love on the one side, work, vocation, politics, and religion on the other side. Thus, a male human being is at home in a second, private world in addition to his public role, whereas a female human being is one-dimensional. With this understanding of *bashariyya*, Bint al-Shati' reconstructs the separation of public from private and male from female spaces.

Sakakini firmly rejected this understanding of the »human«, since the accusation that she had neglected the »human« in her work appeared to her in a completely new light after she had read Bint al-Shati''s take on the Prophet's wives[82]. Sakakini contrasted the terms *bashar*, *basharī*, and *bashariyya* used by Bint al-Shati' with the term *insāniyya*. Although both terms are used to denote humankind in general, there is a slight difference. Etymologically, Bint al-Shati''s *bashariyya* refers to human being in the sense of their nature, biological being or the entirety of the human race. The adjective *basharī* denotes the human as well as the »epidermal« or »outer skin«[83]. In contrast, *insāniyya* denotes humanity and humankind with the connotation of »politeness« and »civility«, such as in »humane«[84]. The adjective *insānī* relates to human as well as »humanitarian« and »philanthropist«; *uns* means »sociability« and »intimacy«, and *ins* relates to humankind as well as to an »intimate friend«[85]. The choice of words is not neutral. Rather, Sakakini complained that if Bint al-Shati' had tried to shed light on the Prophet's *insāniyya*, she would have achieved something good and produced something new; the *bashariyya*, on which she insisted instead, did not touch the hearts of the believers and was neither intellectually impressive nor liberating. Bint al-Shati''s claim that his »healthy nature« led Muhammad to polygyny appears »as if his *bashariyya*, which shows itself in his

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81  Compare note 2733 that 'Abdul Ḥamīd Ṣiddīqī, the translator of *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, adds to the episode, in which the wives try to demand from Muhammad equal treatment with 'A'isha: »The wives of the Holy Prophet were all eminent ladies having deep consciousness of God, but they, after all, belonged to the human race and thus could not completely banish those minor human weaknesses which are ingrained in the very nature of the fair sex«, see *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* IV, p. 1301.

82  SAKĀKĪNĪ, Ḥawla kitāb Ummahāt al-muʾminīn, pp. 68–72.

83  Hans WEHR, A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic, Wiesbaden [4]1979, p. 74.

84  Ibid., p. 39.

85  Ibid., pp. 38f.

masculinity and his sexual inclination, had triumphed over his character, since one wife could not keep up with it«[86].

## 3.    Muhammad's Pleasures and their Intertextual Relations

Sakakini's and Bint al-Shati"s texts are intertextually related to other works published at about that time. An important point of reference was the biography of Muhammad (1935) by liberal writer Muhammad Husayn Haykal (Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal, 1888–1956), which was initially published in serialized form (1932–1935)[87]. Sakakini mentions Haykal's work in the preface to the second edition[88], when she criticizes Bint al-Shati"s approach, whereas Bint al-Shati' named correcting Haykal's approach as one of her main motivations for writing her own text[89]. Haykal's goal was to rationally interpret Muhammad's life and portray him as a spiritual leader. He sharply rejected Western polemics against Islam, especially if they were based on Islamic sources.

The fact that Muhammad lived in polygyny with a growing number of women after the death of his first wife Khadija and that a Qur'anic verse (Qur'an 33:37) approved of this had played a prominent role in Christian polemics against Islam since Late Antiquity[90]. The Prophet's harem, in particular the Zaynab story, acted as examples of the lascivious and immoral character of Muhammad, the Islamic message, and the Orient as a whole. Muhammad had given Zaynab's hand in marriage to his adopted son, a former Christian slave. When Muhammad visited

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86  Sakākīnī, Ḥawla kitāb Ummahāt al-muʾminīn, pp. 68f.

87  For the importance of Haykal's turn to Islam for the whole Arabic literary field, see Charles D. Smith, The »Crisis of Orientation«. The Shift of Egyptian Intellectuals to Islamic Subjects in the 1930's, in: International Journal of Middle East Studies 4 (1973), pp. 401–404; Israel Gershoni, Imagining the East. Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal's Changing Representations of East-West Relations, 1928–1933, in: Asian and African Studies 25 (1991), pp. 209–251; idem, The Reader—»Another Production«. The Reception of Haykal's Biography of Muhammad and the Shift of Egyptian Intellectuals to Islamic Subjects in the 1930s, in: Poetics Today 15, 2 (1994), pp. 241–275; Sing, Illiberal Metamorphoses, pp. 304–308.

88  Sakākīnī, Ummahāt (1962), pp. 10–12.

89  The translator of Bint al-Shati"s book into English sums her points up succinctly, see Matti Moosa, Introduction, in: ʿAbd ar-Raḥmān, The Wives of the Prophet, pp. I–XII.

90  See for example Hopwood, Sexual Encounters, pp. 6 and 9. Already Johannes Damascenus (d. 754) linked Muhammad's lewdness with his false prophethood. Accordingly, Muhammad had forged the revelation in order to indulge in his dissolute married life; he could not be a divine envoy, especially if one compares his married life with Jesus' steadfastness (as an unmarried, abstaining man) against any temptation.

her once and found her alone, he is said to have fallen in love with her and decided to marry her.

Against this background, Haykal now claimed that the entire Zaynab narration was an invention that sprang from the imagination of Orientalists and missionaries, who relied on reports from the *ḥadīth* literature and biographies of Muhammad, but without an accurate idea of Mughhammad's cause and his relationship to women[91]. The interpretation of the Zaynab story as a love story not only raised the charge of sexual lust and viciousness against the Prophet, but also inadmissibly reduced the entire Islamic message to pure materialism, which was fundamentally opposed to any correct understanding of Islam and religion. If thoughtless Islamic narrators said the same thing and thus fostered the allegations of the Orientalists and missionaries, this was because they wanted to present Muhammad as outstanding in all things, even in his earthly desires. An impartial historical investigation, however, clearly showed that Muhammad had recommended monogamy to the Muslims[92].

Zaynab's marriage to Muhammad's adopted son Zayd happened to show that Zayd, as a freed slave, was treated like a free man. Muhammad's marriage to Zaynab abolished the old Arab adoption rules, according to which sons and adopted sons were considered equal and a marriage of the father with a son's former wife was prohibited. On the basis of this understanding, a marriage between Muhammad and Zaynab would have been impossible. Thus, the Qur'anic verses approved of both types of marriage, Zaynab's marriage to a former slave and Muhammad's marriage to the former wife of an adopted son. The verses removed the social barriers to them by stipulating that adopted children and biological sons have a different status[93]. Additionally, Haykal argued that Zayd had not been happy in his marriage to Zaynab.

Moreover, Haykal explained that the Prophet was not guided by sexual desires when he established his harem, but acted out of social and political responsibility. He took Sawda—the harem's first wife, whom Muhammad married after the death of Khadija—for his wife so that she could take care of his children. Many other of his wives were widows. Few of these women are said in the sources to have been

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91  For the English translation of Haykal's chapter on the Prophet's wifes, available online, see Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal, The Prophet's Wives, in: Idem, The Life of Mohammed, URL: <https://ia801300.us.archive.org/30/items/haykal-the-life-of-muhammad/haykal-the-life-of-muhammad. pdf> (11 December 2020).

92  In this context, Haykal quoted Qur'anic verses 4:3 (»If you fear that you may not deal justly with the orphans, then marry [other] women that you like, two, three, or four. But if you fear that you may not treat them fairly, then [marry only] one, or [marry from among] your slave-women. That makes it likelier that you will not be unfair.«) and 4:129 (»You will not be able to be fair between wives, even if you are eager to do so.«).

93  Haykal hinted at the Qur'anic verses 33:4 and 33:37.

particularly pretty. Haykal further stated that the Prophet stood high above moral hostility; even if the accusations of immorality were correct, they were irrelevant for extraordinary personalities like Muhammad because they did not have to bow to the existing law, but rather came to change it.

With Haykal, Sakakini shared the opinion that one could find a social or political motive for each and every of Muhammad's marriages[94]. His multiple marriages were necessary for the spread of Islam among the Arab tribes and had contributed to the strengthening of social ties among Muslims. Like Haykal, she considered the traditional story that Muhammad had seen Zaynab »undisguised« in her tent, fell in love with her and then married her untrustworthy.[95]

The basic tendency in Bint al-Shati's work *Nisā' an-nabī* directly opposed Haykal's and Sakakini's argumentation that Muhammad's polygyny could be explained by social and political reasons. Bint al-Shati' as well as the editor of the English translation accuse Haykal of explaining the Prophet's behavior in an apologetic way: »His detailed apologies for Muḥammad's behavior are unnecessary and mistaken in concept—especially for instance in the case of the wife Zaynab bint Jaḥash«[96]. Thus, Haykal justified Muhammad's harem with false arguments: firstly, that the laws that apply to normal men did not exist for prophets; secondly, that his marriages were not motivated by »lust and infatuation«; thirdly, that enemies of Islam exaggerated the Prophet's lust, even though he had lived monogamously with Khadija for so long. Bint al-Shati' further argued that the reports of Muhammad's life had been written before the time of Orientalists and crusaders. Although his defense of Islam against the Orientalists and missionaries was correct, Haykal missed this point because he ignored the fact that the Prophet was completely human: »He had no control over his own heart«[97]. Why should Muhammad be blamed, when it is God who changed his heart? Regarding Zaynab, the proof was in the Qur'an that God endorses matters of the heart. The whole incident was »a simple love story«[98]. Haykal's idea of assessing the behavior of the Prophet by his own moral standards was even dangerous, as the editor of the English version, Matti Moosa, states: »Haykal confuses the message and the man: Bint al-Shāṭi' attempts to separate them.«[99]

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94  Sᴀᴋᴀ̄ᴋɪ̄ɴɪ̄, Ummahāt (1962), pp. 16f.

95  Ibid., pp. 10–12, and 105 and eadem, Ḥawla kitāb Ummahāt al-muʾminīn, pp. 66–68. How Sakakini depicted the marriage between Muhammad and Zaynab is discussed in chapter V.2.

96  Mᴏᴏsᴀ, Introduction, p. IX.

97  Ibid., p. X.

98  Ibid.

99  Ibid., p. XI.

Sakakini recapitulated Bint al-Shati''s statements[100], but concluded that Bint al-Shati''s view of Muhammad's polygyny could only satisfy missionaries and Orientalists[101].

Haykal was, however, not the only point of reference in the controversy between the two female authors. Their controversy must be seen against the background of the renewed interest in the Prophet's biography that Haykal's work sparked among liberal and nationalist authors in the 1930s and 1940s[102]. In this context, additional layers of meaning were attributed to the word »human«. Whereas in Haykal's view, Muhammad's »human« (emotional) side had to be separated from his »rational« (political) side, another differentiation was between the »human« side of Islam, understood as universal, and the »human« side of Muhammad, understood as emotional.

While Haykal proclaimed a rationalization of religion, Sakakini's view was closer to the understanding of religion that Taha Husayn and Tawfiq al-Hakim had formulated after and in contrast to Haykal, namely the idea that religion addressed the heart, not primarily the mind; thus, the relationship between feeling and reason corresponded to the relationship between religion and science[103]. They emphasized that the Islamic message was »human« in the sense of being universal and aiming at everyone. Yet, Tawfiq al-Hakim took the claim that Muhammad's message was the religion of »human nature« (al-fiṭra al-bashariyya)[104] even further by also relating it to the Prophet's inclination to fragrances and women, thus coming full circle and returning to a position close to Bint al-Shati''s. For al-Hakim, the Prophet's polygyny represented a natural and universally human—read, male—need that was approved by his natural and human religion.

Sakakini had already attacked Tawfiq al-Hakim because of other misogynistic statements[105]. She could probably have shared his »human« (universal) understand-

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100 Sakākīnī, Ummahāt (1962), p. 12.

101 Ibid., pp. 12 and 18.

102 In a contribution in 1985, Sakakini gave an overview of biographies of Muhammad that were published in the 1930s and 1940s without treating the substantial differences, see Widād Sakākīnī, Ḥayyāt Muḥammad ṣallā llahu 'alayhi wa-sallam, in: Nahj al-Islām 22 (November 1985), pp. 104–107.

103 Hakim dealt with the Prophet's biography in essays in *Taḥta shams al-fikr* and also adapted it for the theatre, see Martin Grzeskowiak, Die Darstellung des Arabischen Propheten Muhammad bei Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haikal, Taufiq al-Ḥakīm und 'Abbās Maḥmūd al-'Aqqād, Halle 1969, pp. 79–82.

104 *Fiṭra* means the nature of man, which was created by God. It is often understood in such a way that man is born a Muslim and only raised by his parents in a certain belief, see D.B. MacDonald, Fiṭra, in: EI² II, p. 931.

105 See various references in Sakākīnī, Inṣāf al-mar'a, Damascus ²1989, pp. 27, 133, 138, 154–158, where she strongly disapproves, among other statements, of his article *Kuntu 'alā washk an ataza-*

ing of religion, but like Haykal she saw Muhammad's marriages not as a »human«, but a socio-political necessity in the service of Islam. Bint al-Shati' just saw it the other way. Although she might not have objected to Haykal's rational understanding of Islam as a religion—she saw spirituality as the core of Muslim identity, which separated it from materialism and the Occident—she strongly rejected his »rational« explanation of polygyny and justified it for human and natural reasons. In so doing, she consciously or unconsciously aligned herself with Tawfiq al-Hakim's point of view, although she hardly shared his universalistic understanding of Islam as a natural religion.

This intertextual complexity might be the reason why neither Sakakini nor Bint al-Shati' explicitly and wholeheartedly endorsed any of these authors when they quarrelled about the »human« sides of Muhammad and Islam. Apart from this, what was at stake in the debate about the humanity of Islam was the challenge of how to bring together modern and traditional views. In her early work, Sakakini had already tried to harmonize both sides. She advocated a unity of Western modernity and Arab-Islamic culture[106], but did not argue exclusively with reference to Western or Islamic sources. Rather, she saw Islam and modernity as well as Islam and women's rights as not incompatible with each other. This combination of the Islamic and the secular level of argumentation[107] helped her to subvert two hegemonic discourses. Compared to Islamic discourse, which saw the women's movement as a symbol of Westernization and immorality, Sakakini argued that the emancipation of women was based on Islamic foundations. Compared to the nationalist, neo-patriarchal response, which used rational and objective arguments to justify misogynistic attitudes, she argued that the ideal of Islam was also in line with liberation and human rights. In her treatment of the Prophet's harem, Sakakini thus assumed that Muhammad esteemed women and advocated their »liberation« (*taḥrīr*) and education, as well as their political, economic, and social equality.

Already in her first essay *Taṭawwur al-mar'a*, she had written that when Islam was »born«, both sexes were given equal rights and duties, especially with regard to religion: »women began to study the norms of the religion (*akhadhat tatafaqqah fī*

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wwaj (*I came close to marrying*), which was published in the Egyptian journal *al-Risāla*: al-Risāla 363 (17.06.1940), pp. 1047–1050. Also compare her statements in Mārdīnī, al-Adība, and the remarks in Ashour et al. (eds.), Arab Women Writers, p. 478.

106  Sakākīnī, al-Tajdīd fī l-sharq.

107  Badran pleads for such a mixture of discourses, yet believes that it is a rather recent phenomenon, see Margot Badran, Zur Verortung von Feminismen. Die Vermischung von säkularen und religiösen Diskursen im Mashriq, der Türkei und dem Iran, in: Barbara Pusch (ed.), Die neue muslimische Frau. Standpunkte & Analysen, Würzburg 2001, pp. 213–231; Margot Badran, Between Secular and Islamic Feminism/s. Reflections on the Middle East and Beyond, in: Journal of Middle East Women's Studies 1, 1 (2005), pp. 6–28. I discuss this point in the following chapter (V.4).

*l-dīn*) and sat with the scholars to understand from them the secrets and proper rules of the heavenly Shariʿa. The result was the progress of human thought, from which significant social progress followed«[108]. Discrimination against women was a result of the centuries of decline that followed the birth of Islam: »Woman remained a prisoner in her own home. She did not see the light of freedom, and knew nothing of the things of the universe, her mind decayed, and her will was weakened. The result of this was a general decline in the entire *umma*.«[109]

In *Inṣāf al-marʾa* (1950), Sakakini published a lecture entitled *Muhammad, the Liberator of Women*[110], in which she used the Prophet's life and some Shariʿa rules to substantiate her claim of an early Islamic gender justice. She let blocks of this text flow into her review of Bint al-Shatiʾs *Nisāʾ an-nabī* (1954). Accordingly, the Qurʾan was sent down to Muhammad

> as a lasting miracle and as eternal law (*sharīʿa*) for every time and place, for every individual and group from every people and community and it demanded freedom, equality and brotherhood (*al-ḥurriyya wa-l-musāwā wa-l-ikhāʾ*), these three basic elements (*li-hādhihi l-aqānīm*[111] *al-thulātha*), which it taught to the people, calling upon the people to bring them to fruition[112].

Sakakini not only equated the Qurʾanic message with the slogans of the French Revolution, she also wrote that the Qurʾan and Muhammad were »forerunners« (*sabbāq, asbaq*)[113] of the French and American peoples, who had spent two centuries arguing about who had been the first to proclaim human rights. It was Muhammad who invented these rights more than one thousand years before the Americans, the French, and the United Nations. In her view, Islam is »a just and complete constitution (*dustūr ʿādil wa-kāmil*), containing the wisest democratic methods and the most appropriate socialist intentions, and it it is the greatest call for the liberation and fair treatment of women«[114]. Therefore, »today's Arab women do not demand the right of total equality, but they look for these lost rights«[115].

In early Islam, women participated in public gatherings, trade, and the *jihād*, they acquired knowledge, studied literature and religion, and were personally taught by

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108 SAKĀKĪNĪ, Taṭawwur al-marʾa, p. 400.
109 Ibid., p. 401.
110 Eadem, Muḥammad, muḥarrir al-marʾa, in: Eadem, Inṣāf al-marʾa, Damascus ²1989, pp. 161–170.
111 An allusion to the Christian trinity, which translates the demands of the French Revolution into religious discourse, also on a linguistic level.
112 SAKĀKĪNĪ, Muḥammad, muḥarrir al-marʾa, p. 163.
113 Ibid.
114 Ibid.
115 Ibid., p. 169.

the Prophet. Muhammad had confirmed the »legal capacity« (*kafā'a*)[116] of women in civil affairs, without having to seek permission from their husband or someone with authority over them. Sakakini called for the transfer of these principles to the present, pleading for equality in rights and duties as well as legal maturity (*takālīf*).

## 4. The Images of 'A'isha and Fatima

'A'isha plays a special role in the Prophet's harem as his »favorite woman« and as the daughter of Abu Bakr, the faithful companion to the Prophet and later the first caliph. Her special status also includes the fact that she is said to have been the only virgin among all of Muhammad's wives, which she also emphasized herself[117]. In her presence, Muhammad received many revelations, and he died in her arms when she was about 18 years old. Yet, she occupies a prominent and ambivalent position among the Prophet's wives. She is described in the Prophet's biography as a woman of extraordinary knowledge about religious and legal issues, medicine, and poetry. She is also prominent as a commentator of the Qur'an and the law (many of her sayings relate to family matters such as marriage and divorce), and as a transmitter of information about the Prophet's deeds and sayings; Roded puts the number of traditions attributed to 'A'isha at 1210[118], making her by far the most important transmitter of Prophetic words and deeds.

Because of the personal traits and the events associated with her—jealousy, religious scholarship, the libel affair (*firyat al-ifk*)[119], and political interference—, she has always attracted the interest of the faithful. Nevertheless, in the Islamic tradition, she is not considered an ideal role model for the devout Muslim woman due to her interference in politics and alleged sexual misconduct. Since she took part in the disputes that arose after Muhammad's death, her actions gave rise to polemics. After the assassination of the third Caliph 'Uthman, she left Medina with two companions of the Prophet to face 'Ali, the later fourth caliph and ancestor of the Shi'a, in the Battle of the Camel—so-called because she watched the fighting

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116 Ibid., p. 168.

117 See eadem, Ummahāt (1947), p. 46 and eadem, Ummahāt (1962), p. 59.

118 Roded, Women in Islamic Biographical Collections, p. 28.

119 'A'isha had been left unnoticed during a rest on the way back to Medina and was brought back by a young man. As she affirmed her innocence, but could not prove it, the allegations against her did not end until the Qur'anic verses (Qur'an 24:2–20) revealed her innocence. Sakakini (eadem, Ummahāt (1947), pp. 50–55 and eadem, Ummahāt (1962), pp. 64–69) describes the affair in detail and links it to another episode, Muhammad's one-month retreat from all of his wives. For the question of the authenticity of the so-called *ḥadīth al-ifk*, see Gregor Schoeler, Charakter und Authentie der muslimischen Überlieferung über das Leben Mohammeds, Berlin/New York 1996, pp. 119–170.

from the back of her camel. After 'Ali had won this battle, the two companions were executed, but 'A'isha withdrew undisturbed to Medina, where she lived for another 20 years, until about 678, and continued to be considered an authority in all religious matters, but did not interfere in politics anymore.

Beginning in the third to fourth century of the *hijra*, theologians began to see 'A'isha as a competitor to Fatima, Muhammad's »favorite daughter« because they sought to gain religious and political legitimacy in the conflict between Sunna and Shi'a, which could be traced back to the dispute over the caliphate between Abu Bakr, the father of Muhammad's favorite wife, and 'Ali, the husband of his favorite daughter[120]. From the traditional Shiite side, 'A'isha was vilified—together with other companions of the Prophet such as the first three caliphs—because she was counted among those who did not obey Muhammad's order to transfer the succession to 'Ali. The enmity of 'A'isha towards 'Ali is often attributed to the fact that, while she was living in the Prophet's home, she was already considered to be the rival of his daughter Fatima, the later wife of 'Ali. In addition, when rumours about 'A'isha's infidelity circulated, 'Ali is said to have advised the Prophet to part with her because there were many other women. From the Shiite point of view, 'A'isha's image is therefore completely negative. The fact that 'A'isha is not mentioned directly in Qur'an is sometimes interpreted to mean that the accusation of adultery was justified, even if the exoneration in the stories handed down reports otherwise.

Sunni scholars, on the other hand, imposed severe punishments for abusing 'A'isha. One sentence attributed to the founder of the legal school Malik (Mālik b. Anas, d. 795) is: »Whoever abuses Abū Bakr must be flogged, and whoever abuses 'A'isha must be killed«[121]. Nevertheless, 'A'isha is at least an ambivalent figure in Sunni tradition, not only because of her involvement in war and politics, but also because of her sexual desire, jealousy, and allegedly scheming character. The fear that she (like other Muslim women) may have committed adultery is symptomatic of a patriarchal view of 'A'isha. In 'A'isha's biography, this fear is exemplified in the so-called »libel lie« (*firyat al-ifk*). Since the accusation of infidelity could neither be proven nor cleared up, it required a divine revelation to Muḥammad that stated that nothing had happened. As Denise Spellberg explains in her study, despite different constructions of 'A'isha's biography in the Shiite and Sunni traditions, there is a supra-denominational consensus that she is not the ideal Muslim woman; rather, the 'A'isha figure represents the typical female danger in politics and sexuality[122]. The significance of 'A'isha lies in the fact that, in contrast to her ambivalent image, the construction of an Islamic, female role ideal could take place. Her life story

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120  See Denise A. Spellberg, Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past. The Legacy of 'A'isha Bint Abi Bakr, New York 1994.

121  Ibid., p. 29.

122  See ibid.

could thus be instrumentalized to justify the exclusion of women from public life and politics as well as patriarchal control over the (sexual) behavior of women.

Sunni writers who deal with ‘A’isha in the twentieth century have to face the problem of how to evaluate her political engagement, which is interwoven with the Sunna-Shi‘a conflict. An overly positive interpretation of her political ambitions could quickly be seen as propaganda for the Sunni denomination and, in turn, as anti-Shiite. In view of this problem, traditional scholars of both Sunni and Shiite heritage have it much easier because they concur in the lesson from history that women can intervene in politics, even if their intervention comes at a heavy price, as it did for ‘A’isha.

Widad Sakakini’s solution to this dilemma is that she does not describe ‘A’isha per se as jealous. Instead, Sakakini defends ‘A’isha’s political commitment and considers her share in the Sunna-Shi‘a conflict to be rather small. In order to underline the peculiarity of her approach, Sakakini’s work must read against the background of three works that appeared at almost the same time. The writer ‘Abbas Mahmud al-‘Aqqad wrote a study on ‘A’isha in 1943, which, like Sa‘id al-Afghani’s (Sa‘īd al-Afghānī, 1909–1997)[123] 1947 study, was neo-patriarchal in its orientation. In addition, Nabia Abbott (Nabīha ‘Abbūd, 1897–1981)[124], a pioneer in the history of women in the Middle East, published the first comprehensive, English-language biography of ‘A’isha in 1942. In it, she portrayed ‘A’isha as a politically active woman and claimed that Muhammad’s harem was divided into two political camps, one led by ‘A’isha and the other by Fatima; in her view, this constellation thus explained the later religious split[125]. Since Abbott also saw ‘A’isha’s religious scholarship as a political weapon used by her, she described ‘A’isha as a political actor, but accepted another prejudice: »Her choice, however, to read political motives and designs in every detail of ‘A’isha’s life identifies her discourse with many orientalist theses about Islam as a political movement rather than a religious message.«[126]

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123 Born in Damascus, son of an immigrant from Kashmir, he was a teacher at a young age and then a lecturer at various universities in the Arab world. He was later President of Arabic Philology at the University of Damascus (for about 25 years), Dean of the Faculty of Arabic Literature and member of the language societies in Cairo and Baghdad. See Aḥmad al-ʿAlāwina, Dhayl al-Aʿlām li-l-Ziriklī. Qāmūs tarājim li-ashhar al-rijāl wa-l-nisāʾ min al-ʿarab wa-l-mustaʿribīn wa-l-mustashriqīn, Beirut 2002, vol. 2, pp. 74f.

124 In 1941, she published two articles about women from pre-Islamic and early-Islamic times. Born in Mardin in southern Turkey as the daughter of a Christian Arab merchant, she grew up in Mosul, Baghdad, and Bombay. In 1925, she went to study at the University of Boston and taught history at Ashbury College until 1933. Afterwards she was the first woman to be admitted to the College of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago, where she worked as a specialist for early Islamic manuscripts until her retirement in 1963. See Hambly, Introduction, p. 6.

125 See the critique of this view by Elsadda, Discourses, p. 44.

126 Ibid., p. 45.

The polemical al-ʿAqqad viewed women generally as footnotes to political and social history. Given the demands for equality, he argued for the natural differences between men and women, claiming that in every competition between the sexes, men proved to be superior. In relation to ʿAʾisha, he wrote that because of her passion, jealousy, and intrigue, she represented all the shortcoming of her sex, because women were driven by emotions in all actions and decisions. ʿAʾisha's interference in politics was not voluntary, but was manipulated by the Prophet's companions Ṭalḥat (Talhat) and Zubayr. As long as ʿAʾisha remained in her home, she could be seen as a model of virtue because the place of all women was in the home, not in politics or public life. Al-ʿAqqad explicitly rejected the demands for women's equality because this would amount to crossing borders between the strictly separated modern and traditional, public and private, male and female spaces. That ʿAʾisha ultimately regretted her political interference would also be the fate of all women's rights activists, according to al-ʿAqqad, since such women »are forgetful of their cultural identity and pursue Western issues and values«[127].

Saʿid al-Afghani's portrayal of ʿAʾisha had an anti-Shiite touch[128] in addition to its neo-patriarchal tone. He concluded from the events of early Islam that woman »was not at all made to stick her nose into the political disputes«[129]. Women had the tools to influence the masses, but the end results could not be good. Using the example of ʿAʾisha, God gave the Muslims an unforgettable practical lesson on the division of tasks. Women could do many jobs for the benefit of the *umma* and society as long as she first fulfilled her duties in the home and the family. »If she (then) finds more time beyond educational tasks and the housekeeping«[130], there would be enough other opportunities for activities. She could dedicate herself to charitable works (for the sick and poor), the fight against ignorance (education) and orphans. Even if women had no direct influence on politics, they determined by the way in which they educated the next generation whether their sons become »virtuous« (*faḍāʾil*) or »wicked« (*radhāʾil*) politicians[131]. In a footnote, al-Afghani even proposed a statistical survey of the proportion of married and beautiful women among the suffragettes in the West, suggesting that »the vast majority of them belong to those

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127  Quoted by Elsadda, ibid., p. 50.

128  See espically Saʿīd AL-AFGHĀNĪ, ʿĀʾisha wa-l-siyāsa, Cairo ²1957, pp. 268–290, where he justifies his anti-Shiite historiography (ibid., p. 290). As an affirmation of his view, he even quotes the statement of the Shiite reformer Muḥsin al-Amīn (ibid., pp. 278f.), who had demanded that Muslims should only accept what both Sunnis and Shiʿis consider correct because their differences were due to partisan chains of transmission and a mixture of right and invalid things.

129  Ibid., p. 285.

130  Ibid., p. 286.

131  Ibid., pp. 286f.

whom God has denied beauty, marriage and the wish to have children«[132]; therefore, he believed, they cherished their resentment against society, morality, and happiness on earth.

Sakakini's portrait is characterized by the fact that she explained neither ʿAʾisha's general actions nor her political commitment by trying to decipher the feelings in her soul, as Bint al-Shatiʾ subsequently did (see below). She, first of all, emphasizes ʿAʾisha's ambiguous position among the Prophet's wives. Her jealousy, documented in the sources, is not explained as an expression of her personal nature or as a result of »truly feminine feelings«, as in Bint al-Shatiʾ's work; it is essentially explained by the conditions of polygyny, that is, by a very specific social arrangement. Her jealousy essentially goes back to the fact that Muhammad, as a »human being« (*insān*)[133] and a Prophet, is also torn between his love and his message. This leads to the ambivalence that ʿAʾisha is, on the one hand, his absolute favorite as a wife and a scholar, but that she, on the other hand, had to endure the existence of other co-wives. Sakakini suggests that in this constellation ʿAʾisha was the one who suffered the most because her jealousy—whether overtly expressed or suppressed—was the result of simultaneous preference and neglect. Still, she had to endure this state of affairs because Muhammad's polygyny was necessary for the spread of Islam.

Among women's rights activists, the argument that the institution of polygyny *made* women jealous and vengeful was widespread—it was thought that it could even drive them to poison family members[134]. Sakakini picked up this argument in a short story called *al-Ḍarratān* (*The Two Second Wives*, 1944), by describing how two initially rival wives allied against the husband in order to thwart his plan to divorce one of the two to marry a third wife. They sprinkle powder into his food so that he eventually becomes insane, whereupon they take possession of his house. The short story can be read as a call for women's solidarity against polygyny.

In contrast, Bint al-Shatiʾ, who had no objection to the institution of polygyny, viewed ʿAʾisha's emotionality as part of her selfish nature. Sakakini instead used the expression »her temper« (*sajiyyatuhā*) not only to characterize ʿAʾisha's impulsive nature, but also her »natural« urge to acquire more and more knowledge and education, which made her more knowledgeable than all the (legal) scholars, who came to ask her for advice. ʿAʾisha learned the Quʾran by heart through close contact with the Prophet since her earliest childhood and acquired knowledge of religion by participating in his meetings, in which he answered those who asked questions or who did not know, »until ʿAʾisha knew the norms of religion and morals (*ādāb*) of

132 Ibid., p. 287, fn. 1.
133 Sᴀᴋᴀᴋīɴī, Ummahāt (1947), p. 45; eadem, Ummahāt (1962), p. 58.
134 See Oᴛᴛᴏssᴏɴ Bɪᴛᴀʀ, I Can Do Nothing, pp. 106f.

the Qu'ran by heart so that she used to represent the Prophet in every legal opinion she was asked about«[135].

> All her life she was engaged in strengthening the faith, education, and the legal guidance of women and did not stop to inform the men about what she knew about the *ḥadīth*, so they came to her because she was an authority on the stories about the Prophet, and probably her excellence (*faḍluhā*) resembled Khadija's excellence in organisation and finances. She was an efficient assistant to him in teaching people about the things of their religion and leading them back to goodness, guidance, and mercy. […] And if one thing proved to be difficult for jurists and religious scholars, they only fled to 'A'isha to ask her about it, and they already found knowledge about it with her, because she was more knowledgeable in religion and more educated in the norms and customs of the *sharī'a* than they were. Among the Prophet's companions, there was no one who transmitted more than she and Abū Hurayra, although she was earlier and more understanding than him and her method was wiser and more comprehensive in understanding and teaching, especially concerning women[136].

Thus, Muhammad wanted to make her

> an excellent model (*uswa ḥasana*) for believing women, so that the demand for knowledge becomes a duty for them as well as for men, which is a clear response and a powerful argument against those who advocate keeping women stupid and making their knowledge and education unattractive[137].

That is why the Prophet made her a »guarantor« (*za'īma*)[138] in law and religion and said: »Take half of your religion from this little red one« (*khudhū niṣf dīnikum 'an hādhihi ḥumayrā'*)[139]. In the slightly revised version of 1962, Sakakini even cites the last quote two times[140].

Using her example, Sakakini grounds central feminist concerns—female autonomy, girls' education, and political activism—in Islamic history and upholds the general claim that women had always played an important public role among the Arabs, especially in the formative phase of Islam. Sakakini is also quite outspoken about the fact that 'A'isha's defeat in the Battle of the Camel is a risk of every political

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135  Sᴀᴋᴀ̄ᴋɪ̄ɴɪ̄, Ummahāt (1947), p. 43; eadem, Ummahāt (1962), p. 56.
136  Eadem, Ummahāt (1947), p. 44; eadem, Ummahāt (1962), pp. 56f.
137  Eadem, Ummahāt (1947), p. 44; eadem, Ummahāt (1962), p. 57.
138  Eadem, Ummahāt (1947), p. 45; eadem, Ummahāt (1962), p. 57.
139  Eadem, Ummahāt (1947), p. 45.
140  Eadem, Ummahāt (1962), pp. 58 and 76.

activity. ʿAʾisha has this risk in common with male politicians, in this case with her male allies. Sakakini thus criticizes that the traditional image of ʿAʾisha did not correspond to historically transmitted facts; it was rather another expression of a general hostility towards women[141]:

> The revolt of the Mother of the Faithful was a reason for the historians' criticism and the mockers' rebuke so that people said in old and new times: What had ʿAʾisha to do in politics? Their talk was associated with resentment about all women, and many of them saw ʿAʾisha's willingness to fight as an illegal novelty (*bidʿa*) and riot (*fitna*) because for special reasons they cherished a feeling of hostility towards every woman and underestimated everything that comes from her.[142]

Regarding the alleged competition between ʿAʾisha and Fatima, Sakakini tries to tell the story differently, yet more in line with Sunni than Shiite tradition. She mentions that ʿAʾisha asked Muhammad, whom he loved the most, to which he replied that among the women Fatima was his most beloved and among the men her husband[143]. Immediately after this, Sakakini describes the event—which had also been transmitted several times—that the other wives sent Fatima to Muhammad to demand equal treatment with ʿAʾisha, whereupon Muhammad said with regards to ʿAʾisha: »Daughter, do you not (also) love whom I love? She said: Yes, I do. He said: I love this one.«[144]

Sakakini's final portrait of Fatima culminates in a reconciliation scene between the two women after Muhammad's death, skilfully combining a *ḥadīth* and one of ʿAʾisha's sayings. Sakakini opens the portrait of Fatima by describing ʿAʾisha persistently pressing the younger Fatima because she wants to know why she cried at first and then smiled after Muhammad whispered something to her; Fatima keeps silent, whereupon ʿAʾisha remarks: »I have never seen joy closer to grief than today.«[145] Shortly before Fatima's death, there is an open debate between the two women. In the underlying *ḥadīth*, the initiative originates from ʿAʾisha, in Sakakini's account from Fatima:

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141 At this point, Sakakini criticizes the formation of the tradition that Spellberg studied, see Spellberg, Politics, Gender.

142 Sakākīnī, Ummahāt (1947), p. 60; eadem, Ummahāt (1962), pp. 74f.

143 Eadem, Ummahāt (1947), pp. 27f.; eadem, Ummahāt (1962), p. 197. For this *hadith*, see for example Muḥammad b. ʿAbdallāh Abū ʿAbdallāh al-Ḥākim al-Nayshābūrī, al-Mustadrak ʿalā Ṣaḥiḥayn, Beirut 1990, vol. III, p. 239 (No. 4957).

144 Sakakini, Ummahāt (1947), p. 28; eadem, Ummahāt (1962), pp. 197f. See Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim IV, pp. 1299–1301 (No. 5984).

145 Sakakini, Ummahāt (1947), p. 22; eadem, Ummahāt (1962), p. 191.

In her thoughts, she [Fatima] went back to the secret that her father had entrusted to her and which she had kept concealed from 'A'isha, and as if she felt that her time was coming (soon), she wanted to clear up the matter with 'A'isha, […] and so she said to 'A'isha: »Do you remember the day, when I cried and then laughed, while the messenger secretly entrusted me with words and you were not far from us?« With a sigh and amazed, 'A'isha replied: »Of course, Fatima.« Fatima replied: »The messenger confided to me that Gabriel usually came to him once a year with the Qu'ran and that he came to him twice this year, and he therefore said that his time would come (soon) and I cried fearfully and terrified. When the messenger saw how frightened I was, he said: ›Fatima, wouldn't you like to be the first person in my house to follow me?‹ That's why I laughed, as you saw at the time.«[146]

Sakakini directly adds one of 'A'isha's well-known sayings, which she puts into direct speech: »Fatima, I know nobody better than you, except your father.«[147]

With this composition, Sakakini obviously intends to describe the relationship between 'A'isha and Fatima as a relaxed and friendly one. She uses three asterisks[148] to visually set these scenes in the chapter on Fatima apart from events after Muhammad's death—from the dispute between 'Ali and Abu Bakr over Muhammad's succession as well as from the dispute between Fatima and Abu Bakr over her inheritance[149]. Thus, Sakakini does not place the relationship between the two women in the context of the emergence of the Sunna-Shi'a conflict. If the civil war of the first century is also attributed to the jealousy between these two women—as is the case in Bint al-Shati''s account, for example (see below)—, Sakakini's differently told story of the relation between 'A'isha and Fatima represents an attempt to counter the ballast of pre-shaped, culturally powerful images with a gesture of reconciliation—although it may seem unsatisfactory from a Shiite perspective[150].

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146 Eadem, Ummahāt (1947), p. 35; eadem, Ummahāt (1962), pp. 204f. Once again, this *ḥadīth* has been transmitted several times, for example in Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim IV, pp. 1306–1308 (No. 6003, 6004, and 6005); also compare L. Veccia Vaglieri, Fāṭima, in: EI² II, p. 844 and Klemm, Die frühe islamische Erzählung, pp. 58f.

147 Sakakini, Ummahāt (1947), p. 35; eadem, Ummahāt (1962), p. 205. This statement can be found in Abū l-Qāsim Sulaymān b. Aḥmad al-Ṭabarānī, Al-Mu'jam al-awsaṭ, Cairo 1995, vol. III, p. 137 (No. 2721) and in 'Alī b. Abī Bakr Ibn Ḥajar al-Haythamī, Majma' al-zawā'id wa-manba' al-fawā'id, Beirut 1967, vol. IX, p. 201 (Bāb Manāqib Fāṭima).

148 See Sakakini, Ummahāt (1947), p. 31; eadem, Ummahāt (1962), p. 200.

149 Fatima claimed the possessions in Fadak, while Abu Bakr saw them as a charitable gift (*ṣadaqa*) and referred to Muhammad's saying (handed down via 'A'isha) that he did not bequeath anything. See Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim III, pp. 956–958 (No. 4351–4357) and L. Veccia Vaglieri, Fadak, in: EI² II, p. 725 and idem, Fāṭima, p. 844.

150 The literary scholar Mājida Hammūd holds the view that Sakakini (eadem, Ummahāt (1962), pp. 202–204) mentions only in passing that 'A'isha's father, Abu Bakr, withheld the inheritance from

Since Fatima is connected to the tragedy of Karbala through her son Husayn and her daughter Zaynab, she plays a special role as »passively suffering« and »eternally mourning«[151] woman, especially in Shiite theology. As a religious figure, she was used in the construction of a traditional role model, which is often understood as the »quintessence of Islamic womanhood«[152]. Therefore, the figure of Fatima was generally not very attractive for feminists and secular Muslims, as Bärbel Beinhauer-Köhler argued in her study[153]. This study, however, did not take Sakakini's text into account. Sakakini's intention to describe Fatima in spite of her crying and mourning not as a representative of the »weak gender«, but as a compassionate and—also in comparison to her husband—strong personality[154], seems to represent an exception in the middle of the twentieth century[155].

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Fatima and the caliphate from 'Ali. In this way, Sakakini downplays Fatima's political engagement whereas she overrates 'A'isha's. Author's conversation with Mājida Ḥammūd (22 August 2003, Damascus). A Shiite tradition according to which Fatima had a miscarriage due to the dispute with Abu Bakr and 'Umar and died as a result is not considered credible by Sunni authors; there is no chance at all that Sakakini or Bint al-Shati' would mention such an *ḥadīth*.

151 She is mourning (in the afterlife) for her father Muhammad and her son Husayn, see David Pinault, Zaynab bint 'Alī and the Place of the Women of the Household of the First Imāms in Shī'ite Devotional Literature, in: Gavin Hambly (ed.), Women in the Medieval Islamic World. Power, Patronage, and Piety, Basingstoke 1998, pp. 72–75 and 93; Bärbel Beinhauer-Köhler, Fāṭima bint Muḥammad. Metamorphosen einer frühislamischen Frauengestalt, Wiesbaden 2002; Klemm, Die frühe islamische Erzählung, pp. 76–78.

152 Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, Who is Fatima? Gender, Culture, and Representation in Islam, in: Journal of Middle East Women's Studies 1, 2 (2005), p. 2; also compare Klemm, Die frühe islamische Erzählung, p. 74, who also holds that Fatima represents the paradigm of the Muslim women *par excellence*.

153 Beinhauer-Köhler, Fāṭima bint Muḥammad, pp. 263f.

154 See pp. 233–235 of this study. Ḥammūd arrived at a different conclusion in her study of Sakakini's feminist discourse, see Ḥammūd, al-Khiṭāb al-qiṣaṣī, pp. 14–23. She also wrote a study on the political role of Fatima, see eadem, al-Sayyida Fāṭima al-Zahrā' wa-l-tarbiya al-islāmiyya, Damascus n.d. She criticizes that Sakakini does not represent Fatima as a strong woman, but rather—like other authors (ibid., p. 10)—essentially draws the traditional image of a crying woman weakened by her father's death. Author's interview with Mājida Ḥammūd, 22 August 2003. Fatima's constant mourning is, of course—as a form of self-sacrifice—a central component of the Shiite saintly legend and occurs in anticipation of the tragedy of Karbala, cf. see Klemm, Die frühe islamische Erzählung, p. 79, and Kahsani-Sabet, Who is Fatima?, p. 9.

155 It was not until 'Ali Shari'ati ('Alī Sharī'atī, 1930–1977) that the traditionally passive Fatima was re-interpreted as a political fighter and a sign of independence in *Faṭime Fāṭime ast* (*Fatima is Fatima*, 1971). He wrote that, although she was the daughter of the Prophet, 'Ali's wife and Hasan's and Husayn's mother, none of them was Fatima, only Fatima was Fatima; see Beinhauer-Köhler, Fāṭima bint Muḥammad, pp. 255–262 and Kashani-Sabet, Who is Fatima?, pp. 13–19. After the revolution in Iran in 1978/1979, such activist interpretations increased, sometimes criticized by traditionalists; see Stephan Rosiny, The Tragedy of Fāṭima az-Zahrā'. A Shi'a Historians' Debate in Lebanon, in: Rainer Brunner/Werner Ende (eds.), The Twelver Shia in Modern Times. Religious

In contrast, Beinhauer-Köhler considers al-ʿAqqad and Bint al-Shatiʾ exemplary for the dominant neo-traditional reading of Fatima because they pay attention neither to Fatima's scholarship nor to her resistance[156]. Al-ʿAqqad discussed Fatima's public appearance in detail, finally drawing the conclusion that every time it happened, it was due to her personal closeness to the men around her. Her struggle for her inheritance is simply explained by her motherly love and her care for her sons. Judging from the many prayers and poems attributed to Fatima, she cannot be considered a talented poet or a socially active woman by today's standards,[157] and her religious and scientific knowledge only corresponds to the ideal of an educated Muslim. Bint al-Shatiʾ »almost completely«[158] failed to assess Fatima's intellectual abilities—whether in poetry or political speech.

It is therefore reasonable to assume that Bint al-Shatiʾ continued al-ʿAqqad's and al-Afghani's neo-patriarchal discourse only from a female point of view because they portrayed Fatima and ʿAʾisha as being controlled by female instincts and emotions. It is telling that Bint al-Shatiʾ explained ʿAʾisha's political engagement, which she did not depict, solely by the fact that she »never forgave (ʿAli) his position in the libel affair[159] […] and she probably also did not forgive him for being the husband of az-Zahrāʾ[160], the daughter of her co-wife (*bint ḍarratihā*) Khadija, and the first mother of the faithful«[161].

Sakakini also regards ʿAli's position in the libel affair as the »germ« of the Battle of the Camel 30 years later[162]; yet, she also details the reasons for her political involvement and notes that ʿAʾisha finally regretted her decision to fight the battle due to the bloodshed and the death of the innocent[163]. She contrasts the battle scene with a scene of reconciliation. In any case, Bint al-Shatiʾ's reduction of ʿAʾisha's political commitment to her inner life is entirely in line with the fact that women generally are seen as emotional beings, especially in politics. Bint al-Shatiʾ does not treat the conflicts in Prophet's harem as questions of politics and power (as is the

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Culture & Political History, Leiden 2001, pp. 207–219. In post-revolutionary Iran, however, rebellious women like Zaynab were no longer seen as models, rather the traditional Fatima figure was again used as a model for non-revolutionary times, see Pinault, Zaynab bint ʿAlī, p. 94.

156 See Beinhauer-Köhler, Fāṭima bint Muḥammad, pp. 246–254. According to Beinhauer-Köhler, Kaḥḥāla also treated Fatima primarily as daughter, wife, and mother, see ʿUmar Riḍā Kaḥḥāla, Aʿlām al-nisāʾ fī ʿālamay l-ʿarab wa-l-islām, Damascus ²1958/1959, vol. IV, pp. 108–132.

157 Beinhauer-Köhler, Fāṭima bint Muḥammad, p. 249.

158 Ibid., p. 254.

159 ʿAli is said to have been one of those who advised Muhammad to divorce ʿAʾisha because there were enough other women.

160 Fatima's epithet can be translated as »The Shining«, »the Luminous«, or »the Brilliant«.

161 All quotes: ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, Nisāʾ al-nabī, p. 116. For a further analysis of this sentence see below.

162 Sakākīnī, Ummahāt (1947), p. 54; eadem, Ummahāt (1962), p. 68.

163 Eadem, Ummahāt (1947), p. 60; eadem, Ummahāt (1962), p. 74.

case with Nabia Abbott), but traces them back to emotions, love, and jealousy. The epithet »the beloved wife of Muhammad«[164] in the chapter heading is a key for understanding Bint al-Shati''s text—but not, as Elsadda thinks, because Bint al-Shati' is about to represent the special love relation between Muhammad and his »sublime beloved«[165]. Bint al-Shati' contiues to conjure up the political and sexual dangers of female power: »The Prophet did not have time for this female foolishness nor could he concede more than he did to Aisha, Hafsa and the rest of his wives«[166]. 'A'isha's subversive comment (»How quickly your God responds to your desires«[167]) to the fact that a Qur'anic verse was sent down just in the moment when Muhammad intended to marry Zaynab is also included in the series of female jealousies. Bint al-Shati' makes it clear that 'A'isha always managed to wrap Muhammad around her finger: »Among the Prophet's wives, 'A'isha was the most covetous for his love and contended most fiercely for it«[168]. Muhammad's »healthy human instincts« turn out to be nothing more than a human and serious weakness for 'A'isha. »Whenever 'A'isha's jealousy became too great, the Prophet still defended her by saying: ›If she could avoid it, she would not behave so.‹«[169] As a conspirer and »chief rebel«[170] she is also made responsible for the »factionalism«[171] among the Prophet's wives. This is also justified with her purely female selfishness because she was »truly feminine and responded to her sentiments quite naturally. Her acute jealousy after all was only a sign of profound love for her sole husband and a proof to her adherence to him and her irresistible desire to have him for herself«[172].

A thorough reading of Bint al-Shati''s chapter on 'A'isha—the longest in the whole book— shows that a pejorative basic tone permeates the entire description, in which not one single unrestrictedly positively interpretable sentence can be found. The final sentences of the chapter also call for a more precise analysis, since Bint al-Shati' here summarizes the goal to which 'A'isha has subordinated her life.

Bint al-Shāti' repeats the construction »she lived to« (*ʿāšat li-*) three times, starting with the admission that she »lived to become the first source in Hadith and Sunna and the Muslims learned from her half of the religion, as it was ordered by the Prophet«[173]. Then she added: »Aisha lived to correct people's opinion about the

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164  ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, The Wives of the Prophet, pp. 55–98.
165  According to Elsadda, Discourses, p. 51.
166  ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, The Wives of the Prophet, p. 82.
167  Ibid., p. 78. In Sakakini's works, I could not find this quote.
168  Ibid., p. 94.
169  Ibid., p. 93.
170  Ibid., p. 94.
171  Ibid.
172  Ibid.
173  Ibid., p. 97.

Arab woman and project a living ideal that fascinated the whole world«[174]. What remains open in this wording is whether ʿAʾisha's intended correction of people's opinion was successful and in what sense people were fascinated by her. In the following sentence, ʿAʾisha's purpose in life is described further with the words »she lived to participate in the life of Islam in the most violent way« (*tushārik fī ḥayāt al-islām aʿnaf mushāraka*)[175], or according to the English translator Matti Moosa: »She lived to participate vigorously in the history of Islam and to take a leading part in the great revolt (which gave a distinctive dimension to the history of Islam) against the Caliph ʿUthmān ibn ʿAffān and led armies against ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib«[176].

This wording draws attention to violence and a leading role in the conflicts of early Islam as her purpose in life, through which she presumably wanted to change people's views about Arab women. Both sentences suggest that ʿAʾisha acted differently from what was expected from an Arab woman; a direct judgement of this fascinating fact is missing as is clarification of the importance of her exemplary function. The judgement is left to a short addition, omitted in the English translation, stating, as already mentioned, that she never forgave ʿAli »his position in the libel affair (*firyat al-ifk*), and probably she did not forget that he was al-Zahrā's husband either, the daughter of her co-wife (*bint ḍarratihā*) Khadija, the first mother of the believers«[177]. In these formulations, the accusations against ʿAʾisha are summarized in a condensed form: her vindictive character, her leadership role in the schism of Islam, and her opposition to Khadija and Fatima. The passage has been deleted in the English translation, and also in some Arabic editions; the reasons remain a matter of speculation[178]. Apart from the above-mentioned reduction of ʿAʾisha's political commitment to her emotions, an implicit condemnation of ʿAʾisha is intended here in opposing her to Fatima and Khadija. As Khadija represents the traditional role model for the Muslim wife and mother, this wording reproduces the conflict between ʿAʾisha and Fatima on a different level.

Various sources confirm that ʿAʾisha complained vehemently about the fact that the Prophet could not forget his first wife Khadija[179]. Yet, Bint al-Shatiʾ suggests

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174  Ibid.

175  Nach dem arabischen Text: ʿAbd ar-Raḥmān, Nisāʾ al-nabī 1973, p. 116.

176  Eadem, The Wives of the Prophet, p. 97.

177  Eadem, Nisāʾ al-nabī 1973, p. 116.

178  Cf. eadem, Nisāʾ al-nabī, Cairo 1971 and Beirut 1979. Perhaps it plays a role that the author in this passage, even more clearly than in the previous sentence, took sides against ʿAʾisha and thus also blamed her for the Sunna-Shia conflict. It is possible that the translator wanted to spare his heterogeneous readership this implication. The book was published« in Pakistan for a mixed community of English-speaking Muslims.

179  See eadem, The Wives of the Prophet, pp. 40 and 42; Sakakini also mentions this, see Sakākīnī, Ummahāt (1947), pp. 19f.; eadem, Ummahāt (1962), p. 35. For an example from the Sunna, see Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim IV, p. 1298 (No. 5974).

that ʿAʾisha degraded the deceased Khadija to her own »co-wife«. Since »mother of the faithful« was ʿAʾisha's honorary title, Bint al-Shatiʾ's wording that there had been another, »first« »mother of the faithful« is an expropriation of the honorary title. The Prophet gave the symbolic title to ʿAʾisha (»Oh ʿAʾisha, you are mother of the believers«[180]), when she was jealous and feared for her position after Muhammad's Coptic wife bore him a young boy; the honorary title transfers the mother function from a reproductive to a symbolic level (see chapter V). Bint al-Shatiʾ's comparison between ʿAʾisha and Khadija, however, serves the purpose of devaluing ʿAʾisha by imputing to her that she saw herself as superior to Khadija, although the latter was the first Muslim woman ever and served as the Prophet's refuge in the difficult early days of the revelation. By weighing two women against each other and making one the standard for the other (or for all Muslim women), Bint al-Shatiʾ not only continues, in her own text, the factionalism for which she accuses the image that she has created for ʿAʾisha. Moreover, she also undermines an emancipatory viewpoint in many ways: She sets women's lives generally in relation to a single, absolute, and apolitical role model, which does not permit different standards, deviations, or developments. ʿAʾisha is not evaluated according to her deeds, knowledge, and achievements, but only in relation to the ideal of Khadija. If it is now claimed that ʿAʾisha lived to correct the people's opinion of Arab women, this can also be understood interlineally in the sense that Khadija represented the ideal that ʿAʾisha wanted to correct. Bint al-Shati concludes her work with the sentence, »her body was placed among those of the Mothers of the Faithful: Finally death had put an end to the jealousy and rivalry between her and them«[181]. Again, the implicit message is that the (good) mothers of the faithful were the others.

Bint al-Shatiʾ compared ʿAʾisha not only to Muhammad's first wife in an unfavorable way, but also to Muhammad's granddaughter. Already in *al-Sayyida Zaynab baṭalat Karbalāʾ* (1950), Bint al-Shatiʾ argued that ʿAʾisha had played the leading role in fueling the civil war[182]. In comparing ʿAʾisha's role at the Battle of the Camel to Zaynab's role at the Battle of Karbala (680 CE) and ʿAʾisha's defeat to the massacre of Husayn's supporters, Bint al-Shatiʾ stressed Zaynab's political skills. She concluded that Zaynab's role was less important militarily, but more important after the battle because she confronted Yazid, saved the rest of the family and kept the bloody memories alive for her community[183].

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180  See Sakākīnī, Ummahāt (1947), p. 48; eadem, Ummahāt (1962), p. 61.

181  ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, The Wives of the Prophet, p. 98.

182  See Hatem, ʿAʾisha Abdel Rahman, p. 21.

183  Ibid., pp. 21–23. In the Battle of Karbala Zaynab's brother Husayn b. ʿAli (Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī) was killed with his companions. She saved the life of her nephew ʿAli Zayn ʿAbidin (ʿAlī Zayn ʿĀbidīn), the only son of Husayn, who survived the battle because she clasped him protectively when the governor of Kufa tried to have him executed. This ensured the continuation of the lineage. Then she and her

I turn to Sakakini's depiction of Zaynab further below (see chapter V.2.2). With regard to 'A'isha it is important to conclude that Bint al-Shati' used her portrayal of Zaynab to degrade 'A'isha once again. Bint al-Shati' generally avoided calling 'A'isha a role model, which Sakakini did explicitly. In the second edition of her book, Sakakini even introduced a new sentence in the summary of her chapter on 'A'isha to underline this aspect: »She lived on for about 50 years after the death of her husband Muhammad to be a teacher for the Ḥadīth and Sunna Traditions and a *muftiyya* for what was doubtful to the legal and religious scholars […]«[184].

## 5. Summary: Opposing Ways of Rewriting the Tradition

The controversy between Widad Sakakini and Bint al-Shati' began with Bint al-Shati' questioning the veracity and accuracy of Sakakini's portraits. She held that Sakakini's portraits were one-sided, neglecting the emotional and feminine side of the depicted women. When she began to publish her own accounts of early Muslim women, it obviously became clear to Sakakini that Bint al-Shati' had opposed to her portraits not for historical reasons, but mainly because of the underlying emancipatory pathos. The difference between the two women's approaches crystallized in their explanations of Muhammad's polygyny. Bint al-Shati' understood polygyny as an institution that corresponded to a human and natural desire and, moreover, made the Prophet appear as a human being. Sakakini saw in Muhammad's multiple marriages an exceptional case, justified by the underlying social and political reasons that helped to forge the early Muslim community (*umma*). Thus, what the authors negotiated in their different approaches to the distant past were differing gender norms, pertaining to feminity as well as masculinity.

My further analysis of the texts about the central female figures 'A'isha and Fatima has shown that Sakakini was interested in re-writing history, thereby justifying 'A'isha's political adventure as well as drawing a harmonious picture of her relation to Fatima. She saw Muhammad as the women's liberator and depicted various female role models with the help of different early Muslim characters. She thus claimed authenticity for contemporary feminist demands and plural life plans by rooting them in early Islam. Bint al-Shati', in contrast, was content to produce a neo-traditional picture, zooming in on the women's emotions. She did not even find it necessary to elaborate on 'A'isha's political and military engagement. She left

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relatives were taken as prisoners to Caliph Yazid (Yazīd) in Damascus, whom she defiantly resisted in a speech before being released with the other prisoners; also see 'Umar Riḍā KAḤḤĀLA, Aʿlām al-nisāʾ fī ʿālamay l-ʿarab wa-l-islām, Damascus ²1958/1959, vol. II, pp. 91–99; Abū l-Faḍl Aḥmad IBN ABĪ ṬĀHIR ṬAYFŪR, Balaghāt al-nisāʾ, Beirut 1999, p. 31; PINAULT, Zaynab bint ʿAlī, pp. 69–98.

184  SAKĀKĪNĪ, Ummahāt (1962), p. 75.

it at the suggestion that this too was only a result of her negative feelings towards ʿAli and her jealousy towards Fatima and even towards Khadija.

As already mentioned in the introduction, it is astonishing that academic researchers have neither shed light on these differences nor understood that Bint al-Shatiʾ's books on women of early Islamic times are a response to Sakakini's work. Mervat F. Hatem credits Bint al-Shatiʾ for helping to shed light on the familial context of Muhammad's life, thus contributing »to a greater appreciation of his humanity as a husband«[185]—without grasping the underlying conflict about Muhammad's masculinity.

In her study of the image of ʿAʾisha, Hoda Elsadda supports the thesis that Bint al-Shatiʾ represented a »predominant liberal modernist discourse« that has to be distinguished from the »modern misogynist discourse« of somebody like al-ʿAqqad[186]. Elsadda even falsely claims that Bint al-Shatiʾ was the only woman to condemn al-ʿAqqad's misogynist views[187]. She justifies Bint al-Shatiʾ's use of the dichotomy of private and public spaces with the argument that Bint al-Shatiʾ wanted to make her presentation more acceptable to the (Islamic-Arab) public and to bring it into accordance with the dominant values about the place of women in society. Accordingly, when it comes to women's issues, Bint al-Shatiʾ should be seen as both liberal and conservative:

> She spoke up for women's rights but was also critical of many women activists. Her discourse might be described as a humanist modernist. She was critical of liberal nationalist discourses that seemed to champion a Western paradigm of modernization regarding women's liberation and emphasized the importance of following an Islamic path to liberation, one that avoided compromising our cultural heritage. […] She was capable of establishing a critical distance between herself and the dominant discourses on modernity adopted by many of her contemporaries[188].

This judgment turns Bint al-Shatiʾ into an exceptional kind of anti-colonial and culturally conscious Muslim writer. Yet, Bint al-Shatiʾ's statements about ʿAʾisha and Fatima, even those quoted by Elsadda, are revealing enough of her downright anti-emancipatory attitude. Bint al-Shatiʾ understates ʿAʾisha's and Fatima's public roles and avoids evaluating their role in politics. However, Elsadda judges:

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185  Hatem, ʿAʾisha Abdel Rahman, p. 15. Hatem also misdates the first publications of Bint al-Shatiʾs volumes, see ibid., pp. 14 and 18.

186  Elsadda, Discourses, p. 50 (all quotations).

187  Ibid., p. 53 and 63, fn. 29. Bint al-Shatiʾ and her husband Amin al-Khuli actually attacked al-ʿAqqad in the 1960s, see ʿAmīr al-ʿAqqād, Maʿārik al-ʿAqqād al-adabiyya, Sidon/Beirut 1974, pp. 219–222; Hatem, ʿAʾisha Abdel Rahman, pp. 12f.

188  Elsadda, Discourses, p. 53.

> Her [Bint al-Shati''s] marginalization of the political and interpretive role of 'A'isha indirectly affirms the dominant ideas about women's traditional roles in Islamic societies. As an authority on Islam herself, 'Abdel-Rahman failed to make a case for Muslim women's traditional roles as teachers, political leaders, and authorities on jurisprudence[189].

To my mind, Bint al-Shati''s discourse not only affirmed »indirectly« or unintentionally conservative ideas about women's public roles; this was the only goal of her text. She did not »fail« to make a case for emancipation; she deliberately abstained from doing so.

Interestingly enough, the word »traditional« appears in a double sense in Elsadda's statements: (1) There are the dominant neo-traditional ideas of Muslim women's role in society; (2) there is the (real) tradition of women's public appearance in early Islam.

While Sakakini actually argued against the neo-traditional interpretation of the past and in favor of the historicity of women's leadership roles, Bint al-Shati' whole take on the Prophet's wives was ruled by her interest in affirming the neo-traditional justification of gender hierarchy and downplaying traditional women's public roles, as I have tried to show in my analysis. Thus, Elsadda's judgement that Bint al-Shati' emphasized the cultural identity of Muslim women and showed a critical distance from the premises of Western modernity—something which is also visible in Sakakini's texts to a certain degree—does not relativize Bint al-Shati''s neo-patriarchal discourse. Rather, Bint al-Shati' publicly appeared in the role of the conservative woman and scholar who advocates neo-traditional gender norms. Bint al-Shati' and al-'Aqqad have taken a comparable distance to the Egyptian women's movement—Elsadda only classifies al-'Aqqad as a male misogynist, while she sees Bint al-Shati' positively, as a culturally conscious female voice. In her study, Elsadda herself gives numerous indications of how closely Bint al-Shati''s text is interwoven with neo-patriarchal arguments. For example, she mentions that Bint al-Shati' fought for a place in the institutions of mainstream Islam, which explains her conformist stance: »She seems to have decided not to shock the religious establishment by adopting what would have been perceived as revolutionary views on women's issues.«[190] This may be understandable due to her own biography and career opportunities; but it should not be mistaken as a great liberatory achievement. Although Ruth Roded also judges that Bint al-Shati' wrote »a more feminist biography of the Prophet than most of her male contemporaries«[191], she finally comes to a clear conclusion that is also supported by my analysis:

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189  Ibid.
190  Ibid., pp. 53f.
191  RODED, Bint al-Shati's Wives, p. 65.

'A'isha 'Abd al-Rahman does not elicit from the classical Islamic material the positive achievements of these women but rather dwells on the negative side of their domestic life. She uses her literary license to depict them in almost misogynist stereotypes. [...] The popularity of Bint al-Shati's stories of the women in the Prophet's life in the Arab world has an unfortunate outcome. The descriptions of women's vices fit in with stereotypes and conventions that are all too prevalent in this society. The fact that these negative images of women are portrayed by a woman, and an Islamic scholar as well, provides added legitimacy to their validity[192].

As already noted, the controversy between Sakakini and Bint al-Shati' was not only about gender norms. As the analysis has shown, their texts also involved other complex questions pointing to problems of the modern believers' interpretation of early Islamic history: the schism of Islam, the historical interpretation of Islam, the quest for Arab and Islamic unity, and finally the question about the relation between the Islamic past and modernity. I will discuss these questions in detail in the next chapter.

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192  Ibid., pp. 65f.

# V. Towards a Gender History of Early Islam?

On the following pages, I take a closer look at Widad Sakakini's narrative about the formation and consolidation of the Muslim community. I attempt to show how her actually simple women's legends are interwoven with bigger and more complex issues. I start by characterizing her way of writing, contrasting it with critical historical research (V.1). After that, I reconstruct the historiographical subtext of her work, which is closely connected to the traditional Muslim narrative about the formation of early Muslim community. I intend to show that according to this subtext, the Prophet's »household« reflects the amalgamation of the Muslim community and the Prophet's wives symbolize this amalgamation (V.2). Therefore, the consolidation of the Muslim community is also connected to the transformation of the pre-Islamic Arab marriage market and, when the pre-Islamic tribal society withers away, with new forms of distinction. This reconstruction of the subtext is followed by brief summaries of Sakakini's chapters on the Prophet's wives and daughters (V.2). In the third sub-chapter, I analyse how Sakakini's portrayals are connected to contemporary concerns and in how far they can be interpreted with the help of the *ʿudhrī*-concept that I already applied to the female figures in Sakakini's short stories (V.3). Finally, I sum up the main points of Sakakini's approach to the history of early Islam, which I have worked out in chapters IV and V, and discuss its possibilities and limitations in comparison to Bint al-Shatiʾ's approach (V.4). The leading question in this regard is whether the controversy between the two writers represents a conflict between secular and Islamic feminism.

## 1. The Context: The Historiography of Early Islam

It is important to note that neither Sakakini's works about early Muslim women nor my analysis thereof in the following chapter is text-critical with regard to the early Arab sources. What Sakakini did in her works is that she arranged the contradictory and fragmentary reports, whose chronology is often unclear, into a coherent narrative, thus giving her readers the impression that the women's biographies could be recounted as exciting and entertaining life stories. Whereas pre-modern Arab scholars were content to collect and juxtapose all sorts of different accounts they could find about a certain person, modern writers like Sakakini were concerned with presenting a coherent narrative. Sakakini's approach was in principle in line with the general and traditional Muslim view that Islam was revealed to turn the ancient Arab tribal society into a new Muslim community,

the *umma*. Yet, she re-wrote this viewpoint from a modern perspective. From a sociological point of view, it is therefore interesting to note that it was precisely in the course of the nation-building process since the end of nineteenth century and more specifically since the 1930s that many Arab authors began to deal anew with the beginnings of Islam[1]. They tried to make sense of the formation of the Muslim community in order to better understand how a modern Arab nation could arise again. Re-writing the historical genesis of Islam, they tried to understand the processes that were at work when the early community evolved in conflict with its enemies, but soon also in conflict with itself.

What I attempt in the following chapter is to make understandable how the use and construction of certain historical images of early Islam is closely related to contemporary affairs. How did the authors make sense of the de-stabilization and re-stabilization of social structures in early Arab society? How did Sakakini, who specifically asked about the women's role in these processes, try to authenticate contemporary feminist demands by re-writing portraits of the Prophet's wives?

Having said this, it is important to underline that I am mainly interested in the modern uses of pre-modern Arabic sources, not in analysing the relation between pre-modern and modern texts or in questioning the sources as such. Both these approaches would be equally legitimate, but entail a different sort of analysis. A text-critical approach could reconstruct the various strands of the transmitted reports and raise the question of which strand Sakakini chooses and which she discards; it could then attempt to give a clearer picture of her selective approach. However, I only hint at Sakakini's generally selective narrative in the cases that her approach strays away from the thrust of transmitted reports because she wants to underline a certain viewpoint, as is, for example, the case in the story about the relation between Muhammad and Zaynab bint Jahsh. It would be interesting to sort out how Sakakini's women's portraits differ from the portraits of the same female figures written a few centuries earlier by Arab authors[2]. However, such a research question would also require a study of its own and is impossible to achieve within the chosen approach.

Moreover, I do also not claim that Sakakini's narrative or my interpretation thereof comes close to the historical truth of the emergence of Islam in some way or

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1 On this point, see SMITH, The »Crisis of Orientation«, pp. 382–410; GERSHONI, Imagining the East, pp. 209–251; idem, The Reader, pp. 241–275; idem, Egyptian Liberalism in an Age of »Crisis of Orientation«. Al-Risāla's Reaction to Fascism and Nazism, in: International Journal of Middle East Studies 31 (1999), pp. 551–576; SING, Illiberal Metamorphoses, pp. 304–308.

2 See for example BEINHAUER-KÖHLER, Fāṭima bint Muḥammad; Maria SENOGLU, »Sie weinte und sie fiel in Ohnmacht.« Die weibliche Heiligenfigur im Spiegel der Ṭabaqāt-Literatur, Hamburg 2012; Doris DECKER, Frauen als Trägerinnen religiösen Wissens. Konzeptionen von Frauenbildern in frühislamischen Überlieferungen bis zum 9. Jahrhundert, Stuttgart 2013.

the other. Rather, with a critical perspective on the original Arabic sources and the modern use thereof, it would be possible to deconstruct Sakakini's narrative totally. This stems from the fact that it is questionable whether the picture painted by the early Arabic sources is accurate at all. For one thing, these sources were written relatively late, around two centuries after the events, so it would be surprising if they truly reflected the early days of Islam. Therefore, critical scholarship, at least of the last two or three decades, has increasingly casted doubt upon the credibility of the early Arabic reports because of their inconsistencies and gaps. In this sense, the historiography of early Islam has become a point of controversial debate in academia[3]. The questions raised do not only pertain to the course of historical events; rather, they concern the problem of whether it is even permissible to assume a close connection between the Qur'an and the Prophet's biography because the historical accounts of the Prophet's life were written so late and contextualize the Qur'an in a certain, unmistakably Islamic way[4]. New research has shown the extent to which the Qur'an is indebted to a Biblical subtext that has links to Jewish, Christian, Manichean, and Gnostic ideas[5]. These relations are obscured when the Qur'anic text is interpreted through the narrow lens of salvation history in Mecca and Medina, which was constructed much later, rather than through the much broader context of contemporaneous Late Antiquity in the sixth and seventh centuries. Viewing the Arabic sources with suspicion, critical historians have tried to read them against the grain and make greater use of non-Muslim sources to write an alternative history of the emergence of Islam[6], asking what identities early believers in Muhammad's message had, since when they considered themselves »Muslims« distinct from Jews and Christians, and when and how the Qur'an was collected, transmitted, and codified.

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3　For new approaches on the emergence of Islam and Arab history, see Fred M. Donner, Muhammad and the Believers. At the Origins of Islam, Cambridge 2010; Robert G. Hoyland, In God's Path. The Arab Conquests and the Creation of an Islamic Empire, Oxford 2015; Peter Webb, Imagining the Arabs. Arab Identity and the Rise of Islam, Edinburgh 2016; see also the discussion of these works in Robert G. Hoyland, Reflections on the Identity of Arab Conquerors of the Seventh-Century Middle East, in: Al-ʿUṣūr al-Wusṭā 25 (2017), pp. 113–140.

4　Stephen Shoemaker, Muḥammad and the Qur'ān, in: Scott Fitzgerald Johnson (ed.), Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity, Oxford 2012, pp. 1078–1108.

5　Gabriel S. Reynolds (ed.), The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context, London 2008; idem, The Qur'ān and Its Biblical Subtext, London/New York 2010; idem (ed.), New Perspectives on the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context 2, London 2011; Guy G. Stroumsa, The Making of the Abrahamic Religions in Late Antiquity, Oxford 2015; idem, Jewish Christianity and Islamic Origins, in: Benham Sadeghi et al. (eds.), Islamic Cultures, Islamic Contexts. Essays in Honor of Professor Patricia Crone, Leiden 2015, pp. 72–96; Daniel A. Beck, Evolution of the Early Qur'ān. From Anonymous Apocalypse to Charismatic Prophet, New York 2018.

6　A first, speculative and mostly failed attempt that opened the field for subsequent researchers was Patricia Crone/Michael Cook, Hagarism. The Making of the Islamic World, Cambridge 1977.

It is impossible to expect new insights for this debate from an analysis of the more or less uplifting and fictional portraits of Muslim women written by Widad Sakakini. It is incumbent on us to take her text and the underlying Arabic sources at face value and rather focus on how she makes selective use of them to drive her point home. In Sakakini's works, the historicity of the Prophet and the veracity of the Arabic sources are a pregiven fact. The Prophet's wives represent the growing Islamic community *en miniature*. Their community in Muhammad's household symbolizes the attempt to merge the various clans and tribes into a united community. By constructing such a coherent narrative from the sources, Sakakini retells the path from overcoming the old order to forming new hierarchies. As she emphasizes the role of women in this, the transformation of the marriage market also plays an important role, as we will see.

## 2. The Consolidation of the Early Muslim Community

### 2.1 Tribal Society, Marriage Market, and Distinction

Muhammad Husayn Haykal's and Widad Sakakini's idea that the Prophet's polygyny was necessary to the spread of Islam refers to the tribal society that the Prophet wanted to unite under the umbrella of Islam. The paradox is that both authors generally argue for monogamy[7]; yet, they justify Muhammad's polygyny with even more than four wives as a necessary institution in this context. In contrast, Bint al-Shati', who takes the institution of polygyny for granted, has no difficulty explaining it with reference to Muhammad's natural desires and his control over women, both of which she sees as issues separated from, but congruent with the message of Islam. Put differently, in Haykal's and Sakakini's approach, Muhammad's polygyny is inseparably linked with the emergence of Islam, although they are critical of the institution of the polygyny in general.

A further paradox is that Islam propagated the overcoming of tribal society, tribal solidarity (*ʿaṣabiyya*) as well as the genealogical principle of descent (*nasab*). Yet, the revelation of Islam took place within an intact tribal society. Therefore, in order to be successful, Muhammad and his followers were dependent on tribal structures and mechanisms despite their rejection of tribalism. The Muslim community, composed of members from numerous clans, initially acted like a new tribe in order to create the new Islamic alliance through marriage. Muhammad adopted the tribal marriage strategy to form an anti-tribal alliance. While the pre-Islamic marriage strategy

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7  See Sakakini's above-mentioned take on ʿAli's attempt to marry a second wife besides Fatima as well as her criticism of Bint al-Shati''s marriage as a second wife.

left the Arab tribal system and its *'aṣabiyya* untouched because the wives were usually integrated into their husbands' respective tribe, the advent of Islam caused a complete transformation of the marriage market that gradually turned the system of competing tribes into a single Islamic community. This was a conflict-laden process, however, because the old society opposed the transformation; rather, the distribution of supporters and opponents of the new message in Mecca followed the tribal structures more or less. Muhammad was seen as a representative of the underprivileged clan of the Banū Hāshim; most of his early followers hailed from their ranks or from other underprivileged clans. Muhammad's enemies often belonged to the ruling ʿAbd Shams, to whom the Umayyads belonged, and the Banū Makhzūm. There were, of course, exceptions, like ʿUthman, the later third caliph, who was an Umayyad, and two of Muhammad's later wives, Ramla bint Abī Sufyān and Umm Salama (Hind al-Makhzūmiyya), who hailed from ruling families and from clans opposed to Muhammad. In any case, the opponents of Muhammad in Mecca viewed the proclamation of Islam as a clash of clans and boycotted the clans of the Banū Ḥāshim and Banū Muṭṭalib. Meccans were expressly prohibited from marrying them or trading with them. In this critical situation, the clan loyalty among the Banū Hāshim proved intact because Muhammad's uncle Abu Talib (Abū Ṭālib), the father of ʿAli, protected the small group of Muslims, although he did not adopt Islam himself[8].

The Islamic liquefaction[9] of the tribal principle was experienced differently by men and women. For men, the dissolution of tribal borders marked a clear difference to the pre-Islamic period. With the advent of Islam, Muslims were no longer clearly assigned to a tribal association and its alliances, a dense and close-knit network of social ties; instead, they were members of a small, though growing community of solidarity. Members of the dominant clans therefore took a greater risk by converting to Islam because they had more to lose.

For women, on the other hand, tribal borders had been fluid even before Islam because women had already been traded between the clans and tribes as objects on the marriage market. With the emergence of Islam, members of the ruling clans tried to prevent their daughters and sisters from marrying Muslims. For Muslims in contrast, the most important criterion was no longer the descent of a woman (social capital), but her firmness in the new faith (cultural capital), which led to a higher appreciation of Muslim women given their scarcity on the marriage market. This rationalization of mine for the early changes in the Meccan marriage market

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8 Only Muhammad's uncle Abu Lahab (Abū Lahab) joined the opposition to Muhammad, which earned him and his lineage a lasting condemnation recorded in the Qur'an (Qur'an 111:1–4). Abu Lahab even dissolved the marriages between his sons and Muhammad's daughters (see below).

9 My analysis owes some inspiration to the work of Zygmunt BAUMAN, Liquid Modernity, Cambridge 2000. I borrow the notions of liquefaction and solidification from it.

reformulates Sakakini's—and the general Muslim—view that Islam made women better off. As evidence for this better position of women, it is usually cited that the pre-Islamic Arabs buried their unwanted daughters alive, according to the later Islamic tradition. Nevertheless, there are reasons to believe that the transformations on the marriage market due to Islam were more complex and significantly curtailed women's freedoms especially in choosing partners. In later texts, from 'A'isha's transmissions to literary sources, there are hints that pre-Islamic Arabs knew uxorilocal and polyandrous marriage practices that continued for some time in Islamic times, as especially Leila Ahmed has argued[10]. These practices, which gave women greater freedom of choice in sexual and marital matters, seem to have changed markedly toward patrilinear patterns with the advent of Islam[11]. It seems plausible that delegitimization of women's position prior to Islam by later Muslim writers and historians had to do with an attempt to eradicate such (»amoral«) practices; this could then be understood as not curtailing women's freedom, but rather strengthening their moral and social position in society. Although Sakakini did not address this point in her texts on early Muslim women, she would certainly agree with the view that the end of polyandry contributed to women's moral betterment (just as the end of polygyny would contribute to the betterment of men and women).

That Arab tribal society was possibly characterized by co-existing matrilinear and patrilinear principles, for which we only have indirect evidence through the later Islamic tradition[12], is interesting because it sheds a different light on the context in which early Muslim women actively participated in society and chose partners possibly against the will of their parents or clans. However, this idea will not be pursued further here; it shall suffice to return to the argument and the standard narrative to understand that the value of women in the marriage market would have increased even if we assume a purely patrilineal system. In patrilinear societies, gender asymmetry is already enshrined in the economy of symbolic exchange on the marriage market. Women are bearers of a symbolic value, which relates to their lineage and kinship, their social position, their religious merits, the observance of virtues, and their physical attributes. Men, as the subjects of marriage strategies, treat women as objects of exchange that circulate as symbols that are predisposed to seal alliances[13]. Against this background, the boycott of the rest of the Meccans led to a shortage of marriable women among Muslim men; they were thrown back on

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10 Ahmed, Women and Gender in Islam, pp. 41–78.

11 Ibid.

12 However, an example that uxorilocal practices can still be found under Islam is the Shiite *mut'a* marriage, which is often consummated in the women's home, for example by male pilgrims, merchants, or travellers.

13 See Pierre Bourdieu/Loïc J.D. Wacquant, Reflexive Anthropologie, Frankfurt a.M. 1996, p. 211.

marrying among their own small group of believers. Yet, as women are necessary for the survival of any community, this shortage increased Muslim women's value from the viewpoint of Muslim men. The result was that men from other tribes who joined Muhammad's call had to accept a higher degree of insecurity within the tribal fabric of Mecca, whereas women significantly increased their symbolic capital, at least for Muslim men, by doing so. This situation lead, typically, to marriage exchanges between Muhammad and his close companions, the later four »rightly guided caliphs«: Muhammad married 'A'isha and Hafsa, the daughters of Abu Bakr and 'Umar, the first two later caliphs; he married his daughters Ruqayya and Umm Kulthum to 'Uthman, the later third caliph, and his daughter Fatima to 'Ali, the later fourth caliph (see fig. 9). As these examples show, marriage exchange between believers was necessary to create stable bonds between the members of the emerging Islamic community. Thus, the early Muslims used tribal mechanisms to stabilize their anti-tribal community. Even before Islam, alliances between tribes were sealed by marriages in the same way.

With its move to Medina (Yathrib), the Muslim community also moved from the liquefaction of tribal solidarity to the solidification of a polytribal community. The Arabic sources explain the *hijra* with the fact that the traditionally unreserved protection of group members by the Banū Hāshim became questionable after both Abu Talib and Khadija had died in 619 and Abu Lahab had become the leader of the Banū Hāshim. Yet, in Medina, the Prophet's household formed, as it were, the symbolic nucleus of this new, polytribal community. It is therefore no coincidence that Muhammad married most of his co-wives in Medina after Khadija's death. In the documents referred to as the so-called »treaty«, »charta« or even »constitution« of Medina (*ṣaḥīfat al-Madīna* or *mīthāq al-Madīna*), the novelty of the alliance between the Muslim emigrants from Mecca and the eight tribal groups of Medina is postulated in paragraph two with the words: »They constitute one people (*umma wāḥida*) to the exclusion of others«[14]. In this new community, *'aṣabiyya* is replaced by Islamic faith and tribal loyalty by a federation of tribes, which at the beginning was still open to non-Muslim groups, most notably the Jewish tribes of Medina, who were included in the second part of the treaty.

The social problem for the establishment of a new community concerns the demarcation of friends, enemies, and strangers. The category of clearly identifiable »enemies« facilitates this boundary work and contributes to the identity of the new community. Thus, the identity formation of the young community in Medina was promoted by the conflict with the Quraysh. However, the non-Muslim groups

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14  Michael Lecker, Constitution of Medina, in: Fleet et al. (eds.), Encyclopaedia of Islam Three.

were not fixed to one single category, but in the course of time, Quraysh, Jews, and Bedouin move from one category to the next[15].

Although the Muslim community was constituted ideologically as an overcoming of tribalism and practically in opposition to the hostile clans in Mecca, it was possible for previous enemies to be accepted into the Muslim community. Muhammad's marriages reflect this transformation of the categories of friends, enemies, and strangers, as he married women from all of these categories, partly to change the categorization of a certain group, partly as a reaction to its changed status.

After the treaty of Ḥudaybiyya (628), the Muslims aimed to enforce that Islamic solidarity was valued more highly than tribal solidarity[16]. They granted Muslim women, who had fled their non-Muslim Meccan husbands, asylum in Medina and considered their marriage bonds to be dissolved—if the Muslim woman passed an examination of her faith. In other words, Muslims aspired to establish faith as an essential criterion for the continuation of a marital relationship.

With the expansion of Islam over large parts of the Arabian Peninsula and the integration of the most important tribal organizations into the Muslim community, the old friend–foe scheme practically became obsolete. After the liquefaction of the tribal system and the solidification of the new community, the Muslim community now entered the third phase of its formation, the phase of distinction. After the triumph of Islam, internal competition began among the theoretically though not practically equal people. Muslims were distinguished by whether they had declared their faith early (*sābiqa*)[17] or late, whether they were Meccans, had emigrated to

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15 According to the traditional accounts, the three (main) Jewish tribes of Medina moved from the category of friends or suspect strangers to the category of enemies. This is also visible in Sakakini's account of Safiyya (see below). According to the sources, they did not accept the Islamic message, so that they were accused of violating the treaty of Medina on various occasions. After the Battle of Badr (624), the Banū Qaynūqāʿ were driven out of Medina and their belongings were confiscated. After the Muslims' defeat at Uḥud (625), the Banū Naḍīr were accused of having made common cause with the Meccans. Their palm plantings were chopped off and they fled to the Khaybar oasis. Muhammad led his troops there in the following years in order to subdue them and impose high tribute on them. The Banū Qurayẓa were accused of collaboration with the Quraysh after the War of the Ditch (627); according to tradition, the Jewish men were therefore killed, women and children captured, and their property confiscated. For a critical analysis of the Arabic accounts, see Marco Schöller, Exegetisches Denken und Prophetenbiographie. Eine quellenkritische Analyse der Sīra-Überlieferung zu Muḥammads Konflikt mit den Juden, Wiesbaden 1998; idem, Qurayẓa (Banū al-), in: Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾan IV, pp. 333–335.

16 With the signing of the treaty, the Quraysh in Mecca no longer considered Muhammad a rebel, but a negotiating partner and representative of Medina, and they allowed Muslims still living in Mecca to practice their faith.

17 The *sābiqa* principle soon became a category of debate, especially after Muhammad's death, when the question of who should lead the community was debated. The question of who was the first (male) Muslim after Khadija is still controversial among Muslims today: Shiite Muslims assume that it was
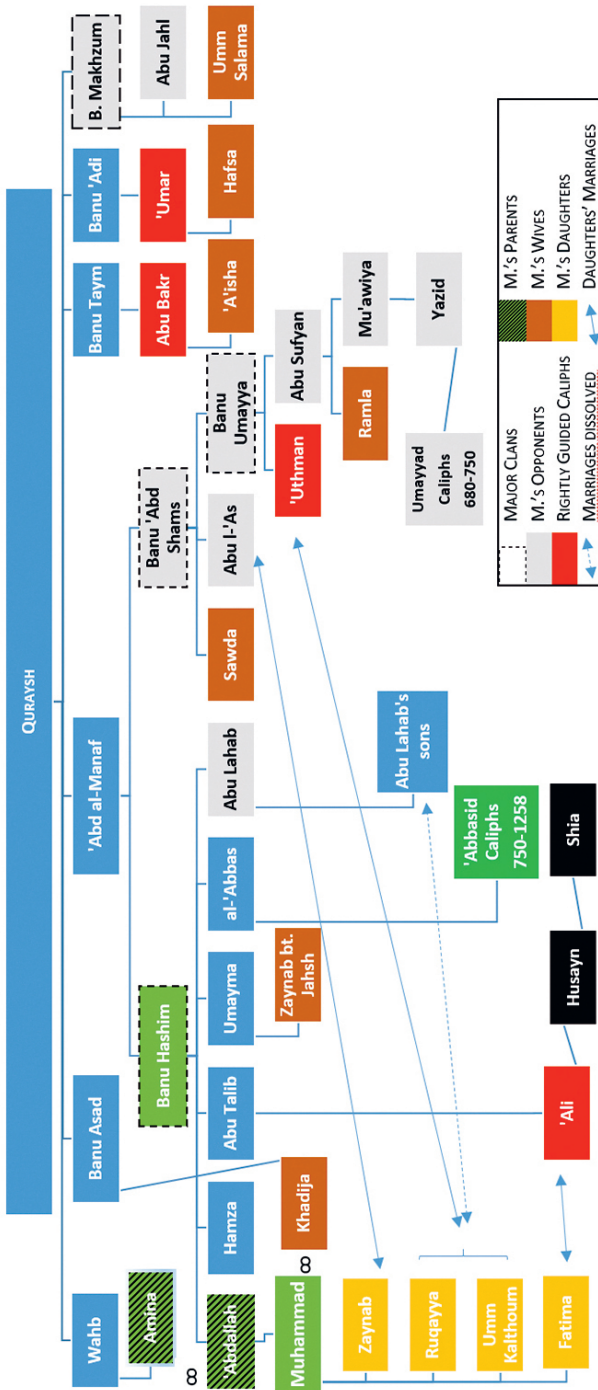
Fig. 9   The Tribes of Mecca and the Prophet's Family Relations (Simplified Pattern)
Source: Manfred Sing

Abyssinia or Medina (*muhājirūn*), whether they were Medineans (*anṣār*), Bedouin or converts, and whether they were closely related, distantly related, or not at all related to Muhammad. The moment the Muslims had won the confrontation with the old form of tribalism and their own tribal federation had expanded to its limits, the new-old tribal structures could re-appear as distinguishing criteria within the community. The replacement of the tribal society as a principle of order did not lead to the merging of different tribes, clans, and groups into a community of indistinguishable believers, but to new forms of Islamic distinction, which transferred the merits of individuals to their collectives and collective merits to individuals.

In the beginning, Muslims had rejected the parentage principle because of the hierarchy associated with it, which gave the Banū Hāshim a lower rank within the Meccan community; ideologically, they opposed the tribal society to an Islamic ethos of equality and solidarity. As they failed to overthrow tribal hierarchy in Mecca, they were forced to emigrate. When the old hierarchy and the old parentage system abdicated, Muslims were able to replace it with a new hierarchy. The genealogical principle was reinterpreted according to new Islamic criteria, whereby the lineage from the Prophet's house, the *ahl al-bayt*, and his clan, the Banū Hāshim, became a prestigious factor. The enforcement of such new hierarchies is part of the struggle over power and authority, aimed at negotiating, justifying, and abolishing privileges. In the struggle for power, political rivals tend to toss their previous, undeniable merits into the ring—especially when conflicts emerge that cannot be decided by rational arguments alone because they are based on divergent, and for each side legitimate interests and claims.

The growing consolidation of the Muslim community also changed the marriage rules and options. Firmness of faith was no longer the sole or most important marriage criterion. Descent, social position, and wealth (social and economic forms of capital) were rehabilitated and gained ground. This change is also evident in Muhammad's decisions because he not only married widows of early Muslims, but also daughters of non-Muslim tribal leaders.

The biographies of early Muslim women reflect the three phases in the formation of the early community. As Sakakini justifies Muhammad's polygyny for Islamic reasons, she aims to present his wives as active participants in the formation process of the early community. Against the background of the obviously asymmetrical gender relationship, which is particularly evident in polygyny, she underlines the symbolic capital of these women and describes circles of legitimization between them and the Prophet. The prestige of those wives, who were early Muslim women,

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Muhammad's cousin 'Ali, while Sunnis consider Abu Bakr, the father of 'A'isha, to be Muhammad's first male follower. From the Shiite point of view, the judgment of the Prophet's companions depends not only on the *sābiqa* principle, but also on the question of whether they supported 'Ali's claim to the caliphate.

depended on their endurance of hardship at the hands of the »enemies« and the deprivations to which they had been exposed. The more profound the hardship and the more ardent their belief, the higher the rank within the community. Often, the marriage to Muhammad can be seen as a reward for the Islamic capital, which such a woman accumulated through great personal sacrifices. The marriage with the Prophet obviously adds additional prestige. Numerous anecdotes enable Sakakini to refer to the important influence that the women, and especially 'A'isha, had on Muhammad's behavior in critical moments. Power, knowledge, and acknowledgment not only flow from Muhammad to his wives, but also from his wives back to him.

Yet, the status and position of the wives also reflect the new processes of distinction inside the early community. They are distinct from the mass of the believers, but also among themselves. In this respect, Sakakini and Bint al-Shati' already express a far-reaching difference in their reading of the women's positions in their respective books' titles. Bint al-Shati' gave her work the title *The Prophet's Wives* (*Nisā' al-nabī*) and thereby indicated the polygynist asymmetry—the singular »Prophet« versus the plural »wives«. Sakakini entitled her work *The Mothers of the Believers*, whereby she emphasized the importance of the women as symbolic »mothers« for all Muslims, without referring to polygyny and the associated asymmetries. The title no longer denotes a hierarchical relationship between the Prophet and his wives; instead, it indicates an exalted position of the women in relation to the mass of the believers and in Islamic history. Thus, the book title already introduces the women's symbolic capital, without directly mentioning that their symbolic capital partly originated from the marriage with the Prophet or that it was increased thereby. What is particularly striking is the re-coding of the term »mother« in this context. The word no longer refers to the childbearing function and the associated symbolic overtones (fertility, motherhood, reproduction, traditional female role). Instead, as Sakakini explains, the title goes back to 'A'isha's childlessness and unfulfilled maternity[18] because Muhammad gave her the title when his Coptic wife bore him a child. Thus, »mother of the believers« is an honorable title that expresses social and religious distinction, the belonging to the Prophet's house as well as the *sābiqa* principle.

Muhammad's various wives are not only distinguished by their high symbolic capital, but they are still identifiable as representatives of the old tribalism by their lineage and by the group that they represent in the Prophet's household. Thus, the thesis can be argued that there is an almost perfect, albeit complex, because changeable homology between the rank of a wife within the hierarchy of Prophet's household and the rank of the group that she represents within the community. The struggles of a Prophet's wife for recognition among her peers are like the

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18  Sakākīnī, Ummahāt (1947), pp. 47f.; eadem, Ummahāt (1962), pp. 60f.

struggles of the group she represents in the *umma*. Her position is relational on two levels: A woman's position in the power field of the Prophet's household is not only determined by her relationship with the other women, but also pre-determined by the (tribal) group to which she belongs. In addition, her position in the house of the Prophet is likely to influence the standing of her group. In her portrayals, Sakakini often makes visible the respective motivations, positions, and dispositions of every woman as well the psychology of her conflict strategy or her conflict-avoidance strategy.

The conflict-laden coexistence of the women in the Prophet's house can be seen as a mirror of larger social tensions. The changing composition of the growing Muslim community entailed fights over ranking order among its groups as well as among the Prophet's wives. The ranking was by no means uncontroversial because different types of prestige were set off against each other and in turn led to internal struggles for prestige. The rank of each wife in the power field of the household is dependent on different criteria, last but not least on Muhammad's relation to her. His statement that 'A'isha is his favorite among his wives places her in the center of the power field. Muhammad's relationship with his wives is further based on common rules and rituals, through which the power structure is consolidated; the most obvious example for this is the ritual that he alternately visits every woman and thus treats them »equally«. However, as the harem grows larger over time, the ritual and thus the structure of power is subject to constant change and cannot become a routine, in which power functions smoothly. With each new wife, the positions of the other women are renegotiated. The results are internal jealousy, fights for rank, and sometimes open criticism of 'A'isha and Hafsa, who hold a privileged position.

The positions of the other wives can be determined by their distance from the center of power, which is represented by 'A'isha and Fatima. The other wives appear in Sakakini's book as loyal servants, followers, unruly outsiders or strangers. In spite of all the conflicts and Muhammad's temporary withdrawal, the women accept the hierarchy by submitting, avoiding conflict, and settling for a less influential position. In doing so, they recognize the hierarchy through their behavior, even if they may be critical of it. Thus, they make a significant contribution to the legitimation of the prevailing order.

In this sense, Sakakini's work shows these women as actors in a wider sense because they pursue their own interests in competition with one another, without losing sight of the common good, despite the mutual rivalry. As individuals, they occupy a high, yet subordinate position alongside Muhammad; as representatives of social groups, they act as objects of exchange to seal alliances, but also as representatives of group interests; as the Prophet's wives, they compete for positions in a field of power with the help of their symbolic capital, which springs from their individual and social dispositions.

The conclusion that can be drawn from this analysis of the subtext is that gender hierarchy and female agency existed alongside each other, as did tribal society and Islam. They were not only antagonistic; they were also complementary. Even if Muhammad's polygyny is to be understood as an expression of the Islamic ethos of equality, it basically presupposes the asymmetry between the sexes and between the Arab tribes.

Given that Muhammad was committed to women's liberation—assuming that Sakakini's argument is correct—the ambivalence of the early Muslim community towards tribal mechanisms parallels the struggle for women's emancipation within and against patriarchal structures. Although Muhammad and his followers at first rebelled against the existing social hierarchies, they were not able to wholly overcome tribalism and patriarchy (if that was their intention at all). Instead of abolishing hierarchies altogether, the new community introduced new forms of distinction. Interpreted in this way, Sakakini's approach holds that the Prophet's wives acted under unfavorable tribal and patriarchal conditions, yet were able to live relatively independent lives according to the circumstances in which they lived.

## 2.2 Summaries of the Women's Portraits

### 2.2.1 The Prophet's Wives

(1) **Khadija** (Khadīja bint Khuwaylid), the first wife of Muhammad, represents the loyal woman at his side and the mother of his four daughters. She was his great backer, advised him, and knew him better than he knew himself. She sensed before him that the revelation would reveal itself to him. The metaphysical event was heralded by two signs: the prophecies of a (Syrian) monk and Khadija's dreams, i.e. through visionary and subconscious knowledge. Waraqa b. Naufal, an uncle of Khadija's and one of the monotheists before Islam in Mecca, served to mediate between the two levels. He interpreted Khadija's dreams in the right way. Since Khadija took the omens seriously, she could interpret the first signs of the revelation correctly, strengthening Muhammad in his role as a prophet and motivating him to preach. This was her legacy because once Muhammad's accepted his prophetic role, the flow of revelation never stopped and the victory of faith was assured. When Khadija, »who dedicated her life to him«[19], died, Muhammad thought that he had lost everything. However, his message had prevailed due to Khadija's loyalty,[20] as

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19  Sᴀᴋᴀᴋɪɴɪ̄, Ummahāt (1962), p. 34. For similar ideas in the first edition, see eadem, Ummahāt (1947), p. 17.

20  Eadem, Ummahāt (1962), p. 35. This is not so clearly expressed in the first edition, see eadem, Ummahāt (1947), pp. 18–20.

Sakakini writes. Moreover, that she bore him four daughters also ensures, physically and spiritually, the transmission of Muhammad's message to coming generations. Sakakini's depiction is very close to the traditional picture.

(2) **'A'isha** ('Ā'isha bint Abī Bakr) represents not only the favorite wife but also the figure of the master's first student in Sakakini's account. As such, she is described as smart, cunning, and ambitious. Sakakini underlines this by claiming that 'A'isha represented the Prophet in his absence, knew Islam better than the Prophet's male companions and that—according to an above-mentioned famous *ḥadīth*—she represented »half of the faith«. 'A'isha was keen to defend and secure her central position and saw every new wife as a potential rival; through this behavior, however, she also reinforced other people's doubts. Therefore, 'A'isha's position of power was unstable and repeatedly questioned, by other women as well as by men. The accusations of sexual (libel affair) as well as political (Battle of the Camel) misconduct against her were symptomatic of this. Since her position depended on Muhammad's approval, his hesitation during the defamation affair was a severe blow to her. It took a revelation (Qur'an 24:2–20)[21] to convince him of her innocence. Sakakini deals with this affair in detail[22] and connects it to another episode, Muhammad's one-month retreat from all of his wives, which brought the whole system of multiple wives to the verge of collapse (see below under »Hafsa«). As already mentioned, Sakakini tries to make 'A'isha's motivations for her actions visible by pointing out that 'A'isha assumed her subjective responsibility for the Muslim community when she went to the Battle of the Camel. After her failure, she withdrew, gave up her central position in the power field and immersed herself in religious studies. Thus, Sakakini's motif of a woman's withdrawal from the world and her immersion in spiritual exercises reappears here. Sakakini explains that the point of 'A'isha's retreat was that she henceforth lived to transmit *ḥadīth* and *sunna*, and became a »source of reference for both men and women«[23].

(3) **Hafsa** (Ḥafṣa al-Khaṭṭābiyya, Ḥafṣa bint 'Umar) was the woman whom Muhammad married after 'A'isha. In many ways, she looks like a copy of her. Like 'A'isha, she was the wise daughter of a close companion of the Prophet and his »second student« (*tilmīdha thāniya*)[24]. Equal in birth and position to 'A'isha, she did not look for confrontation, but for friendship with her in order to benefit from her

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21 The central passage is Q 24:12–13: »When you [first] heard about it, why did not the faithful, men and women, think well of their folks, and say, ›This is an obvious calumny‹? Why did they not bring four witnesses to it? So when they could not bring the witnesses, they are liars in Allah's sight.«

22 Sakākīnī, Ummahāt (1947), pp. 50–55 and eadem, Ummahāt (1962), pp. 64–69.

23 Eadem, Ummahāt (1947), p. 58 and eadem, Ummahāt (1962), p. 72.

24 Eadem, Ummahāt (1962), p. 87.

power position in voluntary submission. Through her loyalty, she strengthened 'A'isha's central position, returned her friendship and secured her exclusive position. Her father 'Umar, however, treated Hafsa as an instrument to secure his own power and his equality to Abu Bakr. He warned his daughter to not compete for the heart of Muhammad and to be with 'A'isha not against her; she should strive to get the approval of her colleague (*riḍā naẓīratihā*), who is her peer in descent and modesty (*nasaban wa-adaban*)[25].

A comparable strategic subordination would make 'Umar caliph after Abu Bakr. 'Umar was particularly annoyed when Hafsa did not unproblematically fulfil his wishes. Hafsa could not pursue her own goals independently because she also represented other interests in the person of her husband, father or brother.

Moreover, Sakakini presents her biography as a psychological drama. Since Hafsa repressed her own feelings because of patriarchal interests and her friendship with 'A'isha, she could not bear a further subordination of her interests when new female competitors arrived. When 'A'isha was annoyed due to the new spouse Umm Salama (Hind al-Makhzūmiyya), she rushed to Hafsa, who immediately shared her feelings, and together they stormed to Muhammad to vent their anger. Thus, Hafsa freed »her oppressed soul« (*nafsuhā l-makbūta*)[26], as Sakakini claims. Sakakini again skilfully combines different accounts; in other reports, the wives' rebellion is triggered by Muhammad's breaking of his own rules[27]. According to Sakakini's account, Muhammad did not initially resent the outburst of anger. The crisis only took shape through male intervention ('Umar) and male disciplinary measures (Abu Bakr, 'Umar, Muhammad). First, 'Umar confronted his daughter and accused her and 'A'isha of improper behavior; he said that the Prophet's wives should be exemplary mothers of the faithful, but could not even control their jealousy. When the rumor finally spread that the wives had plotted against the Prophet, Muhammad did not leave the house. Abu Bakr and 'Umar went to see him and found him in an unusual mood: he refused to deal with his wives. 'Umar threatened to beat his daughter because he considered her the cause of the trouble. Finally, news spread

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25  Ibid., p. 81.

26  Ibid., p. 82.

27  The sources also allow the construction of a different chronology of events. According to a version transmitted by al-Ṭabarānī (d. 971) and al-Bayhaqī (d. 1066), 'A'isha and Hafsa protested against Muhammad's preference for the concubine Mariya. When Hafsa left her hut one day, Muḥammad summoned Mariya. When Hafsa returned earlier than expected, she surprised the two »in my hut, on my own day, and in my own bed«. Since the situation was embarrassing to the Prophet, he promised that he would no longer sleep with Mariya, if Hafsa did not tell anybody. Yet, she told 'A'isha, and the two could not keep the matter to themselves. The Prophet was indignant and at first wanted to spend a whole month with Mariya. The rumor then spread that he had divorced his wives, but he finally decided otherwise. This version was picked up by Maxime RODINSON, Muhammad, London 1985, pp. 280–282.

that Muhammad had completely withdrawn from his wives as a punishment. 'Umar visited him again and hassled him until he finally decided not to divorce his wives, but only left them for a month.

The disciplining of Hafsa and the other wives was justified by the greater cause—the prophethood and the message of Islam—and enforced with the threat of violence and punishment. The women were made compliant by male forms of power: Male authoritative power (as father and as Prophet) was exercised in conjunction with male agency (isolation, sanctioning) and instrumental power (threat of physical and moral punishment)[28]. Sakakini suggests that the disciplinary measures were successful by stating that after the crisis, Hafsa no longer took offense, when Muhammad married another woman. The tamed Hafsa was finally rewarded with a central role in collecting the Qur'an. She was entrusted with the collected pieces of Qur'anic suras and made a significant contribution to the preservation of the Qur'an[29]. One could deduce—against the grain of Sakakini's account—that Hafsa's disciplining and her acceptance of male authority in the service of the Islamic cause, predestined her to participate in the preservation of the central authority of Islam, the Qur'an.

(4) **Ramla** (Ramla al-Sufyāniyya, Ramla bint Abī Sufyān) was the renegade daughter of one of Muhammad's archenemies. Thus, as one of the Prophet's wives, she embodied the anticipated surrender of the old order. Although her father Abu Sufyan (Abū Sufyān) was among Muhammad's main opponents, she became one of the first Muslims and recognized the signs of the times faster than most representatives of the old elite. That the Prophet's call reached her not only proved the appeal of his message, it also showed that the old order's power and legitimacy was waning because the leader of Mecca had lost control of his own daughter. Abu Sufyan suffered the blow that Ramla was one of the first Muslims and that Muhammad was able to marry her because he regarded this marriage as »an aid in *jihād*«[30], which paved the way to conquering Mecca.

The Ramla figure combines the old and new prestige principles: descent (*nasab*) from the ruling Quraysh and early service to Islam (*sābiqa*). This constellation brought Ramla prestige because she opted against her inherited privileges and

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28  For the different forms of power, see Heinrich Popitz, Phenomena of Power. Authority, Domination and Violence, New York 2017.

29  According to the tradition and Sakakini's account, Hafsa had already learned to write from a woman teacher before her marriage. Therefore, she became an important source for *ḥadīth* and Qur'anic verses. When Abu Bakr and 'Umar began to collect the Qur'an in written form during their caliphates, they chose Hafsa to keep the collected pieces, before 'Uthman took the first copy of the Qur'an from her and had copies made of it.

30  Sakākīnī, Ummahāt (1962), p. 129.

joined the new faith despite the resistance of her clan. However, as long as the old order had not surrendered, she had to pay a psychological price, visible in a constant conflict of conscience and loyalty.

'A'isha only looked at the new one from afar because she could not bear »someone entering the house of the Messenger who is superior in her reputation and knowledge and surpasses her in parentage and virtue«[31]. However, no conflict arises between the two wives because Ramla was preoccupied with the confrontation between her husband and her father. Her father's anti-Islamic actions loomed like a shadow over her. When the Meccans grew more worried after the Battle of the Ditch, they sent Abu Sufyan to Muhammad's camp to find out what the Muslims were planning. On this occasion, he visited his daughter, who wanted to meet him, but was unsure how to treat him since she had fled his tyranny and he was still her husband's enemy. She pointed out to him that as an unbeliever he cannot sit on the Prophet's pillow. When he visited Muhammad and his companions, he was humiliated again because, apart from 'Ali, no one spoke to him. Ramla was ashamed of her father, wished to be reconciled with him and hoped for an end to the bloodshed between the two sides. She followed the news »as if sitting on a fire«[32] and was relieved to hear about her husband's victory and the amnesty for her father. Abu Sufyan converted to Islam and—on Muhammad's order—remained the tribal leader due to his influence.

According to Sakakini, Ramla could now appear with »her head held high and full of dignity«[33] among the other women. With the surrender of the Meccans, the Muslims' situation had changed completely. Now was the time to overcome the old mistrust, but Ramla had to wait for 'A'isha's initiative: »'A'isha, who was proud of her father and his (early) way forward in Islam, looked at her companion and approached her then, but the latter preferred to keep a safe distance in order to not increase her anger.«[34] Because 'A'isha was serious, however, a new friendship arose between the two. When the older Ramla died, »Hafsa and 'A'isha recited a *sūra* from the Qur'an for her spirit and recalled the burdens and pains that Ramla had endured in her life, before she reached her last rest in the neighborhood of the previous faithful women and in the city of her husband, the messenger (of God)«[35].

The Ramla figure shows the rapid, consensual gathering between the leaders of the old and new orders after the conflict has ceased, with the representative of the old order (Ramla) leaving the leadership to the representative of the new order ('A'isha). After Ramla's conflict of loyalties was finally resolved, Ramla pursued a

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31  Ibid., p. 130.
32  Ibid., p. 133.
33  Ibid., p. 134.
34  Ibid.
35  Ibid., p. 135.

conflict avoidance strategy towards 'A'isha because she did not want to enflame a new conflict. Therefore, 'A'isha could easily co-opt and honor her because this kind of conciliatory act even increased her own prestige.

(5) **Sawda** (Sawda al-'Āmiriyya) embodied the good soul in the house of Muhammad. She was the first woman Muhammad married after Khadija's death, while he was still in Mecca. Sawda and her husband were among the participants in the first *hijra* to Abessiniya, but returned believing that the hostilities with the non-Muslims in Mecca had stopped. After a short time, her husband died of an illness and left her »without help and occupation«[36]. Muhammad realized that these trials threatened Sawda's faith and married her so that she took care of his four children—Fatima, Zaynab, Ruqayya, and Umm Kulthum. When Muhammad married 'A'isha, Sawda soon felt »like a prisoner in her husband's house«[37]. One day when he came to her to ask if she wanted a divorce, she replied, despite her jealousy, that she did not want to be for him a wife like 'A'isha, but was content to be near him and make him happy. Of lesser social standing, she constantly felt set back, but finally even gave her right to spend the night with Muhammad to 'A'isha.

(6) **Maymuna** (Maymūna Hilāliyya, Barra bint al-Ḥārith) was part of the collective figure of the »faithful sisters« (*al-shaqīqāt al-mu'mināt*), a group of four sisters, who were among the first Muslims and emigrated to Abyssinia together[38]. Their parents made sure that they were married to the best sons-in-law, stemming from the *ahl al-bayt*[39]. For example, Lubaba (Lubāba bint al-Ḥārith), who was considered the second Muslima after Khadija, was married to al-'Abbas (al-'Abbās b. 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib), one of Muhammad's paternal uncles, to whom the Abbasid dynasty (750–1258) would later trace its genealogy[40]. Sakakini recounts that Lubaba once hit Abu Lahab on the head with a stake, when he tried to lay hand on one of her first husband's companions shouting: »Woe to you, since you considered him weak in the absence of his companion!«[41]

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36  Ibid., p. 43.

37  Ibid., p. 45.

38  The term goes back to a saying by Muhammad. The four sisters were children of the same mother (Hind bint 'Awf) and two fathers, Maymuna and Lubaba were daughters of al-Ḥārith, Asma (Asmā') and Salma (Salmā) were daughters of 'Umays.

39  Ibid., p. 150. The husbands include 'Ali, his brother Ja'far b. Abī Ṭālib, Muhammad's uncle Hamza b. 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib, and Abu Bakr.

40  Ibid., p. 151.

41  Ibid.

Muhammad married Maymuna as a barely 30-year-old widow and as the last of his wives. Sakakini's writes only three pages[42] about her, and the representation is rather stereotypical: Maymuna is depicted as deeply religious, courageous, and eager to serve Islam. 'A'isha testified that Maymuna was one of the most pious women, who cared for the weak and poor[43]. The meaning of this figure, who essentially refers to reproduction, is also symbolized by the fact that Muhammad gave her a new name after marriage, changing it from Barra (the »Pious«) to Maymūna (the »Blessed«, »Fortunate«)[44]. The collective figure of the faithful sisters represents the function of women as objects of symbolic exchange in its purest form. Without the faithful sisters, who are married to the best sons-in-law, there would have been neither a Muslim community, nor an Abbasid genealogy.

(7) **Zaynab** (Zaynab al-Asadiyya, Zaynab bint Jaḥsh) has already been mentioned above due to the ominous love affair connected with her. She is depicted as being grateful to have been rescued from her unhappy marriage. Sakakini opens her chapter not with Muhammad's visit to Zaynab's tent, as one might expect, but with a detailed account of a marriage dispute between Zayd and Zaynab, which ends with Zaynab declaring that she can no longer stand her life and is demanding divorce. Zayd reluctantly accepts, but without saying the divorce words. The Prophet then meets Zaynab and settles the matter. In Sakakini's account, the common narrative is deliberately omitted. Muhammad marries Zaynab out of mercy and compassion, not out of lust. The story is meant to give an example for the idea that divorce is better than an unhappy marriage.

By marrying her, Muhammad resolves a problem he has caused before. According to Sakakini, he married her against her will to his adopted son Zayd, the freed slave. Zayd had been Khadija's slave and made friends with Muhammad, who urged his wife to free Zayd so that Muhammad could adopt him. Zayd had previously accepted the faith and according to Sakakini, was the second male Muslim after 'Ali[45].

As a member of the Banū Hāshim and Muhammad's cousin, the pretty Zaynab feels superior to Zayd in rank and descent and does not consider him worthy of

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42  Ibid., pp. 150–152. The reports about the sisters are scarce. Sakakini does not even mention that Maymuna had another half-sister, Zaynab bint Khuzayma, who was also married to Muhammad. There is also no separate chapter on Zaynab bint Khuzayma, who was considered »the Mother of the Poor« (*umm al-masākīn*).

43  Ibid., p. 152.

44  The change of name was meant as a good omen for the return to Mecca. Muhammad originally wanted to marry her in Mecca in the year (628), when the Muslims wanted to go on their first pilgrimage. Due to tensions, which forced the Muslims to leave, he could not carry out his plan to marry her in Mecca.

45  Ibid., p. 35.

marrying her; they therefore lived unhappily with each other. After her marriage to Muhammad, Zaynab was so happy that she gratefully fasted for two months. Apart from the violation of her marital duties (*nushūz*) towards Zayd, Zaynab cannot be blamed for anything because she hates turmoil and intrigue and becomes known for her generosity[46]. When Muhammad asked her opinion about 'A'isha during the libel affair, she said: »Oh God, I only know good things about 'A'isha.«[47]

In Sakakini's version of the Zaynab story, Zaynab's sense of (tribal) superiority over (former slave) Zayd contradicts the tenets of Islam. This fact is tempered by Sakakini's emphasis that she cannot be blamed for anything else.

(8) **Hind** (Hind al-Makhzūmiyya, Umm Salama bint Abī Umayya) was an Umayyad woman who, like Ramla bint Abi Sufyan, defected from her clan. She was married to a Muslim from the Makhzūm clan, to which Abu Jahl, one of Muhammad's main enemies, belonged. Together with her husband, Hind was one of the first emigrants to Abyssinia and Medina. Despite her pregnancy, she fled across the sea to Abyssinia. During the second *hijra* to Medina, her husband had to leave her behind because her family prevented her from emigrating by taking her child away from her. One day she managed to escape to Medina on a camel. After three years, her husband died, leaving her with four children. Abu Bakr and 'Umar wanted to marry her, but she refused, arguing that she wanted to take care of her children. However, she could not decline Muhammad's offer. He did not want to leave her on her own, although she warned him that she was very jealous.

Sakakini stresses that Hind was as jealous as 'A'isha and as rightly guided and wise as Khadija[48]. She had great influence on Muhammad and accompanied him on his raids. Once, the Muslims wanted to visit the Ka'ba and the Meccans blocked their way, so that Muhammad decided to withdraw, but many of his followers did not agree[49]. He was very annoyed because of this, but Hind advised him to keep silent and confront his followers without saying a word, as if he did not realize their insubordination. Once he did so, the faithful returned to the right path and followed him[50].

When Hind found out that 'A'isha wanted to go to war against 'Ali, she sharply rebuked 'A'isha, whereupon 'A'isha replied that she wanted to reconcile the two

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46 Ibid., p. 108.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid., pp. 93–95 passim.

49 Sakakini only vaguely hints at the exact circumstances. Obviously, according to *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, this refers to many Muslims' objection of the Treaty of Ḥudaybiyya (628) that Muhammad negotiated with the Quraysh of Mecca. Due to the treaty, the first pilgrimage to Mecca was postponed to the following year.

50 Ibid., pp. 94f.

conflicting parties. Hind's blame failed to have any effect, but in the end ʿAʾisha grieved as much about the result of the battle as Hind, as Sakakini notes[51]. Sakakini does not spell out Hind's pro-Shiite position any further and merely hints indirectly at the Battle of Karbala without naming it. She writes that Hind lived until the days of Caliph Yazid (Yazīd b. Muʿāwiya), who did not refrain from murdering the people from the Prophet's house (*āl bayt*), and ends the portrait with the sentence that »she closed her eyes, seeing the injustice that man does to his brother man«[52]. Sakakini's depiction of Hind avoids describing any particular pro-Shiite or anti-Sunni inclinations. When she comes to speak about the Battle of Karbala in another chapter, she rather vaguely notes that Husayn, Khadija's grandson, carried »the flag of martyrdom«[53].

The Hind figure represents a woman with prestige and life experience who sees no point in fitting into the hierarchy dominated by the younger women. She dared to rely on her own judgment and sometimes contradicted ʿAʾisha. As mentioned above, ʿAʾisha's and Hafsa's anger was enflamed by the very existence of Hind among the Prophet's wives, according to the transmissions on which Sakakini relies.

(9) **Juwayriyya** (Juwayriyya al-Muṣṭaliqiyya, Barra bint al-Ḥārith) represents a noble vanquished Bedouin woman. Her marriage to Muhammad concluded the Muslims' alliance with the Bedouin. Her father al-Harith (al-Ḥārith) was the tribal leader of the Banū Muṣṭaliq, at first opposed the Muslims, when they tried to include »those who stay away« (*al-munāʾinūn*)[54] in the Treaty of Medina, thus dragging them into the confrontation with the Meccans. After a short battle, the Bedouins were defeated. Barra, the young and pretty daughter of al-Harith, lost her husband in this battle and was held as a prisoner of war. Since her new owner demanded an excessive ransom for her release, she went to Muhammad and told him about the misfortune she had suffered. ʿAʾisha, who was with Muhammad, could not prevent her from talking to him. Muhammad decided to end the humiliation of the noble girl and her tribe and instead »makes her a means of reducing the misfortune that has befallen her tribe«[55]. He paid the ransom, married her after she had converted to Islam, and—he obviously did not like the name Barra—renamed her Juwayriyya (»Little Rose«). The other Muslims followed the Prophet's example and released the prisoners of war. When Harith, who came to pay the ransom for his daughter, found out about this, his attitude towards Muhammad turned from opposition to loyalty and respect.

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51  Ibid., p. 95.
52  Ibid., p. 96.
53  Ibid., p. 36.
54  Ibid., p. 110.
55  Ibid., p. 113.

Juwayriyya did not join the group around 'A'isha, Hafsa, and Zaynab, but took an example from the militant and ascetic Hind of Umayyad descent. 'A'isha regarded her as a serious competitor due to her beauty, but was distracted by the libel affair from confronting her, according to Sakakini. When 'A'isha returned to the circle of the wives after the end of the affair, all of the other wives except Hind and Juwayriyya gathered around her. Those two immersed themselves in worship and studied the foundations of the faith[56].

The figure of Juwayriyya runs through all three categories of social demarcation in a short time: stranger – enemy – friend. In addition, she did not become a Muslim by her own conviction, but on the Prophet's suggestion and with the prospect of freedom. In order to make her belief appear beyond any doubt, she is stylized as a Muslim ascetic by Sakakini. Juwayriyya's beauty, nobility, and conversion represent her symbolic capital. Her position of relative independence is easier to uphold in combination with Hind.

(10) **Safiyya** (Ṣafiyya an-Naḍīriyya, Ṣafiyya bint Ḥuyayy) embodies the »other« that is not totally accepted. For Muslims, she remains the Jewess, even if she has adopted Islam. Sakakini explains the conflict between the Muslims and the Jews of Medina as follows:

> The rabbis read in the Torah that a prophet with a new faith would appear among the Arabs, who would lead the people from darkness to light, and when they saw the signs of this prophet and his message in Muhammad, they knew that he was was the expected messenger. So, they hid their enmity and hatred from him and openly showed him flattery and pleasure, when he came to Medina as an emigrant from Mecca. […] The leaders of the Jews convened to consult about how to face the Islamic message, fearing defeat and loss if it resonated within a group among them. Thus, they considered sowing intrigue, differences, and discord among the Medineans, violating the treaties, and playing a wrong game with Muhammad and his Medinense helpers (*anṣār*)[57].

One of the Jewish leaders, who was beheaded in the massacre following the Battle of the Ditch under the charge of being one of the main conspirators, was Huyayy (Ḥuyayy b. Akhṭab)[58]. His daughter, Safiyya, was taken prisoner. She did not share the views of her father, who had announced that he would remain Muhammad's enemy all his life. Safiyya had been successively married to two leaders from the

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56  Ibid., p. 116.

57  Ibid., pp. 118f.

58  The massacre is mentioned in biographies of the Prophet's life. The number of the executed men ranges consistently between 400 and 900, see Schöller, Qurayẓa (Banū al-), in: Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an IV, p. 334.

Jewish tribe of Banū al-Naḍīr. Her second husband, Kanana (Kanāna b. ar-Rabīʿ), »slapped her on the face and hit her in the eye because she mentioned good and admirable things about Muhammad in front of him«[59]; he also threatened her with divorce. For Sakakini, a comparison with one of the Umayyad woman among Muhammad's wives seems obvious: »It is therefore no wonder that Safiyya secretly contradicted her father's view and inclination; she suffered the same fate as Ramla bint Abi Sufyan, who believed in Muhammad, while her father felt more disgust for him than Huyayy.«[60]

When Muhammad learned that his enemy's daughter had been captured, he let her be brought before him together with one of her cousins. Having passed several dead Jewish bodies laying on the way, the girls were in tears when they arrived. Muhammad asks Bilal (Bilāl), the first caller to prayer, reproachfully why he had not taken a different route.

> The Prophet of the Arabs and of Islam liked Safiyya because he noticed that she looked at him in an ashamed way, asking for pity. He put her on his robe to let her know that he had chosen her to relieve her heart of what had happened to her family, and he sent to Diḥya al-Kalbī, who desired Safiyya, to take her cousin. Safiyya adopted Islam after the messenger had given her the choice between his and her religion. Then he set her free because her release was the introduction to his wedding to her[61].

When they arrived in Medina, the Prophet's wives gathered to look at Safiyya's grace and tenderness, and even

> ʿAʾisha could not stay away. The other co-wives went ahead of her to the house, where the new wife stayed. Then she (ʿAʾisha) came covered and veiled to make inquiries, and when she wanted to sneak away from the women (unnoticed), the messenger followed her and asked her jokingly: »How do you like her, little blonde?« ʿAʾisha tore her hand free and was stunned, but the jealousy of her co-wife ignited the flame in her chest and she answered haughtily and mockingly: »I saw a Jewess!« Muhammad took pity on her and appeased her with the words: »Safiyya has accepted Islam and her Islam is good, so don't repeat what you just said. You know your rank with me and the reasons that lead me to a wedding like this one, so don't be angry«[62].

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59  Sakākīnī, Ummahāt (1962), p. 120.
60  Ibid., p. 120.
61  Ibid., p. 121.
62  Ibid., p. 122.

Safiyya joined the group around Fatima, who offered her a golden chain—a possible hint at implicit anti-Shiite sentiments in Sakakini's account[63]. Sakakini continues by stating that Safiyya felt a lot of pain because the other wives were proud to be Qurayshite Arabs, whereas »she remained a Jewish-born woman for them, even though she had adopted Islam«[64]. When Muhammad heard this insulting allusion, he asked Safiyya: »Didn't you say to 'A'isha and Hafsa: How can you be better than me, when my husband is Muhammad, my grandfather Aaron, and my uncle Moses?«[65] When Muhammad laid on his deathbed, she said to him: »I wish, oh Prophet of God, that what you have is in me.«[66] Muhammad rebuked the women, who were whispering comments about this statement: »Oh God, she is sincere.«[67]

Safiyya did not deny her roots, but kept in touch with her family. One day a slave told 'Umar that Safiyya loves the Sabbath and finds nothing in giving alms to her relatives. When 'Umar asked her about it, she replied: »As for the Sabbath, I have not loved it since the Prophet of God changed it for Friday. And as far as the Jews are concerned, I have mercy on them.«[68] When Safiyya asked the slave what caused her to talk to 'Umar, she countered: »Satan!«[69]. Thereupon, Safiyya released her because she replied with good when somebody wanted to harm her. When the caliph 'Uthman was arrested in his house[70], Safiyya left her house furiously to put the angry masses, who held him without food and drink, into their place. She rode back and forth unharmed between her and his house to provide him with water and food. When she went out to calm the dissatisfied people, they hit her mule without recognizing her.

The figure of Safiyya is a complex and interesting one. She embodies the problems of demarcation for the young community, for whose members diversity, change of faith and previous enmity were the norm. Although Safiyya was similar to others in many ways, she remained different because the others wanted to perceive her as different. Although she was the daughter of a tribal leader, disagreed about Islam

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63 A classical Sunni stereotype says that among the Shiite Muslims there were many people, especially Jews, who outwardly confessed Islam, but actually wanted to corrupt it by infiltrating alien dogmas; see e.g. AFGHĀNĪ, 1957, p. 281; on this, also ENDE, Arabische Nation, pp. 199–221.

64 SAKĀKĪNĪ, Ummahāt (1962), p. 123.

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid., p. 124.

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid. As the redaction of the Qur'an under 'Uthman's rule was a controversial issue, unrest broke out among the Qur'an readers and 'Uthman was arrested in his house. He was accused of poor administration, nepotism, and wasting money. After long negotiations, a group of dissatisfied people stormed the house and murdered him. This is considered the prelude to the first phase of the civil war (*fitna*) in the first century of Islam.

with her father, and was beaten by her husband because of her views about Muhammad, her symbolic capital is not acknowledged by the other wives. Muhammad's statement that she does not differ in rank and can look back on a number of great prophets only refers to her objective position, not to the subjective judgments of others. Muhammad himself contributed to these negative judgments: First, by defending Safiyya's adoption of Islam, as if her new faith needed special justification; secondly, by ascribing instrumental reasons to his marriage, thereby devaluing her as a wife and indirectly confirming 'A'isha's criticism (»I saw a Jewess«).

Sakakini's carefully crafted portrayal is open to divergent readings because she depicts Muslim suspicion towards Safiyya, but she also nurtures it. On the one hand, Sakakini writes that not only the other wives were suspicious of Safiyya; she was not even immune to the intrigue of a slave woman. Safiyya remained a stranger because the other wives did not acknowledge her, and even the angry crowd did not recognize this »mother of the believers«. The lack of acknowledgment was related to the unwillingness to perceive the stranger as a human counterpart. The key scene for this is Muhammad's reprimand of Bilal that he should not have guided Safiyya past the Jewish bodies killed by the Muslims. Safiyya should not have seen the misdeeds that the Muslims committed to the Jews. The Jewish convert should not have seen a part of herself in the dead bodies of the »others«. She should have been made to forget in order to live on. Safiyya, as a marginalized woman among the wives, could not. She broke into tears over the dead, she would not deny her roots and helped her relatives, she even had mercy on her unfaithful slave, and she still saw the human being in the imprisoned caliph.

On the other hand, Sakakini's chapter is framed by her depiction of the Jewish conspiracy in Medina. There is no way out of the frame that the Jews were playing the wrong game. That Sakakini lets the dying Prophet say that Safiyya is sincere, invokes an opposite subtext. To the informed reader, there are several varying reports about another Jewish woman, Zaynab bint Ḥārith, who wanted to take revenge for the massacre of the Banū Naḍīr by killing Muhammad by offering him a poisoned lamb shoulder[71]. In some versions of the story, he eats a bite from the lamb and his final ailment is attributed to this incident. Thus, Sakakini's narrative can be read as openly affirming that Safiyya may have been sincere, while implicitly assuming that most of the other Jews were not.

(11) **Mariya** (Māriya al-Qibṭiyya, Umm Ibrāhīm) embodied the migrant from Egypt. Sent together with her sister as a gift to Muhammad by the Christian governor of Egypt, she enjoyed the right to stay, but is not granted the full status of

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71 See, for example, Haykal, The Life of Mohammed, p. 407.

a wife; Muhammad may have treated her like a wife, but she is not[72]. She had no place in Muhammad's house and the mosque like the other wives', but lived in some distance in an orchard—called *mashrabat Umm Ibrahim* in the *ḥadīth* literature—that formerly belonged to a Jewish tribe, the Banū Qaynuqāʿ. Muhammad put the veil (*ḥijāb*) on her in the manner of his wives, and when she gave birth to his son Ibrahim (Ibrāhīm), he also gave her the honorary title »Mother of the Faithful«[73]. The fact that he treated her generously because of her motherhood, even though she belonged to a different people, aroused the jealousy of the other women, with ʿAʾisha at the forefront, »especially when this Coptic stranger became a mother«[74]. One day, when Muhammad carried Ibrahim in his hands and approaches ʿAʾisha, he showed him to her asking: »›Look, ʿAʾisha, doesn't Ibrahim look like me?‹ ʿAʾisha answered him without words, but with a sign that revealed what she felt in her heart for Mariya and her son because she turned her face away from him and didn't look at him.«[75]

When his son died at the age of about one and a half years, Muhammad was so heartbroken that he once said that his grief had not ended, he had only stopped raising his voice in lamentation. However, he consoled Mariya and even interceded for all Copts because of her. Shortly after Ibrahim, Muhammad also died, whereupon Mariya isolated herself in deep sorrow. She only wanted to see her sister or visit the two graves and live in worship and memory. The Prophet's companions honored her until her death.

The figure of Mariya did not feel at home abroad, she found respect, but no luck. ʿAʾisha accepted neither the outsider nor her son. She rejected him because he was Mariya's son, and she did not want to look at him to see that he was also Muhammad's son. Admitting a similarity to Muhammad would have meant recognition. She also could not claim dissimilarity because to do so, she would have had to look at him. This is why she looked away in silence. Sakakini does not mention the tradition according to which the crisis in the harem and Muhammad's isolation went back to ʿAʾisha's and Hafsa's rejection of Mariya. Since Mariya had only a few friends with whom she could speak and whom she wanted to see, she had a special relationship with the surrounding nature: the garden, the vines, the wind, the goats, and the soil. The space surrounding her marks her isolation: she lived on the outskirts of the city (where the Jews, the other strangers, used to live). Sakakini, however, draws a parallel from the Coptic woman to the fertile Egyptian soil and depicts Mariya's relation with Muhammad as the beginning of the bond between Copts and Arabs.

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72  According to the *ḥadīth* literature, she was either a concubine or a wife. Some traditions, among them *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, mention that Muhammad married Mariya. In Egypt, she had been a slave girl.

73  Sᴀᴋᴀ̄ᴋ̄ɪɴ̄ɪ, Ummahāt (1962), p. 142.

74  Ibid., p. 143.

75  Ibid., pp. 143f. The episode is also told in the chapter about ʿAʾisha, see ibid., p. 60.

This final image of Maryia in her garden tries to overcome her separation from her homeland, yet at the same time confirms it because Egypt's abundance contrasts with the limitations of her life.

### 2.2.2 The Prophet's Daughters

Khadija and her four daughters form Muhammad's core family. As he married more and more stepmothers, the daughters came to represent the second side of the dualism in this familial constellation. Among all of his wives, only two of them—Khadija and Mariya—gave birth to children, which further enhances the importance of the daughters. The fact that none of the Prophet's sons survived infancy, is considered by Sakakini as »God's Wisdom«: »Fate wanted Muhammad to become a father of daughters, who towers high thanks to his humanity and his manner in caring for them in order to give an example to the faithful of what is befitting for the daughter, both in terms of the rights created by Islam and the rank appropriate to her freedom and message«[76].

The family of daughters in the Prophet's house is, for sure, another challenge to a patriarchal system, in which power is given by the father to the legitimate son; in pre-Islamic times the heir could be an adopted son. Since women's role is limited to being objects of symbolic exchange, the transfer of power in the case of daughters can only be to the son-in-law, if at all. Even if prophecy as an expression of religious charisma cannot be inherited either directly or indirectly, there still remains—after the death of the founder of the religion—the purely practical question of how to proceed. Familial relationship and relationship by marriage are options for a succession plan. In the case of Muhammad, the marriage of his daughter Fatima with 'Ali legitimatized a claim that was realized for the short period of 'Ali's caliphate (654–661). The view of Muhammad's daughters as marriageable objects is therefore similar to the view of his wives: while marriage to Muhammad is a reward for the loyalty of the woman and the social group that she represents, the daughters' marriages similarly reward the Prophet's most esteemed companions. Since three of his daughters died before Muhammad, only Fatima remained after his death—and through her also 'Ali—as possible heir to his symbolic capital as direct descendants.

(1) **Zaynab bint Muhammad**, the eldest daughter of Muhammad, embodied divided loyalties. As the faithful wife of a pagan Meccan, she found herself in a conflict of conscience between husband and father, between family and Islam, between emotion and mind. In a way, Zaynab was a mirror image of the Prophet's wife Ramla.

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76  Ibid., pp. 176f. Some Shiite scholars do only consider Fatima to be Muhammad's biological daughter and asume that Khadija brought her other daughters from previous marriages.

While Ramla separated herself from her father Abu Sufyan to follow the Islamic call, Zaynab stayed with her husband in spite of her adherence to the Islamic message.

In pre-Islamic times, Zaynab married her mother's close relative, Abu l-ʿAs (Abū l-ʿĀṣ b. al-Rabīʿ). The marriage was intended to strengthen the links between Khadija's clan and Muammad's family. When Muhammad started to preach the new faith, Abu l-ʿAs remains faithful to the rites of *jāhiliyya*, »not out of enmity towards the messenger, but because of his Qurayshite sense of honor«[77]. When the conflict escalated and the Qurayshites tried to isolate the Islamic group, Abu Lahab forced his two sons to dissolve their marriages to Muhammad's daughters Ruqayya and Umm Kulthum (see below). Abu Jahl also tried to convince Abu l-ʿAs to divorce Zaynab. Since Abu l-ʿAs loved his wife, he did not comply with this request, but still lived with Zaynab in Mecca, even when the Muslims emigrated to Medina and several families were torn apart.

For Zaynab, the *hijra* meant separation from her father, but her actual inner conflict only came to light when Abu l-ʿAs took part in the Battle of Badr and was captured by the Muslims. She had no choice but to contribute the collar that she had inherited from her mother Khadija to the ransom collection. When Muhammad saw this collar in Medina, it hurt him because he knew that it came from his daughter. The Muslims decided not only to send Abu l-ʿAs back as a free man, but also to send his ransom back with him.

According to Sakakini, the second crisis began, when a Qurʾanic verse »prohibited«[78] the marriage of a Muslim woman to a polytheist (*mushrik*). Zaynab secretly managed to escape to Medina, but her heart was still with Abu l-ʿAs in Mecca. One day, his caravan was attacked by the Muslims, the goods were confiscated, and the people captured. When Zaynab heard about this, she blocked Muhammad's way, as he was going to pray with the believers, and said: »I have offered Abu l-ʿAs b. al-Rabiʿ protection.«[79] The Prophet agreed with the words: »The believers protect those who, like them, protect the least among them. To whom Zaynab granted protection, we also grant protection.«[80] Thereupon, all goods of the caravan were collected and returned to Abu l-ʿAs. The latter returned to Mecca to hand over the caravan's belongings to its owners. Finally, he professed Islam and after a six-year separation, the couple was reunited after the Muslims' peaceful capture of Mecca. One day,

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77 Ibid., p. 157.

78 Ibid., p. 163. Implicit reference to Qurʾan 2:221, although it is unclear whether a prohibition or a mere preference is expressed in this verse (»And do not marry polytheistic men [to your women] until they believe. And a believing slave is better than a polytheist, even though he might please you.«).

79 Sᴀᴋᴀ̄ᴋɪ̄ɴɪ̄, Ummahāt (1962), p. 168.

80 Ibid.

when Zaynab was on her way to visit Muhammad in Medina, muggers attacked her caravan. The pregnant Zaynab was mistreated, lost her child, and died[81].

(2)/(3) **Ruqayya bint Muhammad** and **Umm Kulthum** (Umm Kulthūm bint Muhammad) are the tragic variant of the collective figure of the »believing sisters« (see above). Both died too early to fully perform their childbearing and alliance-building functions[82]. Their examples show the transformation—the continuity and change—in the marriage policy. Since Zaynab had been married to a man from Khadija's clan, Ruqayya and Umm Kulthum were destined to strengthen the bond with the clan of the ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib, the relatives of Muhammad. Muhammad therefore married them to two sons of his uncle Abu Lahab (ʿAbd al-ʿUzza b. ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib), to whom he was indebted because Abu Lahab had cared for Muhammad since his childhood. When Abu Lahab asked for the two daughters' hands to marry them to his sons ʿUtba and ʿUtayba, Muhammad could not refuse his wish. After the first revelations, Abu Lahab turned from friend to foe and had the marriages dissolved. After the daughters escaped their marriages with the sons of the enemy in their own tribal lineage, Muhammad married them, one after the other, to the same companion, ʿUthman, who, as an Umayyad, embodied the friend from the inimical tribal camp in Mecca. Ruqayya and ʿUthman emigrated at first to Abyssinia and then to Medina. There Ruqayya gave birth to a child, who did not live long. Her mother's and her child's deaths as well as the difficult circumstances weakened her so much that she soon died as well (624). After her death, Muhammad appointed Umm Kulthum as the new wife of ʿUthman. When she moved to ʿUthman's house, she saw in a vision her sister telling her that she should not stay in her place, but follow her, and so she too died prematurely (630). Both of these bonds were not fortunate and found a premature end. This can be seen as a bad omen for ʿUthman's later caliphate (644–656), which stood under a bad star, ended with his assassination, and marked the beginning of the civil war—a turning point in Islamic history.

(4) **Fatima bint Muhammad** (Fāṭima al-Zahrāʾ) represents the Muslim woman of supreme knowledge. Sakakini attributes such a high symbolic capital to Fatima that it tends to surpass even that of ʿAli. Sakakini writes that ʿAli, despite the abundance of his knowledge, could not surpass the messenger's daughter: »Muhammad was the city of knowledge, ʿAli his door and prayer niche. When Fatima lived in that city, she was able to educate the door and the prayer niche well with her father's

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81  Ibid., p. 171.
82  Ibid., pp. 176–187.

knowledge. She remembered all that was difficult for the men (to remember) from his (Muhammad's) habits and sayings«[83].

Therefore, Sakakini actually inverts the criteria of the marriage market, as Fatima's symbolic value is higher than being an object of exchange or marriage. She is not married off to anybody because it is nearly impossible to find a partner good enough for her. After having rejected Abu Bakr and 'Umar as marriage candidates, Muhammad finally concluded that his cousin 'Ali was the worthiest—nota bene: not the best—candidate for Fatima's hand[84]. Sakakini continued to write that Muhammad summoned a meeting with the later first three caliphs as well as Talhat and Zubayr, 'A'isha's allies in the Battle of the Camel against 'Ali, in which he announced the marriage of Fatima and 'Ali. He asked God to bless the couple in their presence.

Sakakini gives further examples for the asymmetry between Fatima and 'Ali. The daily life of the couple is presented as arduous because they had few things and had to work hard. Therefore, 'Ali urged Fatima to complain to Muhammad. However, Muhammad said that he cannot give them anything, while the *ahl al-ṣuffa* (»the people of the cornice«)[85] were starving; Muhammad had just called for donations to the poor. Fatima felt ashamed and donated a blanket and two bracelets to them. Sakakini also mentions that 'Ali could not outdo his wife in the household; once the water bucket slipped from his hands and the contents poured over the food that Fatima had just prepared.

A central point in Sakakini's portrayel is, however, that Fatima was angered when 'Ali was forced to pledge his allegiance (*bay'a*) to Abu Bakr after Muhammad's death. According to Sakakini, 'Ali refused to pledge his allegiance at Fatima's request, as she thought that he had the right to become the caliph[86]. Then, 'Ali was forced into allegiance by 'Umar, which made Fatima angry; Abu Bakr asked her pardon because of 'Umar, but she concealed her thoughts and »through her wisdom« prevented »separation« (*fitna*), ending the conflict[87]. With this sequence of sentences, Sakakini follows a Sunni view and implicitly opposes a Shiite view according to which 'Ali never took the oath. Moreover, Sakakini suggests that 'Ali only stood firm with Fatima at his side.

In her portrait of Fatima, Sakakini completely abolishes the male-female hierarchy and the attribution of a public cum male or private cum female space at the expense of Shiite sensibilities. In principle, she subverts the logic of symbolic exchange in the whole chapter. Fatima does not really act as evidence of 'Ali's excellence and as a link between Muhammad and 'Ali; she herself represents the

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83  Eadem, Ummahāt (1947), p. 27; eadem, Ummahāt (1962), p. 196.

84  Eadem, Ummahāt (1947), p. 24; eadem, Ummahāt (1962), p. 193.

85  A group of poor immigrants living under the protective roof of the mosque.

86  Eadem, Ummahāt (1947), p. 33; eadem, Ummahāt (1962), p. 202.

87  Eadem, Ummahāt (1947), p. 34; eadem, Ummahāt (1962), p. 202. Ibid., pp. 203f.

embodiment of excellence, with which 'Ali cannot quite keep up. 'Ali receives her as his wife because there is—in Muhammad's words—no better man for the best human being. If 'Ali's marriage to the Prophet's daughter is, from a Shiite point of view, interpreted as an indication of *his* special status in the Islamic community, Sakakini contrasts this idea with the image of a self-confident Fatima, who has a decisive influence on 'Ali's actions. Only when she sees that the question of the caliphate is lost because 'Ali has consented under compulsion, she silently gives up for the good of the whole community.

(5) **Zaynab bint 'Ali:** Muhammad's granddaughter was not part of Sakakini's second edition of *Ummahāt al-mu'minīn*, which comprised only his wives and daughters. Yet, in the first edition, a separate chapter was dedicated to »Husayn's sister« (*ukht Ḥusayn*)[88]. This chapter forms an interesting point of comparison for the question of how Sakakini deals with the conflict between Sunna und Shi'a. Zaynab bint 'Ali not only represents a woman with experience on the battlefield and a Shiite figurehead, her biography is also directly connected to the Battle of Karbala, a central founding myth of the Shi'a.

As already mentioned, Bint al-Shati' called her the »heroine« of the Battle at Karbala and favored her over 'A'isha, one of the Sunni figureheads. Since Zaynab sheltered Husayn's son 'Ali Zayn al-'Abidin during the battle, she lived up to Bint al-Shati''s ideal of a woman who cares for others—unlike 'A'isha who was in command in the Battle of the Camel.

With regard to Sakakini's portraits, there are two points of comparison: On the one hand, the question arises whether Sakakini, like Bint al-Shati', compares Zaynab to 'A'isha due to their participation in military action. On the other hand, the question is whether Sakakini shows more sympathy for the Shiite side in this chapter, which she avoids in the chapter about Hind (see above no. 8), where she mentions that Hind criticized 'A'isha's military adventure. Yet, Sakakini treats neither of these questions. In this sense, the chapter about Zaynab ties in with the Hind chapter because there already Sakakini draws a rather indiscriminate conclusion from the Battle of Karbala about »the injustice that man does to his brother man« (see above). Similarly, the chapter about Zaynab is framed by the expression *al-qadr al-maktūb* (»the predestined fate«)[89], expressing the idea that a bitter fate was foreordained for the family of the Prophet (*ahl al-bayt*), especially for Husayn and Zaynab, who accompanied his martyrdom. This way, Sakakini understands the events at Karbala as a tragedy. The notion of the tragedy allows her to not blame a single culprit, even if she describes Zaynab's accusations of the Umayyad military

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88  Eadem, Ummahāt (1947), pp. 79–89.

89  Ibid., pp. 79f., 88.

leaders and Zaynab's confrontation with Caliph Yazid. Sakakini's account follows the ordinary chain of events by and large[90] and her depiction of the aftermath of the battle seems mostly taken from al-Ṭabarī[91]. However, she adds to al-Ṭabarī's account that Yazid's soldiers had »hearts of iron« (*qulūb min ḥadīd*)[92], whereas the women at his court were far more sensitive. Thus, she underlines that not only Husayn's relatives mourned and wept, but also all the women of Yazid's family, when the corpses, Husayn's severed head, and the captives arrived in Damascus. She further describes the humiliations for the Prophet's descendants at Yazid's court on only one page and renders Zaynab's famous sermon (*khuṭba*), in which she contradicts Yazid until he remains shamefully silent, in indirect speech, reduced to one sentence[93].

According to al-Ṭabarī[94], Zaynab was angered by a man's behavior, who asked Yazid if he could have one of Husayn's daughter as a war booty; Zaynab called such a behavior as against »our religious community« (*millatunā*) and »our religion« (*dīnunā*), even if Yazid would have acted this way. When Yazid thereupon dubbed her an »enemy of God« (*ʿadūwat allāh*), she called him a »tyrant« (*amīr musallaṭ*)[95] and reminded him that her father's, brother's, and grandfather's religion had guided his father and grandfather.

Sakakini merely writes that Zaynab answered in the sharpest possible terms to Yazid's outburst of rage. He then decided to treat the prisoners well and return to them all or even more of what the soldiers had taken from them. In this context, Sakakini mentions that Husayn's daughter, Sukayna, said: »I never saw a better infidel man than Yazid«[96]. Whereas in the traditional account Sukayna simply »said« this sentence, Sakakini adds that Sukayna »scoffed at Yazid and derided him«[97]. This attribution—in combination with the omission of Zaynab's sermon—has the tendency to soften the criticism of Yazid; it turns severe accusations into mere mockery.

Although the meaning of Sakakini's account is not straightforward, it can be seen in the context of Yazid's exoneration by modern pro-Umayyad authors such as

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90  The battle; Zaynab's shelter for ʿAli b. Husayn; the captivity of Zaynab and the other women; Zaynab's addresses to the people of Kufa and the governor of Kufa; the confrontation with the Caliph Yazid in Damascus and the release of the captives.

91  Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad b. Jarīr AL-ṬABARĪ, Tārīkh al-Ṭabarī. Tārīkh al-rusūl wa-l-mulūk, edited by Muḥammad Abū Faḍl Ibrāhīm, Cairo 1971, vol. 5, pp. 461–464.

92  SAKĀKĪNĪ, Ummahāt (1947), p. 86.

93  Ibid., p. 87.

94  AL-ṬABARĪ, Tārīkh al-Ṭabarī, vol. 5, p. 461.

95  Ibid.

96  SAKĀKĪNĪ, Ummahāt (1947), p. 87. Compare AL-ṬABARĪ, Tārīkh al-Ṭabarī, vol. 5, p. 464.

97  SAKĀKĪNĪ, Ummahāt (1947), p. 87. Compare AL-ṬABARĪ, Tārīkh al-Ṭabarī, vol. 5, p. 464.

Muhammad Kurd ʿAli and Muhibb al-Din al-Khatib[98], whose works she generally appreciated of (see chapter II).

Although Sakakini does not omit the gruesome details, her account does not do justice to the special significance that these events have for the Shiʿa. Although she describes that the captivated women gathered around Zaynab to mourn their dead, she does not explicitly refer to the annual Shiite ʿAshūrāʾ rituals that resulted from these gatherings. According to Shiite belief, Husayn's *jihād* was marked by swords and arrows, Zaynab's *jihād* by the words of eloquence and both ways of resistance—martyrdom as well as sermon—made Karbala immortal[99]. Shiite accounts of Karbala often refer to the Prophet's saying that the best form of *jihād* is to utter just words (*kalimat al-ʿadl*) in the presence of a tyrant[100].

The chapter on Zaynab continues Sakakini's approach of trying to strike a balance between Sunna and Shiʿa, following her way of presenting the relationship between ʿAʾisha and Fatima. However, the chapter on Zaynab and the battle of Karbala clearly shows that this balancing does not fit well with a Shiite view. Nevertheless, two distinctions can be noted: Unlike Bint al-Shatiʾ, who places Zaynab above Aisha, Sakakini does not favor one woman over the other; unlike open admirers of the Umayyads, Sakakini's account reflects more of an implicitly Sunni view.

## 3.  Interpretation of the Biographies

### 3.1  Conflicts of Loyalty and the Prophetic Line of Escape

Sakakini's portrayals argue that women played an important role during the formation of the early Muslim community because they wholeheartedly stood up for the new religion, accepted sacrifices, and symbolized the process of unification. Sakakini makes the point that women—especially ʿAʾisha and Fatima—represent »half the religion« and that they can even be considered to be superior to the Prophet's companions in their knowledge or pious lifestyle. These women prevailed against strong social pressure, often breaking the bonds of tribe or family to follow the call of Islam.

The collection of biographical portraits thus represents the diversity of careers in faith, which are not so much historical facts, but rather literary and edifying stories. These women act under the conditions of polygyny and a patriarchal tribal society,

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98  Ende, Arabische Nation, pp. 64–75; 91–110.

99  Syed Akbar Hyder, Reliving Karbala. Martyrdom in South Asian Memory, Oxford 2006, p. 96.

100  Ibid. Actually, Sakākīnī, Ummahāt (1947), p. 85, applies the term *kalimat al-ʿadl* to Zaynab's speeches, but not to her confrontation with Yazid and she does also not render the contents of these words.

thus, in multiple chains of dependence on men. However, Sakakini's representation can be considered feminist insofar as she sees women as self-confident actors with their own cultural capital in their religious, social, and political environment. She shows how women found their own way to Islam with great individual commitment; they were rewarded for this with their marriage to the Prophet. Since Muhammad's marriages are interpreted as conjugal alliances for the expansion of Islam, Sakakini implicitly introduces a reciprocity of the evaluation criteria: The marriages to these women come about not only because of *his* prestige, but also because of *theirs*.

The parallels to the twentieth century lie in the increasing cultural capital of women, the gradual change in traditional marriage strategies, and an increasing social mobility. At this point, the circle of Sakakini's portraits of women past and present becomes complete. By comparing an idealized past with the current reality, Sakakini's works obviously draw a stark distinction between the two worlds: The Prophet's wives' devotion to a man, their spiritual and social mission all fall under the same umbrella. They do not have to seek for lines of escape from the patriarchal world as contemporary women are forced to do in many of her short stories. Seen this way, Sakakini implicitly claims that the Prophet's wives were freer under the conditions of Muhammad's exceptional polygyny than her contemporaries, the majority of whom lived monogamously. Is that credible?

Be that as it may, in any case, the portraits of early Muslim women represent partly an anti-thesis and partly a continuation of the female *'udhrī*-narrative that we encountered in Sakakini's short stories and novels. The female *'udhrī*-narrative mostly expresses the stages of unfulfilled women's lives; its lines of escape often point to the impossibility of fulfilment in this world. The figures of the Prophet's wives stand in contrast to this plot structure because they find fulfilment within their world, despite its imperfection and compromises. The dramatic climax of the wives' life stories is represented in their conflicts of loyalty, when they defy tribal society, their tribe, clan or family. Yet, these women know why they make sacrifices and endure hardship. The line of escape in their life stories is their marriage to the Prophet, which goes a great distance towards resolving their conflicting of loyalty. Compared to the *'udhrī*-narrative, these figures also go through three stages, roughly speaking, as shown in Table 1:

Table 1   The Wives' Line of Escape.

| First Step | Becoming a Muslima |
|---|---|
| Crisis | Separation from tribe, clan, family (father, husband), hometown or home country |
| Line of Escape | Marriage to the Prophet, reconciliation (with tribe or family), internal conflicts, and distinction |

Source: Manfred Sing

Thus, the stories resemble saints' lives of conversion, persecution, and veneration. In spite of the dramatic climax, the wives' agency and dedication to Islam come into harmony with their social position and tribal descent in the end. The basic tone of the portraits is positive. Even if new conflicts break out in the Prophet's household, every woman in the end finds her adequate place in the house and in the community: Sawda stays with the Prophet's children; 'A'isha retreats from politics to religion; Hafsa helps to compile the Qur'an; Ramla and Hind anticipate the decay of the old order; Juwayriyya and Mariya symbolize new alliances that already point beyond the tribes of Mecca and Medina.

Muhammad's life can also be ordered along such a triad either focussing on the early community's political survival or its social cohesion. For the political survival, the critical phase would be represented by the finale phase in Mecca before the decision to migrate to Medina. Thus, the scheme would be:

Table 2   Muhammad's Line of Escape.

| First Step | Becoming the Prophet |
|---|---|
| Crisis | Leaving Mecca; separation from clan and conflict with hometown |
| Line of Escape | Establishing the community in Medina and laying the foundation for its further expansion |

Source: Manfred Sing

With a focus on social cohesion, the crisis would be represented by Muhammad's withdrawal from his wives, thus endangering the Muslim community *en miniature* as well as the community of the believers as such. A gender conscious scheme, taking into account the Prophet's wives' centrality, would then read with a slight modification this way:

Table 3   Muhammad's Line of Escape Gendered.

| First Step | Becoming the Prophet | Support by Khadija |
|---|---|---|
| Crisis | Leaving Mecca; separation from clan and conflict with hometown | Khadija's death |
| Line of Escape I | Establishing the community in Medina and laying the foundation for its further expansion | Polygyny |
| Crisis | Conflicts in Medina and with Mecca | Withdrawal from the wives |
| Line of Escape II | Victory over opponents in Medina and Mecca | Reestablishment of the harem; ensuring the continuity of the community |

Source: Manfred Sing

The Prophet's death then signals that he has fulfilled his mission: securing the political survival and social cohesion of the community.

For the Prophet's daughters, the trajectory is different because their life stories have an obviously tragic undertone (see Table 4). They—excepting Fatima—do not have children that grow up. As these women endure hardship and die prematurely, the plot structure comes closer to the female *ʿudhrī*-narrative. Their life paths are not fulfilled in this world, but represent a higher meaning. The stories do not focus on their reproductive or representative function. Even in Fatima's case, her mourning of her father's deaths reflects the believers' mourning of her premature death and the premature deaths of her offspring. The *ʿudhrī*-narrative thus reflects the prominent religious position of the *ahl al-bayt*, the Prophet's family.

Table 4   The Daughters' Line of Escape.

| First Step | Becoming a Muslima or sealing a marriage |
|---|---|
| Crisis | Sealing a marriage or becoming a Muslima; harsh fate |
| Line of Escape | Steadfastness, premature death, and eternal memory |

Source: Manfred Sing

Thus, the underlying message is that even though Fatima represented the perfect and pious woman, she had to endure hardship because she was sincerely committed to the cause of Islam. Yet, her case as well as the portraits of the other daughters are exemplary of steadfastness and piety in the face of harsh conditions—and in that sense, their legacy lived on in spite of their premature deaths. In this respect, the case of Muhammad's granddaughter, Zaynab bt. ʿAli, only forms a slight variation:

Table 5   The Granddaughter's Line of Escape.

| First Step | Growing up as a member of the *ahl al-bayt*, the descendants of Muhammad |
|---|---|
| Crisis | Battle of Karbala; brother's martyrdom |
| Line of Escape | Confronting injustice, protecting Muhammad's offspring, ensuring the continuity of the lineage, eternal memory |

Source: Manfred Sing

## 3.2   Unity versus Tribalism and Factionalism

It should have become clear by now that the controversy with Bint al-Shatiʾ as well as Sakakini's two books about early Muslim women are not only about questions of gender. Various other issues are involved, making the whole picture much more complex. As my analysis has shown, these issues include the schism of Islam, the interpretation of early Islam, and the Shiite view of Islam, but also contemporary concerns such as Arab nationalism, Islamic unity, modernity, and the idea of a Jewish conspiracy. Therefore, Sakakini's attempt to write a history of early Islam that centers on female actors encounters factors that make it difficult for her account to be even-handed. These factors can be described in the following seven points:

(1) **The historical interpretation of early Islam:** The interpretation of the earliest events gives a retrospective meaning to the religious schism that was consolidated only in later centuries and reported by the Arabic sources written in this time. There exists a consistency problem insofar as there is a difference between the earliest events and the far-reaching interpretations of these sources from later times. Sakakini's text does only rarely address this tension, as is the case in male condemnations of ʿAʾisha; she mainly tries to re-interpret the existing material.

(2) **Sunna versus Shiʿa:** Although Sakakini sets the reconciliation scene between ʿAʾisha and Fatima against the picture of religious and political divisions in early Islam, she writes her history of early Islam in the context of a—more or less clearly expressed—Sunni preconception. This is particularly evident from the fact that her

appreciation of the two women is at the expense of Shiite viewpoints. Already her apologies for ‘A’isha’s political adventure almost inevitably entail a devaluation of ‘Ali’s claims. The same goes for her stress of ‘A’isha’s and Fatima’s religious knowledge and piety. That Sakakini further suggests that Fatima was superior to ‘Ali in nearly all respects and that he leaned on her in his political decisions casts ‘Ali’s masculinity in a negative light. It does justice to neither Fatima nor ‘Ali from a Shiite point of view. In the Shiite conception of history, Fatima’s resistance to Abu Bakr and ‘Umar does not go back to her being a »strong woman«, but to her role as one of the ancestors of the Shi‘a. From a Shiite perspective, the figure of Fatima primarily serves the construction of a Shiite, not a female identity. Therefore, Sakakini’s feminist and trans-sectarian attempt to re-tell ‘A’isha’s and Fatima’s story has an anti-Shiite undertone, which partially undercuts her more general goals. This becomes particularly clear in the chapter on Zaynab bint ‘Ali, in which Sakakini understates Zaynab’s importance for Karbala and its Shiite interpretation and glosses over Yazid’s at least moral responsibility for the massacre.

(3) **Men’s action and women’s contribution:** If the conflict between the two men ‘Ali and Abu Bakr over the caliphate is usually seen as a reflection of the competition between the two women Fatima and ‘A’isha, the resulting schism between Shi‘a and Sunna appears as a quasi-natural consequence of these conflicts. Yet, Sakakini’s text rightly poses the question of whether the dualism of favorite wife (‘A’isha) and favorite daughter (Fatima) is actually congruent with the male power struggle. Sakakini’s attempt to tell the story of ‘A’isha and Fatima differently is directed against the prevailing historical images. Storytelling is a cognitive instrument, which usually creates order in (everyday) chaos. Stories are mostly conservative in terms of their narrative structure and they provide arguments for the *status quo* because they draw a line from the more distant to the nearer past, creating false coherence and intelligibility. Thus, most stories mystify the understanding of chaos and contingency. In contrast, the attempt to tell a story that has not yet been told is a liberating act that can have a shattering effect on the existing social order[101]. In this respect, Sakakini’s differently told story of ‘A’isha and Fatima represents an attempt to free her readers from the ballast of the prefigured, culturally powerful images of Islamic history. The gesture of reconciliation is set against the overwhelming power of these sectarian images. This gesture has the character of an appeal that stands in the tradition of pan-Arab nationalism, arguing that Arabs should overcome their various divisions.

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101 On this point, see Mike HANNE, The Power of the Story. Fiction and Political Change, Providence 1994.

(4) **Factionalism versus Arab and Islamic unity:** The Prophet's harem in Sakakini's books stands for the unity of the Arab tribes as well as the early Muslim community. Although Sakakini's text has a Sunni flavour, it is not fiercely anti-Shiite. In spite of its shortcomings, one may assume that it tries to overcome religious and tribal divides. In the second edition, the book even includes Christian and Jewish wives of Muhammad. As such, it obviously highlights its allegiance to pan-Arabism, which—although it aimed to set aside religious differences—was often tinged with Sunni images of history[102].

(5) **Arab Jews versus Jewish conspiracy:** Although Sakakini includes a Jewish wife in her collection of Prophet's wives, she implicitly makes it clear that Safiyya is an exception—a »sincere Jewess« to be distinguished from the majority of conspiring Jews. Sakakini's narrative thus introduces a central element of a modern conspiracy theory to make sense of the distant past. Both the Jewish wife and the anti-Jewish trope were absent in the first edition of the book from 1947. It is therefore fair to assume that Sakakini introduced the Jewish wife in the 1962 edition so as to have an opportunity to speak about Jewish sincerity/insincerity.

(6) **Modernity vs. Islamic heritage:** Both modernity and tradition appear in a double sense in Sakakini's texts. Tradition is split into the prevailing ideas about women's traditional roles in society and a historically correct image of the past—in other words, between the »neo-patriarchal« use of the past and a historical study of the past. Sakakini argues against the so-called »traditional« women's roles with the help of a—more or less—impartial study of the past. Similarly, she splits modernity into the (universal) call for emancipation and the Western claim of superiority and tries to show that women's position in early Islam anticipated modern Western claims and that Arab women's public engagement past and present is an argument against Western colonialism.

(7) **Arab-Muslim versus European emancipation:** Sakakini's writing of a gendered history of early Islam is the continuation of women's post-Ottoman and inter-war activism, which aimed »to construct a local model of womanhood, rather than one cast in the European mold«[103]. As is visible in Sakakini's works, »Islam« functions as a marker for a particular (non-European) history, culture, and religion. Just as Haykal made use of the Prophet's biography to argue for a culturally self-confident version of Arab-Islamic liberalism, Sakakini pleaded for a culturally

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102  For twentieth century Sunni apologetics on the Umayyads see Ende, Arabische Nation.

103  This is also Pahumi's argument with relation to the Albanian women's movement, see Nevila Pahumi, Which Feminism Will Be Ours? The Women's Movement in Post-Ottoman Interwar Albania, in: Clio. Women, Gender, History 48, 2 (2020), p. 133.

self-confident Arab-Islamic womanhood. Sakakini did not only use Arab-Islamic history to ground the universal demand for women's emancipation locally and depict historical role models; she even used it to argue that Arab-Islamic culture played an historic role in women's emancipation. Thus, Sakakini used historical religious images to demand women's emancipation. Her opponent Bint al-Shati'—as well as later Islamist voices such as Zaynab al-Ghazali—denounced gender equality on religious grounds.

## 4.    Summary: The Controversy as a Conflict between Secular and Islamic Feminism?

The controversy between Sakakini and Bint al-Shati' demonstrates that women in patriarchal structures are not only passive victims but also actors. They can stabilize, challenge or subvert the dominant structures. This holds true for both authors as well as for their views of the Prophet's wives. Their re-interpretations face narrow boundaries and different challenges. Sakakini's feminist voice was made to fight for recognition in the literary field, but it was much harder for her to be heard in the religious field. For Bint al-Shati', the scope for action in the religious field was much smaller, but she was well equipped by her religious authority to intervene vigorously in the literary field. As a woman who wanted to succeed in the religious field, she was predisposed to recognize the symbolic power of religion and the social order that is legitimized by it. As shown through the example of this debate, the opponents pursued different strategies in order to assert themselves in their respective fields and gain male recognition. Since both the literary and religious fields were dominated by men, both women were inevitably faced with arguments that made male rule appear natural and culturally or religiously legitimate; they could reject male domination only within the scope of the agency that they had acquired and that was granted to them. That Sakakini's liberating message was drowned out by Bint al-Shati'—in terms of book sales as well as in terms of continued academic interest—, can be explained by the latter's discursive strategy and the context in which her works were written, but also by the fact that Bint al-Shati''s work was translated into English and thus enjoyed some kind of financial and institutional backing.

Sakakini's more feminist interpretation of the Prophet's harem was a creative innovation, but it was a risky investment because she used the symbolic power of the Prophet's wives against the symbolic power of patriarchal religion. Therefore, the symbolic power of the Prophet's wives not only supports Sakakini's concern, but also counters it subliminally. By referring to the high rank of the Prophet's wives, Sakakini wanted to remove the religious legitimacy of the contemporary neo-patriarchal order by reinterpreting Muhammad as a »liberator of women«. She

thus attempted to turn the »fair treatment of women« into a core concern of Islam. At first glance, this appears to be an effective attack on the patriarchal core of the Islamic order, which is stabilized with conservative images of the same women.

One problem, however, is that this argument asserts the compatibility of just gender relations with Islam; thus, it implicitly accepts that only that which is compatible with Islam can be considered legitimate. The idealization of the possibilities of women in early Islamic times out of counter-hegemonic intention carries within itself the spark of the idealization of early Islam or Islam as such. A second problem lies in the fact that a double compatibility—Islam with emancipation, Islam with modernization—is claimed, although contradictions and resistance are predictable. The demand for emancipation, even if rooted in Islamic history and based on Islamic norms, stands in open conflict with male rule, which is traditionally also based on Islamic modes of legitimation. Since a central social function of religion is to give social hierarchies a higher meaning, there is a high probability that feminist approaches will be socially marginalized and attacked as religiously questionable or even un-Islamic[104].

A further obstacle lies in the source material that clearly sets limits on an emancipatory approach due to the relatively low number of women's appearances and the stories told about them in the sources. Apart from that, Sakakini implicitly claims that Muhammad's polygyny was more just to women than contemporary monogamous or polygamous arrangements. Still, the main difficulty that Sakakini's approach to the Prophet's harem poses is not that Islamic sources do not allow a feminist interpretation or that Sakakini did not try to legitimatize just gender relations on Islamic grounds or that her interpretation of the history of early Islam was too emancipatory. Rather, it lies in the fact that patriarchy and Islam support each other; the modification of the one also requires the modification of the other. The intended destabilization of the one by recognizing the authority of the other has a paradoxical effect. In this regard, Sakakini's difficulties in the cultural context of the mid-twentieth century is not too far away from our own experiences.

A similar paradox can be observed in recent attempts at feminist reinterpretations of Middle Eastern history and the Qur'an. These readings presuppose, reproduce, and thus strengthen (in a feminist version) the religious authority that they try to break (in the male version). The debate about a new »Islamic feminism« or gender *jihad*[105] that has been ongoing since the 1990s and intensified since 2005 seems to ignore this paradox. The representatives claim—in spite of differences in their

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104 For some examples from recent decades see Roswitha BADRY, On the *takfīr* of Arab Women's Rights Advocates in Recent Times, in: Camilla ADANG et al. (eds.), Accusations of Unbelief in Islam. A Diachronic Perspective on Takfīr, Leiden 2016, pp. 354–380.

105 In October of 2005 a congress under this motto convened in Barcelona, see Asra Q. NOMANI, A Gender Jihad for Islam's Future, in: The Washington Post (06.11.2005). The following year, US

approaches—that a decidedly Islamic approach that interprets the Qurʾan, Sunna, and Shariʿa in an egalitarian manner and saves them from patriarchal falsifications can point to a culturally grounded and therefore better or more adequate way of achieving gender equality.

Margot Badran holds that a »feminist discourse and practice in an Islamic paradigm«[106] is better suited to bringing about equality in the Middle East than secular feminism. In 2002, she demarcated the two feminist approaches: »Islamic feminism discourse on the whole is more radical than Muslims' secular feminisms have been«[107]. She claims that secular feminisms »historically accepted the idea of equality in the public sphere and the notion of complementarianism in the private sphere«[108]. The distinction between secular feminism and Islamic feminism is »that the latter is a feminism that is articulated within a more exclusively Islamic paradigm«[109]. New readings of the Qurʾan theoretically affirm »the unqualified equality of all human beings (*insān*) […] across the public/private spectrum. Secular feminism insisted on the full equality of women and men in the public sphere but accepted a model of gender complementarity in the private or family sphere«[110]. Badran suggests that the elder generations of Arab feminists failed to critically engage the Islamic foundations and therefore failed to bring about radical change.

This point of view is not really confirmed by the present study about the debate between Sakakini and Bint al-Shatiʾ; it rather turns out to be hardly meaningful. The problem begins with the fact that it is difficult to decide whether Sakakini should be counted as a secular or religious actor. It is clear, however, that her opponent, Bint al-Shatiʾ, does not embody the idealized »Islamic feminism« that advocates gender equality from within an Islamic paradigm; she rather represents Islamic conservativism. A second problem is that the opposition between secular and Islamic feminism is not generally congruent with the opposition between emancipatory versus conservative views of gender relations. Even if, in our case, secular and emancipatory could be assigned to Sakakini and Islamic and conservative to Bint

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activist and Muslim scholar Amina Wadud published her work: Amina Wᴀᴅᴜᴅ, Inside the Gender Jihad. Women's Reform in Islam, Oxford 2006.

106 Margot Bᴀᴅʀᴀɴ, Islamic Feminism. What's in a Name?, in: al-Ahram Weekly Online 569 (17.–23.01.2002).

107 Ibid. She has slightly rephrased this sentence in eadem, Islamic Feminism. What's in a Name?, in: Eadem, Feminism in Islam. Secular and Religious Convergences, Oxford 2009, p. 250.

108 Eadem, Islamic Feminism. What's in a Name? (2009), p. 250. Also compare her earlier article where the word »historically« is still missing, see eadem, Islamic Feminism Revisited (2006), URL: <https://www.counter currents.org/gen-badran100206.htm> (08.11.2021).

109 Eadem, Islamic Feminism. What's in a name? (2002). She deleted this sentence in eadem, Islamic Feminism. What's in a Name? (2009), p. 250.

110 Eadem, Between Secular and Islamic Feminism/s, p. 14. See the various reformulations of the same idea in eadem, Feminism in Islam, pp. 3f.

al-Shaṭiʾ, this need not be so because Sakakini can also be seen as a Muslim feminist. In a sense, then, Badran's intervention can be read as a partially justified critique of the self-understanding of a secular, perhaps leftist feminism. However, her inversion only works as a polemic, not as a scholarly categorization. Even current Islamic feminism is not per se more progressive than secular feminism; it depends on the individual case. The categorization »secular« versus »Islamic« is misleading in that it says nothing substantive about the type and degree of emancipation advocated by activists who see themselves as secular or Muslim. As already shortly mentioned (see chapter II.4), this problem of categorization can be traced back to Margot Badran's view that Huda Shaʿrawi and her companions represented a »radical liberal feminism«[111], that »shied away from a secularism that severed all links with religion«[112].

Thirdly, there is the problem that Bint al-Shaṭiʾ has been more successful with her books and has been able to generate more attention than Sakakini. This is an inherent contradiction to Badran's assumptions: First, theoretically Sakakini should have been more successful in bringing about social change because she was more radical in her reinterpretation than Bint al-Shaṭiʾ and closer to a progressively understood »Islamic feminism« than Bint al-Shaṭiʾ; second, her failure to outdo Bint al-Shaṭiʾ could be easily explained, according to Badran, if one simply assumed that she was a secular author. The fact that Badran introduces the criterion of success is very problematic in this context because she blames the failure to achieve a gender-equal society on the approaches of feminists, not on their opponents or the structures in which the feminists operated. Moreover, someone's alleged failure or success would determine whether she was categorised as secular or Islamic.

To my mind, it does not change much whether Sakakini is categorized as a secular or Islamic feminist, as long as she fights for gender justice (*inṣāf*) with the help of Islamic sources. I therefore call her an »Arab feminist«, a designation that is open to secular as well as religious layers of meaning in her argumentation. The controversy between Sakakini and Bint al-Shaṭiʾ shows that both authors used Islamic sources in nearly the same way to create a coherent narrative based on their interests, claims, and social position. It is impossible to see how one of the two narratives could claim to be considered »more exclusively« (Badran) Islamic. Nor is it possible to attribute a full-fledged demand of »gender equality« to one of the two authors, as both of them engage with models of complementarity. What the controversy, however, clearly shows is that the demands of this generation of Muslim women (even if understood as »secular«) also had references to religion, as Badran duely emphasizes.

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111  Eadem, Independent Women, p. 135; reprinted in eadem, Feminism in Islam, p. 124.
112  Eadem, Competing Agenda, pp. 210f.

This stems from the fact that a feminist criticism in Islamic contexts must inevitably be a criticism of Islamic sources and narratives. Further studies with an egalitarian and critical intention, as requested by Badran, are therefore doubtlessly desirable. Yet, it is obvious that the more or less edifying portraits of early Muslim women by Sakakini can serve the struggle for emancipation, although they are just as historically and academically unsatisfactory as the portraits by Bint al-Shatiʾ. But does that make their arguments and their controversy worthless?

Quite the opposite: What we can learn from their controversy is that it is doubtful that Sakakini's approach can be intensified and practiced in a »more exclusively Islamic« (Badran) way. It is even questionable that a *theoretically* possible »exclusively Islamic« feminism would be better able to *practically* reconcile Islam, gender equality, cultural identity, and radicality; rather, the idea of such a perfect »Islamic feminism« is simply based on a desire to harmonize these various demands—a desire that already underlies Sakakini's approach.

What the controversy between Sakakini and Bint al-Shatiʾ reveals is that a gender conscious rewriting of the religious tradition entails not only gender norms, but also other issues such as the schism of Islam, the re-interpretation of early Islam, the quest for Arab and Islamic unity, and the question about the relation between Islamic past and modernity. There is more than one secular or religious way to answer these complex questions. In fact, religious authors are just as divided among themselves as liberal writers in their search for answers to these questions, as the various narratives constructed by Arab authors in the twentieth century clearly show. Placing an author on the right or left side of the secular-religious divide is not enough to predict how she will resolve all the religious, social, and political issues involved in rewriting historical narratives.

# VI. Mobility and Belonging



Fig. 10 On the cover of Widad Sakakini's first short story collection *Marāyā l-nās* (*The Mirrors of the People*, 1944), the people are not bound by national boundaries. They stand as a grey mass in an undefined space, viewing themselves in an oversized mirror. Only the mirror makes their cultural peculiarities visible. Source: Despite great efforts, the rights holder could not be located.

In the final chapter, I sum up my approach to studying Widad Sakakini's work within a transnationally interconnected realm through the lens of her mobility and the question of her multiple belongings (VI.1). With this approach, my intention is to argue against methodical nationalism and a purely literary-studies analysis. The lens of mobility, understood in a spatial as well as symbolic sense, allows discussing the multiple forms of her—emotional, social, national, and religious—belonging at various stages in her life. Based on her spatial, social, and intellectual mobility, I question the prevailing attributions, which posit her as a »Syrian«, a pioneer of »short story writing«, an author of »inconsistent« plots or an »ambivalent« woman writer with conservative or religious inclinations. This approach not only allows us to ask in what sense Widad Sakakini was Syrian, we can also interrogate how she moved in time and space, between literary genres and intellectual camps, and what kind of intellectual or literary boundaries she thereby crossed. With this form of analysis, I seek to better grasp the character of her transnational biography, the forms of her movement, and the opportunity structures that enabled her practical and symbolic mobility.

In the second sub-chapter, I ask in what sense she can be perceived as a »secular«, »Muslim« and »feminist« writer (VI.2) Here, I consider how Sakakini's work speaks back to the recent post-colonial criticism of »secular feminism«, complementing the discussion of the chapter above (V.4), in which I already dealt with the conundrum of »Islamic feminism«. In doing so, I engage with the theoretical debate on the connections between feminism, secularism and Islam and reject a methodologically narrow understanding of secularism as well as a comprehensive understanding of the otherness of Islam. Methodologically, I question a sharp secular/religious separation, refrain from describing Sakakini as essentially either a »secular« or »Muslim« author, and see her more as an author who »advocates« the cause of Muslim women and »belongs« to the Arab women's movement. I believe that this approach is better suited to capturing the complex layers of her identity, affiliations and the positions for which she argued in the literary field.

## 1.    A Transnational Biography

In her introduction to the edited volume *The Making of the Arab Intellectual*, Dyala Hamzah makes the case for studying Arab intellectuals in their multi-layered, contemporary contexts and distinguishes this approach from the paradigm of Western impact and Arab reaction[1]. She sees Albert Hourani's *Arabic Thought in the*

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1  Dyala Hamzah, Introduction, in: Eadem (ed.), The Making of the Arab Intellectual. Empire, Public Sphere and the Colonial Coordinates of Selfhood, Milton Park 2013, p. 3.

*Liberal Age*[2] as »the iconic exercise in introduction and rehearsal (of modern Arabic ideas to the Western student)«[3], and claims that it is grounded in this paradigm. She proposes to re-focus on »the contemporary and local production of meaning«[4] instead of judging Arab authors against the background of external norms, canons, arguments, and expectations rooted in other times and places. She further states that the field of Middle Eastern intellectual history has long been divided between those researchers who traced »Middle Eastern ideas« back to their »intellectual origins« and those who looked at their »social roots«[5]. The practitioners of the genealogical principle »usually fuelled histories of ideas that were, by and large, and despite often erudite scholarship, unconcerned with the social mooring of those concepts at work in their articulation«[6]. Therefore, the ideas under consideration »failed the acid test of originality«[7], were measured against the Western canon, and understood as second-rank formulations or failed applications. In contrast, those who sought for the social roots of thought were forced to downplay (Western) intellectual genealogies and, one could add, they explained ideas and their failure by their (parochial) social context. Instead, Hamzah pleads for us to understand the making of the Arab intellectual landscape as concomitant with the emergence and formation of the public sphere.

In the same sense, I am critical of the supposed failures that are attributed to Arab feminism—that is to say, the claim that it is not radical enough or is hampered by social conditions. In Hamzah's sense, I understand the formation of the Arabic literary field as an act that is constitutive and constituted at the same time. Constituted by individual and institutional activities—the printing press, journals and newspapers, among others—, the formation of a literary field forms the constitutive condition for the possibility of intellectual activities, which unfolded in the field, once it was constituted. Through the perspective of Widad Sakakini's life and work, it has been possible to apprehend the establishment of the Arabic literary field as gendered practice (see chapter II). Suffice to mention that Hourani's *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age* is nearly devoid of women[8], although they certainly were a subject of men's debates. In addition to these considerations about the formation of a gendered field of public debate, it is equally important that Widad Sakakini's life represents a striking example of a transnational biography. The dominant practice

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2  Albert Hourani, Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798–1939, Cambridge ²1983 [¹1962].

3  Hamzah, Introduction, p. 3.

4  Ibid., p. 9.

5  Ibid., p. 3.

6  Ibid.

7  Ibid.

8  He mentions Huda Sha'rawi in one sentence, see Hourani, Arabic Thought, p. 215.

of nationalizing such biographies »not only simplifies a life's course unduly«[9], it also »shows a bias towards national narratives«, as Sarah Panter et al. have argued. »Analysing such biographies as ›nationalised‹ lives ignores the transnational dynamics and entangled practices shaping their agency. For such transgressive life stories were not bound to one territory or one nation-state but rather marked by a high level of mobility and internationality, especially if one keeps in mind larger group relations, like family or business networks«[10].

Starting from these theoretical assumptions, I try to re-configure Widad Sakakini's intellectual history and transnational biography more precisely on the following pages.

Literary critics' and researchers' judgment that Widad Sakakini's works were incoherent, illogical or ambivalent (see chapter III.4) mainly follows from a reading of her texts as purely literary products. The accusation that Sakakini's plots and her protagonists' inner monologues were illogical or contradictory is derived from the literary structure, discursive or aesthetic level of her texts. The question of how and in which way her work reflects social conditions is not even discussed. Rather, her depiction of men's vices and women's victim status in *Arwā bint al-khuṭūb* is disavowed as an exaggerated fabrication[11], whereas other tropes of unfaithful or vengeful women are said to border on or represent feminist misogyny[12]. My apprehension is that such points of criticism raised by critics and researchers reflect the concerns of other times and places, not the contexts of Sakakini's life and work. Thus, in Yumna al-ʿId's, Subhi Hadidi's, Iman al-Qadi's, and Astrid Ottosson Bitar's critiques (see chapter III.4), Sakakini's work is not really read against the background of her own concerns, but embedded in a broader narrative. Sakakini's work does not meet the expectations of the latest feminist theory or literary analysis and appears to be insufficiently feminist. Subsequent generations of Arab women authors, so the narrative goes, have made literary progress with a presentation of women's concerns that appears to be nearer to the critics' taste. This is not really a critical analysis of Sakakini's work, but rather a positioning of her, as a literary »pioneer«, on the trajectory of literary progress. Sakakini's attempt to articulate her concerns seems to be separated by a dividing line from more recent (and better) work. If we put Radwa Ashour's et al.'s *Arab Women Writers*, in which al-ʿId's, Hadidi's, and al-Qadi's critiques appeared, alongside Hourani's *Arabic Thought*, the similarity becomes more obvious—even if one must still admire the »diehard

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9 Sarah Panter et al., Mobility and Biography. Methodological Challenges and Perspectives, in: Eadem (ed.), Mobility and Biography, Berlin / Boston 2016 (Europan History Yearbook 16), p. 2.

10 Ibid.

11 al-Qāḍī, al-Riwāya al-nisawiyya, p. 80.

12 Ottosson Bitar, I Can Do Nothing, p. 55.

beauty«[13] of both reference works. Widad Sakakini appears as a female revenant of the public intellectuals that Hourani discusses; she seems to be the »other« woman writer, a pioneer from the past, you fondly remember without knowing exactly why. In this regard, it seems appropriate to recall Chandra Talpade Mohanty's now classical criticism of Western feminist theorizing, in which she elucidates the strong tendency to homogenize Third World women into a discrete unifying category, constituted prior to the women's entry into social relations, institutions, and families, thus underestimating their agency[14]. Transferred to our case that means unpacking the category of »Arab women writers«, freeing the figure of Widad Sakakini from unspoken expectations and paying more attention to her relationship with the social world. This is what I tried to do on the previous pages of this study by discussing Widad Sakakini's work in relation to her male and female Arab interlocutors (see chapter II), by comparing her texts with Bint al-Shati's approach (see chapter IV), and by analyzing her plots as a reworking of Arabic literary conceptions (see chapter III) as well as a response to social transformations (see chapter I.1 and III.1).

From a transnational perspective, I start by questioning Widad Sakakini's allegedly »Syrian« identity, as it is one of the salient categories, attributed to her. It has become commonplace to describe her as a pioneer of Syrian short story writing or at least »Syrian women's short story writing«[15]. Yet, she was born and raised in Lebanon and only became »Syrian« through her marriage to a Syrian. The gender bias of naturalization law—that the husband's nationality determines his wife's—is thus applied to her and even to the character of her writing. She certainly lived in Damascus from the mid-1930s to the mid-1940s and from the end of the 1960s to her death. Yet, judging from her own remarks, she considered herself a part of the tradition of Lebanese women activists[16] and complained about the lack of literary activities in Syria[17] and the lack of support for her literary ambitions in Damascus[18]. This dual national identity results in strange effects: In *Arab Women Writers*, her pioneering work of the 1940s and early 1950s is treated in the chapters on »Lebanon« and »Syria« in four different places, under the heading of »short stories« and »novels« from Lebanon as well as »short stories« and »novels« from

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13 Hamzah, Introduction, p. 3.

14 Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Under Western Eyes. Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses, in: boundary 2 12, 3/13, 1 (1984), pp. 333–358; idem, Feminism Without Borders. Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity, Durham/London 2003, pp. 17–42.

15 See, for example, Hadidi/al-Qadi.

16 Sakākīnī, al-Thaqāfatunā l-fannī, p. 195.

17 Eadem, Taṭawwur al-maṛa, p. 402.

18 Eadem, Wīdād Sakākīnī, p. 168.

Syria[19]. However, her first short story collections and her two novels were printed by Egyptian publishers while she lived in Egypt. Her literary breakthrough and constant productivity were probably only possible because of her move to Egypt, although she brought the short stories for her first collection with her from Damascus and had published stories in various papers before, most notably her prize-winning work in the Lebanese literary journal *al-Makshūf*. As she had her most productive days in Egypt in the 1940s and 1950s, it would be more reasonable to describe her writings as a product of the creative Egyptian literary scene. Moreover, in hindsight, she described her days in Egypt as the luckiest days in her life[20] because she found support, encouragement, and inspiration there. Amina Sa'id's remark[21] that Sakakini synthesized in her literature the »breeze« of Lebanon, the »depth« of Syria, and the »sensibility« of Egypt, at least indirectly grasps Sakakini's transnational life, yet glosses over the differences and adds an essentialist dimension to the places and writing styles. The literary critic Muḥsin Jamāl al-Dīn discovers in Sakakini's style a union of the »beauty« of Lebanon, the »grandeur« of Syria, the »history« of Cairo and the »glories« of Baghdad[22].

If we move away from container terms such as »nationality« or »identity«[23], we are able to ask about the »belonging«[24] of Widad Sakakini. Belonging is characterized by its multi-dimensionality, as it encompasses different layers of meaning—such as the legal-national aspect, political affiliation, ideological commitment, ethnic genealogy, language communities, and religious membership. It also extends to the emotional, subjective, and social sense of being at home in a certain place[25]. Thus, it is not only possible to make a strong case for Sakakini's belonging to Egypt—or even to a pan-Arab community—on an emotional level, but also for a further deconstruction of the Syrian container that has been erected for her. Both Zaki al-Mahasini and Widad Sakakini embodied the process of Arab unification in their lives and work. When the Egyptian-Syrian unity (1958–1961) emerged with the proclamation of the United Arab Republic, they saw themselves as among its pioneers who »paved the way« and »established co-operation and cultural unity« through their activities[26]. Therefore, the break-up of the unity must have been more

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19  See al-'Id, Lebanon, pp. 22 and 36f., and Hadidi/al-Qadi, Syria, pp. 61f. and 77f.

20  Sakākīnī, Widād Sakākīnī, p. 167.

21  Quoted in Yūsuf, al-Qiṣṣa al-qaṣīra, pp. 19f.

22  Jamāl al-Dīn, al-Sayyida, p. 26.

23  For a meanwhile famous critique of »identity« see Rogers Brubaker/Frederick Cooper, Beyond »Identity«, in: Theory and Society 29 (2000), pp. 1–47.

24  Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka, Zugehörigkeit in der mobilen Welt. Politiken der Verortung, Göttingen 2012.

25  Ibid., p. 8.

26  See Sakakini's remarks in her interview with Naṣr, Udabā', p. 291.

than a personal disappointment to them. As self-proclaimed pan-Arabists and probable supporters of ʿAbd al-Nasser, they may have been unhappy with political developments in Syria; they certainly had to arrange themselves with the regime after the Baʿth Party seized power (1963). Against this backdrop, it seems to be no accident that Sakakini joined her grown-up children, who studied in Egypt, in the mid-1960s, while her husband accepted calls to teach in Mecca and Beirut. It might also have to do with the changing political circumstances that Sakakini's biographies about ʿUmar al-Fakhuri and Mayy Ziyada appeared in 1969 and 1970 and that she explicitly appreciated the socialist convictions of both, something which had been of little concern in her previous writings[27]. Zaki al-Mahasini died in 1972, shortly after Sakakini returned to Damascus; the rest of her life was marked by disappointment, bitterness, isolation, and poverty[28]. From conversations with people from Sakakini's personal milieu, Ottosson Bitar discovered that Sakakini's »frankness and stern nature also seem to have caused her to come into conflict with other members of the cultural community« of Damascus«[29]. To what extent this mood also reflects the relative alienation of the older generation of women activists vis-à-vis the new Baʿth regime cannot be clarified[30]. In any case, Sakakini must have felt that she was not accorded the respect in Syria that she deserved and had enjoyed in Egypt[31]. By spreading this impression, she obviously capitalized on the presumable lack of acknowledgement in Syria and was able to garner financial and practical backing from the Union of Arab Writers in Damascus and her companions from the Women's Cultural Club. In this sense, her transnational experience offered her the possibility of mobilizing support. However, in the nineteen years between the death of her husband and her own demise, her productivity dropped significantly. Only four books appeared in this period: a short story collection, which contained new material, but also re-prints of earlier stories; two collections of literary essays, which mainly consisted of already published essays; and the collection of short women's biographies *Sābiqāt al-ʿaṣr*. In the volume of literary essays, *Shawk fī l-ḥaṣīd* (1981), she explained that she re-published parts of *Niqāṭ ʿalā l-ḥurūf* (1962) because the 1962 collection of essays had appeared in Cairo and was unavailable and unknown in Syria, although it dealt with important and fundamental issues in literary criticism[32].

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27 Her first treatment of Mayy's socialism dates to 1963, see Sᴀᴋᴀ̄ᴋɪ̄ɴɪ̄, al-Ishtirākiyya ʿinda »Mayy«, in: al-Maʿrifa 19 (1963), pp. 47–54.

28 Oᴛᴛᴏssᴏɴ Bɪᴛᴀʀ, I Can Do Nothing, p. 45.

29 Compare ibid.

30 On women's politics under the Baʿth regime, the formation of mass organizations, and the restrictions, especially in the cultural field, see Mᴇɪɴɪɴɢʜᴀᴜs, Creating Consent, pp. 103–105, 166.

31 Ibid.

32 Widād Sᴀᴋᴀ̄ᴋɪ̄ɴɪ̄, Li-l-ḥaqīqa wa-l-tārīkh. Kalima … wa-muqaddima, in: Eadem, Shawk fī l-ḥaṣīd, p. 3.

The work even contained a re-print of Muhammad Mandur's 1962 preface in which he praised Sakakini's literary »engagement« (*iltizām*) *avant la lettre*—a point that was an old hat by then. On top of this, the censorship authorities refused to release Sakakini's sixth collection of short stories for printing. »It was delivered to the Ministry of Culture of Damascus for acceptance and there it has remained«[33], writes Ottosson Bitar. Compiled in 1986, the collection with the title *Mudhakkirāt umm. Marāḥil qiṣaṣiyya* (*A Mother's Memories. Narrative Stages*) included writings from different stages in Sakakini's life, the earliest story being ʿMaqtal ʿAliyya bint al-Mahdī (*The Killing of ʿAliya, al-Mahdi's Daughter*) from 1934[34].

All in all, her trajectory epitomizes the risk of transnational biographies. In the last phase of her life, she did not feel that she had »arrived«, where she belonged. Thus, the static attribution of a Syrian identity obviously misses Sakakini's subjective sense of belonging. Moreover, her trajectory also reveals three further intertwined social problems inherent in her transnational biography: the transient nature of her social ascent; the difficulty of earning money with writing; and her—at least partial— social and economic dependence on her husband. The latter obviously offered her the freedom for her literary work, while he was alive; after his death, her prospects looked dim.

A national interpretation of Sakakini's work not only underestimates her transnational movement in a post-Ottoman space, but also overlooks the spaces of possibilities and risks that arise from a transnational biography as well as the ways in which her transnational life influenced her writing. While the attribution of a »Syrian« identity neglects mobility, dynamism, and border crossing in a more practical sense, her categorization as a »short story writer« misses her mobility in a symbolic and intellectual sense. It is telling that the above-mentioned literary critics and researchers restricted their interpretation of Sakakini's work either to her short stories or to her two novels. They did not analyze the other literary genres in which Sakakini excelled: essays, literary criticism, and biographies. However, these other literary genres were important for different reasons. With her biographical writings, Sakakini pushed Arab women's lives into the limelight. In her literary criticism, Sakakini directly questioned major works of modern Arabic literature and the structure of the Arabic literary field. In *Niqāṭ ʿalā l-ḥurūf*, she vividly described her joy of discovering and practicing literary criticism—with the idea in mind that she thereby contributed to the improvement and further development of the emerging modern Arabic literature and of the Arab countries as a whole[35]. Both her outspoken literary criticism and her feminist essays can be seen as exemplary

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33 Oᴛᴛᴏssᴏɴ Bɪᴛᴀʀ, I Can Do Nothing, p. 73.

34 Ibid.

35 Sᴀᴋᴀᴋ̄ɪɴ̄ɪ, Kalimat al-muʾallifa, pp. 8–12.

border crossings. As a young female writer, she gained admission to the male dominated literary field, yet she did not hesitate to publicly criticize major writers as well as her supporters (see chapter II.1). In several critiques, she even disclosed the mechanism of consecration in the literary field and personal relations between authors. Since she was dependent on male consecration, this outspokenness was a risky investment, which could contribute to the accumulation of cultural capital, but also cost her support, as in the case of *al-Makshūf* (see chapter I.2).

Widad Sakakini was clearly aware that she was located in a post-Ottoman space. She was keen to stylize herself as a successor of the literary pioneers of Greater Syria, who had come to Egypt since the last third of nineteenth century and contributed massively to the literary scene, e.g. by founding newspapers and journals[36]. She consciously inscribed herself into this Ottoman and post-Ottoman tradition that included women like Zaynab Fawwaz and Mayy Ziyada, who founded famous literary salon in Damascus and Cairo respectively (see chapter II.3). The impact of Lebanese and Syrian immigrants on the Egyptian literary scene since the end of nineteenth century was already a common topos in Sakakini's days. Her posthumously published portraits of male authors from Greater Syria who had lived parts of their live on the banks of the Nile adds to this literature[37]. Sakakini's relationships with a variety of women interlocutors in various countries form another aspect of her belonging to a web of post-Ottoman female solidarity that sprang from her transnational mobility (see chapter II.4). Though rooted in different local contexts, these women often shared the experience of leaving their hometown after marriage, joining their husbands and settling in a new environment. While this had been a common practice in Ottoman times, the far-reaching family networks started to clash with the emerging nation states and their border regimes. Therefore, Sakakini's mobility also depended on opportunity structures that were not wholly in her hands. First, her marriage, against her mother's will, brought her to Damascus; secondly, that her husband was officially sent to Egypt three times as a PhD student, a cultural attaché, and cultural representative brought her to Egypt. The reputation that she had acquired in Egypt earned her a place in the Syrian delegation sent to Moscow in 1957.

People, ideas, and commodities obviously move with differing speeds in the same transnational space. For Sakakini, her personal movement back and forth between Syria and Egypt and a few other places was an incisive, yet a rather extraordinary experience. In contrast, the transnational space that she created as an author was a continuum, as she simultaneously supplied literary journals in various places

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36  For the example of the journal *al-Muqtaṭaf*, see Dagmar GLASS, Der Muqtaṭaf und seine Öffentlichkeit, Würzburg 2004. For the Syrian migration to Egypt in general, see Thomas PHILIPP, The Syrians in Egypt 1725–1975, Stuttgart 1985.

37  SAKĀKĪNĪ, Wujūh ʿarabiyya.

with her essays, critiques, and short stories. Sorted in chronological order, her main organs of publication were: *al-ʿIrfān* (Sidon, 1928–1977), *al-Ḥadīth* (Aleppo, 1929–1958), *al-Risāla* (Cairo, 1935–1965), *al-Adīb* (Beirut, 1942–1981), *al-Thaqāfa* (Cairo, 1943–1952), *al-Kitāb* (Cairo, 1946–1953), *al-Hilāl* (Cairo, 1947–1961), *al-Ādāb* (Beirut, 1953–1963), *al-Maʿrifa* (Damascus, 1962–1976), *al-ʿArabī* (Kuwait, 1972), *Nahj al-Islām* (Damascus, 1982–1986), and *al-Manhal* (Jidda, 1985–1988)[38].

While she could easily manage to send her articles to these media and make her thoughts accessible to a diverse readership, the commodity of a book obviously moved much slower and with more obstacles, as already mentioned. Journals and magazines were, for better or for worse, a fast-paced business. Essays and short stories were produced for these media; the production of a whole book or a novel was a much more complex and time-consuming process. Thus, Sakakini came to realize that her articles were spread all over the place, but were often unavailable in Damascus a few years after they had first appeared, unless they had been collected and re-printed. Even the collection of stories in a book did not save them from oblivion. According to Ottosson Bitar, Sakakini had nine of the fifteen short stories from *Marāyā l-nās* (1944) re-printed in her other collections as well, »sometimes with slightly modified language and/or a different title«[39]. That intellectual work was so much centered on journals posed a real problem for Arab intellectuals: their achievements and thoughts were always threatened with obscurity. For this reason, Zaki al-Mahasini's poetic work, which he continuously produced throughout his lifetime, was lost because it was not collected in a volume, either for time or for financial reasons. It was only thanks to his children, who bothered to have the partly collected, partly scattered poems printed, that Zaki al-Mahasini's poetic oeuvre became available *in toto* in 2006, 34 years after his death[40].

Moreover, Sakakini's mobility had an obvious influence on the content and structure of her writing. Mobile actors are generally forced to reflect on their belonging: they become attached to certain things that remind them of events, places or things in the past or in their childhood; they make experiences of alienation or even uprooting and they have to create new meaningful forms of belonging[41]. A writer can weave various aspects together that relate attachment and detachment to belonging. In Sakakini's case, it is striking how she meticulously describes scenes of everyday life, cultural customs, and religious rites. In *al-ʿArūs* (*The Bride*), published in *Marāyā l-nās*, the depiction of a wedding »occupies seven of the short story's total number of ten pages«[42]. Referring to the men in the bridal procession that

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38  A list of her articles is to be found in OTTOSSON BITAR, I Can Do Nothing, pp. 201–211.

39  Ibid., p. 73.

40  AL-MAḤĀSINĪ, Dīwān.

41  PFAFF-CZARNECKA, Zugehörigkeit in der mobilen Welt, pp. 34–46.

42  OTTOSSON BITAR, I Can Do Nothing, p. 76. For a short summary of the story, see ibid.

are about to chant songs, Sakakini explains in a footnote: »In its weddings, the middle class in Damascus has started for a little more than ten years to abandon these customs, which are still deeply rooted in the lowest class and those people who are a bit above it. I have fixed this image in this story«[43].

In this side note, actually rather unusual for a short story, Sakakini explicitly hints at the transformation of customs, which she cannot have experienced on her own, given that she had been in Damascus for less than ten years at that time; however, she describes it as her task to save these customs from being forgotten. In *Abū Turāb* (*Father of the Dust*)[44], she depicts the funeral customs in the old quarter of Salihiya in Damascus. Impermanence is the subject of the story. The main character, Abū Turāb, performs the washing (*ghusl*) of the deceased. He lives with other poor people in a decaying building, which is only remotely reminiscent of the former splendor of the religious schools (*madāris*) in Salihiya. The storyline is reduced to a minimum and culminates in the description of a funeral prayer (*ṣalāt al-jināza*). On the demand of a Sufi shaykh, a widower invites fifty of the poor men, who perform the prayer in two rows and ask God for forgiveness of the deceased wife in exchange for »an expiatory gift« (*kaffāra*). Following »the tradition of some narrow-minded people of Damascus«[45], the widower lets the practice of *kaffāra* be performed with a coin of »one hundred Lira of Ottoman gold«[46]. The shaykh symbolically hands the coin to each of the poor men with the words »I gave these hundred Lira to you for the spirit of so-and-so«[47], whereupon the poor man answers »I received them for you, my master, here I give you this value«[48]. Abū Turāb, however, grabs the coin and flees, but is soon caught by a policeman, who beats him. From this day, the narrator tells us, the funeral custom was performed without a golden coin in the shaykh's hand since it was words for words anyway. In a story about impermanence, Sakakini aims to capture changing habits dealing with impermanence.

Her status as an immigrant observer in Damascus and Cairo contributed to arousing her curiosity for such daily scenes and local customs. She held up the mirror to the people to show them their peculiarities and keep them aware of their cultural belonging, just as it is depicted on the cover of her first short story collection (see fig. 10). With the mirror, the title page took up a classic metaphor of Islamic imagery, which plays with the juxtaposition of the outside and the inside world and is rather sceptical about the value of representation, while attaching a higher

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43  Widad Sᴀᴋᴀᴋ̄ɪɴ̄ɪ, al-ʿArūs, in: Eadem, Marāyā l-nās, p. 114.
44  Eadem, Abū Turāb, in: Eadem, Marāyā l-nās, pp. 55–62.
45  Ibid., p. 60.
46  Ibid.
47  Ibid., p. 61.
48  Ibid.

value to reflection[49]. On the one hand, the mirror makes the act of image making visible. On the other hand, the underlying idea of the polished mirror is that it »can enhance reality in reflecting the ideal beyond the actual realization of the ideal in nature«[50]. Especially in Sufi thought, the real world is not real at all, it requires a reflecting heart. The mirror stands for this reflecting heart. The mirror image does not stand for an unreal space, for deception or for illusion, but for an act »of transparent and cognitive reflection«[51]. The underlying meaning is that perception not only makes the image of the people on the title page clearer, but also brings out their innermost. The metaphor of the mirror »indicates world-reflection, not self-reflection«[52]. Yet, through her »affective experience«[53] the artist also realizes what is already present within herself—because she sees the people with her reflecting heart. The first and rather long short story about the old spinster Hagar, cleverly uses the mirror metaphor. Hagar's story is told by a friend, who has watched her throughout her life. This narrator relates how Hagar's parents, her sisters, and the match makers see her in a way that turns a happy child into a girl who is deeply unhappy inside. She grows up cursing her fate, until finally, as a teacher, she behaves openly unjustly towards the schoolgirls, who can perceive nothing in her but an ugly old spinster. Thus, the perception by others shapes Hagar's personality. The other people are the mirrors in which Hagar's sees her own unfavorable reflection, which she cannot escape until she finally turns into the picture that the others made of her.

The approach of reflecting the self in the other and the other in the self is also visible in Sakakini's short story collection *Bayna l-Nīl wa-l-nakhīl* (*Between Nile and Palms*, 1948) in a less dramatic way. In the book with the subtitle *ṣuwar wa-aqāṣīṣ miṣriyya* (*Egyptian Images and Tales*), Sakakini often applies a journalistic reportage style, which is supposed to attest her eyewitness reports. In *Min al-zār ilā l-qimār* (*From zār to Gambling*), the depiction of a *zār*[54] ceremony—musical performances and dancing that are assumed to exorcize a demon that (usually) possesses a woman—extends over five of the nine pages. The story *Masābīḥ Ramaḍān* (*The Lanterns of Ramadan*) is a pure description of Ramadan customs even

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49  See Wendy Shaw, What Is »Islamic« Art? Between Religion and Perception, Cambridge 2019 (chapter 5 »Seeing through the mirror«).

50  Ibid., p. 137.

51  Ibid., p. 172.

52  Ibid., p. 127.

53  Ibid., p. 137.

54  The *zār* cult is a popular women's ritual of exorcizing spirits from a possessed individual. See Ioan Myrddin Lewis et al. (eds.), Women's Medicine. The Zar-Bori Cult in Africa and Beyond, Edinburgh 1991; Gerda Sengers, Woman and Demons. Cult Healing in Islamic Egypt, Leiden 2003.

without a plot or actors[55]. These texts are reflections about strange, alien or even exotic places, events or customs. For the author, they are worth telling because they trigger feelings and stimulate thinking about our attachment (or lack thereof) to different things. These texts constitute her not only as an observer of society, but also as an observing and reflecting self.

Similarly, among the portraits of the Prophet's wives, we find the Coptic woman Mariya, who feels estranged on the Arab Peninsula and develops a connection to the natural environment in Medina and the graves of Muhammad and their common son. In spite of this image of isolation, Sakakini suggests that we understand her example as the beginning of an exchange between Copts and Arabs—an idea that refers beyond the story she tells.

Structurally, this kind of implicit self-reflection often goes beyond genre boundaries, as in the already mentioned examples of a footnote, a comment in the text, or a short story without a plot and an actor. Sakakini's two collections of portraits of early Muslim women constitute an example of crossing genre boundaries as such; actually, they constitute a separate genre, for which Ottosson Bitar found the felicitous term of »fictional biographies«[56], a combination of short story writing with an infusion of biographical sketches and historical images. The chapters of Sakakini's two books are neither simple portraits nor disentangled life stories. Their interwoven narrative strands form an overall picture of early Muslim personalities and events. In pop music, one would speak of a »concept album«, which contains different songs that have a close relationship to one another. Her first book from 1947 depicts a greater diversity of early Muslim women's lives; the second edition of 1962 with its limitation—and partial extension—to the Prophet's wives and daughters is more coherent, but less diverse. This idea of collecting a modern version of the early Islamic women's stories in a single book soon found its imitators, beginning with Bint al-Shatiʾ. From these and other examples, it is obvious that Sakakini pushed the borders of the genre of the »short story«. The reason for this might lie in the fact that such short, entertaining or edifying texts were a new literary invention in Arabic and were mostly published in journals or newspapers. As culturally under-determined artefacts, they formed a template open for experimental approaches with regard to content and structure. Interestingly enough, Sakakini's short story collection *Aqwā min al-sinīn* (1978) opens with a peculiar short text, in which she describes the development of Arabic short story writing and her own experience with the 1936 competition of the journal *al-Makshūf*[57]. Thus, genre

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55  For both stories, also see OTTOSSON BITAR, I Can Do Nothing, p. 75.

56  Ibid., p. 61.

57  SAKĀKĪNĪ, Li-l-ḥaqīqa wa-l-tārīkh, pp. 7–11.

transgression is linked to her own life experiences. The transgression of literary genre and the transgression of national boundaries are interconnected.

This brings us to another facet: The genre of the short story not only helps the author to write about her views or experiences in relation to different milieus, it also offers the possibility of »biographical navigation«[58], a reflection of one's own life and its changing circumstances. The short story *Shaqīqat nafsī* (*My Soul Mate*, 1944) represents an early instantiation of this and stands out as a rare example of female autobiographical writing in Arabic at that time. Sakakini here describes Wiʾām, her alter ego in younger years, teaching girls by day and studying literature at night. This picture from her early adulthood suggests that her further path in life, which will ultimately lead her to Egypt, was already predetermined by her childhood enthusiasm for literature. A second story called *Aqwā min al-sinīn* (*Stronger than the Years*)[59] from 1978 draws a different picture. It depicts an unmarried woman, who, against her will, is retired from her position as headmistress of a school. The narrator reflects about her fate gloomily because her life has lost its purpose without school. The first sentence of the short story reads: »May God forgive me for my thoughts and feelings because I was never insincere or indisposed«[60]. Although she never used to complain, she now cannot help feeling isolated and depressed—something that can affect anyone, as she states. She was unable to marry because her mother rejected her favorite candidate, a fellow teacher, and all other applicants »until I missed the train that took one colleague after the other to the paradise of her dreams, whereas the paradise of my dreams was nothing but my school, in which I grew into myself and fulfilled my vocation that carried blossoms of affection and education for the coming generation«[61].

However, she finally makes up her mind to found a model kindergarden, thus using her experience in a new way. She asks her retired fellow teacher for help, and he accepts the offer and proposes marriage as well. In the end, the narrator not only makes up for her earlier despondency, but manages to keep her head up high in front of those who rejoiced at her retirement and misfortune in life. She surprises her female colleagues with the message of »the promised paradise«[62] that unites the new couple and entails their cooperation—the renewal of their lives and the continuation of their vocation. I cannot help but interpret this story autobiographically[63], since it seems to me to reflect Sakakini's mood of misfortune

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58 Pfaff-Czarnecka, Zugehörigkeit in der mobilen Welt, pp. 47–62.

59 Widād Sakākīnī, Aqwā min al-sinīn, in: Eadem, Aqwā min al-sinīn, pp. 13–19.

60 Ibid., p. 13.

61 Ibid., p. 15.

62 Ibid., p. 19.

63 For a summary of the content and a different interpretation, see Ottosson Bitar, I Can Do Nothing, pp. 137–142.

and lack of appreciation in the 1970s. After Zaki's death, she must have said to herself that somehow she had to continue her vocation, according to her self-image as a »tireless«, perhaps indestructible literary pioneer. Maybe a smaller literary project—the very story she is writing down—would re-unite her with him in her thoughts, just like the protagonists of her story finally find a way to each other.

A final challenge for people living transnational lives is a process described variously as translocational positioning, creative self-location, self-integration or politics of becoming[64]. The underlying idea is that transnational lives cannot remain in a free-floating state forever, but have to bring forth conviviality and a new feeling of belonging, built on complex, possibly unstable bonds that connect various local contexts and form cross-border webs.

Theoretically, this re-positioning builds a counter-weight to the disadvantages of globalization. In Sakakini's case, she belongs to the transnational Arabic literary field as well as to a cross-linguistic, mainly Arabic-French, cultural field. She was well aware of French works on literary criticism as well as French (women's) literature in a more general sense (see chapter II). Her pan-Arab orientation also played out in her work's subjects, in which she created a cultural as well as religious Arabic space that not only encompassed the post-Ottoman space covering the modern states of Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt. Especially her two books on the Prophet's wives constitute a striking example of her ability to skillfully move in time and space and re-claim past women's lives from the Arab Peninsula as a living heritage for women in the Arab Mashreq. She shared this ability with Zaki al-Mahasini, who wrote his dissertation on the Arabic poetics of war in Umayyad and 'Abbasid times and was later officially responsible for the curation of Arabic manuscripts in Syria. This interest in Arabic manuscripts was part of the processes of nation building and decolonization. Drawing on the wealth of Arabic sources helped to construct a Syrian as well a pan-Arab identity. Pre-colonial authenticity served as a counter-weight to European cultural influences and Western political dominance. Achievements that were often simply dubbed as Western, such as human rights or feminism, could thus be projected back on the past as something that had already been established in early Arab Islam. This intellectual movement between past and present as well as between Orient and Occident subverted the idea of incommensurable opposites; it reflects a thinking in dualisms that can—or even must—be reconciled (see chapter II.1.1.3). Thus, dualisms between tradition and modernity, Orient and Occident are congruent with the dualism between men and women or between 'A'isha and Fatima (see chapter IV.4). »Feminism« especially is re-articulated as the fair and just treatment of women, *inṣāf al-mar'a*—and is thus understood to have harbored in Arab-Islamic history. It can then be marked

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64  Pfaff-Czarnecka, Zugehörigkeit in der mobilen Welt, pp. 95–100.

as a moral duty that accompanied the anti-colonial struggle. These aims aligned Sakakini on the one hand with the pioneers of modern Arabic literature, who emulated European motifs, techniques, and genres; yet, she still had allegiances to the growing strand of Islamic, anti-Western writers, who were rather critical of any Western influence. As a player in the literary field, she followed its »secular« rules, whereas as a champion of Arab liberation and Arab women's emancipation, she defended what she found defensible in Arab culture and the religion of Islam. Depending on the context, she played both sides, pleading for modernization as well preservation.

The point of these considerations about Widad Sakakini's transnational biography is to see its opportunities and risks more clearly. The contradictions that arose from her practical and intellectual transnationality were neither forever linked with »ambivalence« nor miraculously resolved by »hybridity«. I neither aim to describe Widad Sakakini as swaying between two extremes or uniting two poles easily with each other. I rather tend to see her as a mobile actor who navigated in a space of various possibilities and changing risks, (bitterly) aware of the unbreachable gap between reality and its literary reflections.

## 2.    Feminism, Secularism, and Islam

For around two decades, a re-examination of the interplay between secularism and feminism has been underway, and different lines of argumentation in feminist scholarship can be distinguished[65]. Here, I discuss these issues in relation to the two clusters of thought that advocate or criticize secularism/secular feminism, and I ponder the question of whether Sakakini's work stands on the secular or Islamic side of the divide. At first, I go over Sakakini's work again to see how it reflects these feminist research issues.

A legitimate self-reflective question raised in today's feminist scholarship is whether the categories of »gender« and »sexuality« are appropriate categories to analyze non-European societies or cultures of the distant past, especially if both of them were untouched by modern heteronormativity. Many academic historians, in their attempts to re-construct past worlds, increasingly populate their accounts with men and women, thus implicitly constructing (hetero-normative) gender binary where it may not have been, according to the criticism of Afsaneh Najmabadi[66].

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65  For an informative overview, see Niamh REILLY, Rethinking the Interplay of Feminism and Secularism in a Neo-Secular Age, in: Feminist Review 97 (2011), pp. 5–31.

66  Afsaneh NAJMABADI, Beyond the Americas. Are Gender and Sexuality Useful Categories of Analysis, in: Journal of Women's History 18, 1 (Spring 2006), pp. 11–21.

What can we deduce from Sakakini's work with regard to questions of heteronormativity, sexuality, gender hierarchy, Arab nationalism, religion, and secularity? In her books on the Prophet's wives and daughters, Sakakini certainly does not deconstruct the concept of male prophethood; she also does not downplay women's roles in early Islam. Even if her female protagonists cannot act independently from men, she endows them with their own agency, which elevates them above the average (male) believer. Thus, she constructs hierarchies, but they are not congruent with the gender hierarchy, instead they subvert or partly reverse it, as we have seen above. As I have tried to show (see chapters III and V), Sakakini was interested in the transformation of gender relations in early Islam as well as in modern times. Whereas sexuality is nearly a non-issue in her books about the Prophet's wives and daughters, the over-all impression is that she clearly constructs a gender binary. Thus, the result is mixed insofar as Sakakini's narrative about early Islam is clearly organized around a (hetero-normative) gender binary, whose hierarchical effects she tries to revoke. The extent to which this image corresponds to the historical realities of early Islam cannot be determined; but what is clear is that her re-construction of this history is a rather modern image—if only because its focus is so much centered on hetero-normativity and the gender binary.

In her essays, Sakakini distinguished her call for *inṣāf*, the fair and just treatment of women, from absolute equality without exactly explaining the difference. Positively interpreted, her approach leaves some space for flexibility, calling either for equality or for difference, according to the issues at stake. In the term *inṣāf*, however, the notion of the two halves (*niṣf*) is inscribed, both of which should be in a balanced relationship to each other. Thus, again, the duality of gender is constructed here.

Sakakini's biographies and essays are pervaded by the idea that the anti-colonial struggle goes together with women's emancipation, that women have a national duty to take part in these struggles and that they have an important function in educating the nation's next generation. Thus, her anti-colonial and pan-Arab enthusiasm reflects a common, widespread sentiment in the Arab women's movement from the 1930s to the 1960s. The open emphasis of the idea that emancipation and nationalism go together, however, precisely suggests that they do not, at least not for the critics and opponents of the emancipation movement. The common accusation, levelled against women's rights activists, was that women's emancipation and education were a European import, which subverted Arab-Islamic families, norms, and culture. Because of this debate, it was particularly important for Arab feminists to emphasize the conformity of their demands with Islam. This sometimes set them in opposition to both their internal and external critics, e.g. European feminists and Arab anti-feminists. This rhetoric was not specific to Sakakini, but also common

among Arab Christian and Arab Jewish feminists[67]. Islam was—or had to be—a reference point for Arab women's emancipation. In this context, Sakakini's books on the Prophet's wives and daughters can be seen as additional rhetorical resources for the Arab women's movement. She translated originally secular feminist demands—education, rights, and equality—into Arabic terms through her essays, short stories, and biographies. In this way, she tried to anchor them in Islamic contexts and root them in the Arab-Islamic past. Yet, there is also a terminological dualism visible in Sakakini's work since she demanded gender justice by drawing on Islamic examples as well as on early Arabic literature without specifically religious connotations. Her portraits of women from early Islamic times can be read as both nationalist and Islamic role models. She often spoke interchangeably about Muslim women and Arab women of former centuries, as if the labels meant the same.

Her narrative about the Prophet's wives and daughters had several intertextual references. It negotiated not only the relations between men and women, but also between Orient and Occident, between the glorious Arab past and the presence, and between reason and religion/spirituality (see chapter V.3). She belonged to the growing number of authors who participated in re-writing the history of early Islam in the twentieth century and whose motivations and intentions were rather different. Among the so-called liberal group of Arab authors various intertwined motivations are distinguishable. Authors with a clearly liberal inclination, such as Taha Husayn, tried to show that the academic apparatus of historical criticism was also applicable to the history of early Islam[68]. For Muhammad Husayn Haykal, who celebrated his spiritual awakening with his biography of Muhammad (1935), the intention was to re-negotiate the relation between spirituality (Orient) and rationality (Occident) and dissipate a widespread Oriental inferiority complex that he saw as unjustified; according to him, a purely technical Western modernity lacked the spirituality that was to be found in the Orient[69]. In the novel *'Usfūr min al-sharq* (*Bird from the East*, 1937), Tawfiq al-Hakim constructed his plot around the opposition between a representative of the spiritual East, a student from Egypt in Paris, and the rational West, embodied by a woman in Paris[70]. In contrast, the

67  See, for example, Thompson, Colonial Citizens, pp. 138–140; Lital Levy, Arab Jewish Intellectuals and the Case of Esther Azharī Moyal (1873–1948), in: Dyala Hamzah (ed.), The Making of the Arab Intellectual. Empire, Public Sphere and the Colonial Coordinates of Selfhood, Milton Park 2013, pp. 128–163.

68  For this see, Smith, The »Crisis of Orientation«, pp. 382–410.

69  Gershoni, Imagining the East, pp. 209–251; idem, The Reader—»Another Production«, pp. 241–275.

70  On the author and this work see, for example, Samar Attar, Debunking the Myths of Colonization. The Arabs and Europe, Lanham 2010, pp. 90–120; Rotraud Wielandt, Das Bild der Europäer in der modernen arabischen Erzähl- und Theaterliteratur, Wiesbaden 1980, pp. 314–385.

Egyptian writer Yahya Haqqi (Yaḥyā Ḥaqqī, 1905–1992) lets a physician, the main protagonist of the novel *Qindīl Umm Hashīm* (*Umm Hashim's Lamp*, 1944), find his way to a reconciliation of his rational professionality with his supressed spiritual identity[71]. Widad Sakakini, in various essays and fictional texts, advanced a similar but gendered thesis of the compatibility of *ratio* and *religio*. Indeed, she even went so far as to argue for the indispensability of a union between them (see chapters II. 1, III. 2, V). Her female protagonists' line of escape, their retreat from an unjust world, is the logical as well as spiritual answer to the vale of tears, from ʿAʾisha to Rabiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya, from Mayy Ziyada to Arwa. The result is again mixed. While Sakakini recasts the originally male narrative of the *ḥubb al-ʿudhri* into a female narrative, her protagonists' turn to spirituality underlines their feminity in a conventional sense. In contrast, Haykal's, al-Hakim's and Haqqi's rediscovery of male spirituality is more of a surprise, given that men usually claim rationality. Against this background, it is possible to summarize by saying that Sakakini constructs and belabors gender binary in her work on several levels.

Sakakini's secularity is structurally as well as discursively visible. As a player in the literary field, she structurally subscribes and adheres to its rules and pledges herself to literary novelty, creativity, and criticism—but not at all to religious doctrines. She also sees women's just treatment as a value in itself, attested by the Prophet Muhammad, but also by moral obligations and modern state legislation, as well as by individual or collective rights. However, she structurally and discursively uses Islamic material to underline feminist concerns. Like some of her male colleagues, she drags Islamic material into the literary field, re-writes Islamic history, and justifies women's emancipation with recourse to Islamic sayings, such as the Prophet's statement that Muslims should »take half of the religion« from ʿAʾisha.

Where does this all lead us in relation to the current debate about the relation between secularism and feminism? Is Sakakini's feminism Islamic or secular—and why is this question difficult to answer and why is it important at all? I try to answer these points at first from a historical and then from a systematic point of view.

Historically, much feminist scholarship at least implicitly advocated secular ideas, in so far as it did not deal with religion and rather found it to be irrelevant—under the premise that the subordination of women to men could be found in every human culture. »Because religion is frequently implicated in endorsing subordinate roles for women relative to men and/or harmful cultural practices, equality and rights feminism tends to view religion primarily as a threat«[72], as Niamh Reilly puts it. Exactly this view has come under attack by critics of secularism, who argue

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71  On the author and this work see, for example, Attar, Debunking, pp. 121–135; Wielandt, Das Bild der Europäer, pp. 386–398.

72  Reilly, Rethinking the Interplay, p. 20.

that »the experience and worldview of white, western, middle class and, ostensibly, secular women is falsely universalized as the norm of ›modern emancipated womanhood‹«[73]. The accusation is that Western/secular feminism tends to exclude and oppress Muslim women as the un-emancipated Other. The so-called headscarf debate, which has raged in Western European societies since the end of the 1990s and demands the banning of Muslim women's dress in the public sphere, helped to intensify this debate between advocates and critics of secularism. Additionally, critics of secularism castigated the use of feminist arguments for neo-imperial warfare or by anti-Muslim agitators of the new populist right in Europe and the Americas. In the wake of the war in Afghanistan and impending wars in Iraq and elsewhere, Lila Abu-Lughod posed the sharp question: »Do Muslim women really need saving?«[74] Moreover, authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, which suppressed Islamic movements as well as other religious and ethnic groups, were often seen as part of the heavy legacy of secularism.

That the debate has raged so fiercely is surprising insofar as the attention for the particularities of cultures and societies and the awareness of power hierarchies have been received wisdom in feminist scholarship since the 1980s, when Chandra Talpade Mohanty challenged the construction of a unified category of Third World women »under Western eyes«[75]. Since then, a growing number of studies have shown how European feminist movements have been involved in, and even benefited from, colonial projects. Thus, for example, European feminists urged their Arab sisters to stick to pacifism in the anti-colonial struggle of the 1930s because they themselves prioritized anti-fascist policies—and were astonished by the anti-colonial fervor of Arab feminists[76]. In turn, European feminists thought that fighting the veil should be the first priority for Arab feminists, who put unveiling behind more pressing social forms of inequality, especially in Syria and Lebanon, following the Zayn al-Din debate[77]. Avra Theodoropoulou (1880–1963), the delegate of the leading international feminist organization the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship (IAW, est. 1904), considered the long list of resolutions at the Eastern Women's Conference in Damascus in

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73 Ibid.

74 Lila Abu-Lughod, Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving. Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others, in: American Anthropologist 104, 3 (2002), pp. 783–790. Compare the continuation of this criticism by Sadia Toor, Imperialist Feminism Redux, in: Dialectical Anthropology 36 (2012), pp. 147–160.

75 Mohanty, Under Western Eyes, pp. 333–358.

76 Kathryn Libal, Staging Turkish Women's Emancipation, Istanbul 1935, in: Journal of Middle East Women's Studies 4, 1 (Winter 2008), pp. 31–52. For the importance of nationalism for the emerging women's movements in the Middle East, see Fleischmann, The Other »Awakening«, pp. 107–116.

77 Thompson, Colonial Citizens, pp. 138–140.

1930—prohibition of polygyny, increase of the marriage age, equal divorce rights, equal pay, and better education for women—as »too meek and mild, somewhat timorous indeed«[78]. Elizabeth Thompson in her now classic study of the »secular« mandate system in Syria and Lebanon[79] showed not only that French colonialists worked together with the male Arab political and religious elite to thwart feminist demands, but also that many European feminists had little understanding of the specific conditions of Muslim women's struggles in the colonies.

What makes it difficult for Arab women, in practical terms, to claim an »authentic« path to gender equality is that every such attempt for the last 120 years has met with the accusation that gender equality is a Western invention certain to corrupt Islamic family values—an accusation made by conservative representatives of religious and political institutions as well as members of Islamic movements throughout the twentieth century, as many authors have shown. Since feminists want to change the role of women in family and society, they presumably work towards the destruction of the natural order, which must be maintained if one wants to ward off the external enemies (colonialism, imperialism, globalization), as well as their »intellectual or cultural invasion« (*al-ghazw al-fikrī/al-thaqāfī*), and the Arab agents of these incursions into Arab lands. To counteract this perceived cultural threat, gender politics became a central field of Arab and Islamic identity politics, whereby the Arab and the Islamic came to be equated with anti-feminism because feminism was seen as the cultural arm of colonialism and as inimical to the preservation of Islamic traditions and Arab identity[80].

Because of the portrayal of feminism as a henchman of Western colonization, the term *nisāʾī*, »feminist«, which can be literally translated as »concerning women's affairs«, has acquired such a pejorative connotation that some Muslim and Arab women avoid or oppose the term today[81], although they have no other suitable expression for their demand for emancipation and equality. Sakakini's *inṣāf al-marʾa* might be a candidate for an alternative Arabic expression, although it is no synonym for »gender equality«. In any case, the durability of anti-feminist sentiments is one of the reasons why Muslim women nowadays talk about gender *jihād* rather than feminism. They separate feminism from modernization/Westernization in

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78  WEBER, Between Nationalism and Feminism, pp. 88f.

79  THOMPSON, Colonial Citizens.

80  On this point from a more general anti-colonial perspective see Partha CHATTERJEE, Nationalist Thought and Colonial World. A Derivative Discourse, London 1986; idem, The Nation and Its Fragements. Colonial and Postcolonial Histories, Princeton, NJ 1993.

81  See for example Amina WADUD, Qurʾan and Woman. Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective, New York 1999, p. xviii; Asma BARLAS, Engaging Islamic Feminism. Provincializing Feminism as a Master Narrative, in: Anitta KYNSILEHTO (ed.), Islamic Feminism. Current Perspectives, Tampere 2008, p. 15.

order to be able to bring the two—the critique of patriarchy and the critique of colonialism—together again.

Against this background a new wave of »Islamic feminism«[82] that Margot Badran recently described seems like a solution. Badran includes the »feminist« re-readings of the Qur'an by Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas into this new trend, yet, the latter authors refuse to be labelled as »feminists«[83], to put it mildly. From here two questions arise: Whether the category of »Islamic feminism« actually exists as a social or cultural phenomenon, and in what sense Islam needs a »more radical« form of feminism than the traditional one that Badran has called, for convenience, »secular« or »radical liberal«.

The fact that Sakakini used the symbolic power of Islam for emancipatory purposes was a meaningful and effective irritation that affected the interplay between male domination and Islamic legitimation. However, this irritation rests on the indirect recognition of Islamic authority over questions of gender relations. Thus, there is always already a risk that the discussion about the structure of gender relations in politics, society, law, or religion will take a back seat to question of where true Islam ends and misinterpretation begins—and all the more so in the modern age, when pluralistic interpretations of Islam abound. This problem can also be seen in more recent interpretations of Islam and its history. Asma Barlas' idea that the Qur'an is an anti-patriarchal manifesto[84] is a well-argued and thought-provoking challenge to hegemonic readings; it is certainly a more profound critical reading of the »text« than Sakakini's re-writing of early Arabic accounts about the emergence of Islam. Nevertheless, there is an unmistakable similarity: on the one hand, Barlas's turn to the Qur'anic text is a continuation of earlier attempts at (feminist) rewriting of Islamic history; on the other hand, even if Barlas's analysis goes deeper, the question arises of what exactly follows from the insight in the historical construction of a text and its patriarchal interpretations. The problem is that the mere proof of the historical construction of the text and its meaning is not enough for the religiously legitimised patriarchy to simply vanish into thin air. With view of the pluralistic interpretations of Islam and Qur'an in modern times, this de-construction of dominant male readings does certainly not go unchallenged.

Therefore, Badran's demand for a new and more radical »Islamic feminism« faces the old dilemma visible in the fact that conservative authors such as Bint al-Shati' also claim the Islamic paradigm. Although they plead—especially in their

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82 BADRAN, Zur Verortung von Feminismen, pp. 213–231; eadem, Between Secular and Islamic Feminism/s, pp. 6–28; eadem, Islamic Feminism, pp. 242–250.

83 WADUD, Qur'an and Woman, p. xviii; BARLAS, Engaging Islamic Feminism, pp. 15–23.

84 Asma BARLAS, »Believing Women« in Islam. Unreading Patriarchal Readings of the Qur'ān, Austin 2002. For a study of her approach see Shadaab RAHEMTULLA, Qur'an of the Oppressed. Liberation Theology and Gender Justice in Islam, Oxford 2017.

own right—for a more active role for women, they often do not see emancipation as a value in itself. Instead, they fall back on the idea that women should only emancipate themselves to the extent that it is Islamically legitimate and beneficial for the community (i.e. ultimately for men)[85]. The problem is not that women understand and interpret Islamic norms differently, in a secular or Islamic way, whatever that means; but that they approach the texts with different pre-conceptions and see emancipation either as a guiding principle or an object of negotiation.

Sakakini's approach—like many Arab feminists before World War II—stood in the tradition of the Islamic reform movement, developed by the reform-oriented elites of the nineteenth century in the face of an obvious scientific and technological gap of the Islamic world vis-à-vis the West. For the reformers, another Islam was desirable; a rational religion that was to be compatible with modernization. In particular, a main argument was that although Western criticism of the discrimination against Arab women was justified, it was wrongly blamed on Islam because Islam basically wanted »the liberation of women« (Qasim Amin). This view increasingly met with opposition in the course of the twentieth century. A majority of Muslim thinkers opposed the reformers' postulate of the compatibility of supposedly separated entities such as Islam and modernity, arguing instead for cultural differences (as represented by Bint al-Shati'). Such a thinking in irreversible opposites (West/Islam, Modernity/Tradition, God/Woman, public/private) works towards the idea that there is a natural polarity in the world. In this sense, the difference between man and woman simply reflects a fundamental and natural opposition (as everyone can easily see). Against this background, the distinction between secular and religious feminisms subscribes to this idea of polarities and, as such, sets itself a trap. In a recent publication, Badran concedes that she formerly understood secular and Islamic feminism as »two named phenomena«[86], but then came to realize that »the two discourses were seen as too starkly different«[87]. Now, she juxtaposes the two terms to argue for their »confluences«[88] in order to overcome the juxtaposition: »I argue that secular feminism is Islamic and Islamic feminism secular«[89].

At this point of Badran's reflections, the question comes to mind: What is the use of the boundary work between two forms of feminism in the Middle East, in

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85 Egyptian Islamist activist Zaynab al-Ghazali summarized her view in 1969 with the words: »Muslim women should play a role outside of the home if the well-being of the Islamic state required it […] and if the woman was able to juggle both her private and public tasks«. See Mervat F. Hatem, Egyptian Discourses on Gender and Political Liberalization. Do Secularist and Islamist Views Really Differ?, in: Middle East Journal 48, 4 (1994), pp. 673f.

86 Badran, Feminism in Islam, p. 306.

87 Ibid.

88 Ibid., p. 5.

89 Ibid., p. 306.

which Badran has invested so much energy over the last two decades? I concur with the idea that it is sometimes difficult to separate what is religious and what is secular in Arab feminist discourses; the term »Islamic« itself can bear a cultural as well as a religious meaning. Yet, Arab feminists were not only Muslimas; and if they were, not all of them were very religious; and if they were, many refused to call themselves feminists. Why then should Arab or Middle Eastern women be put into the category of an »Islamic feminism«, when neither the »Islamic« nor the »feminist« label seems unchallenged? Moreover, if one can put Muslim women who refuse the label into that category, why not also secular women? This even seems to be the underlying sense since Badran entitled her book *Feminism in Islam*, while the subtitle explains that the religious and the secular converge. Where do they converge? Obviously »in« Islam.

A further question arises from here: Even if »Islamic feminism« reshuffled gender relations, can it leave the rest of the social world untouched? Or, would feminism not have the mission to object to the structure of the entire social space, critically touching upon any process of legitimatization for social hierarchies and power relations, even the religious ones?

What this debate about the right form of feminism shows is that a meaningful way out of circular modes of theorization cannot be found in the abstract, but only through theories of social practice that champion »un/doing difference«[90]. The main challenge for any kind of feminism is not to find better arguments for equality (there are already more than enough) or a better interpretation of holy sources, but instead to induce practical change.

Badran's approach implicitly suggests that former Arab feminists have failed to bring about radical change because the elder generations failed to critically engage the Islamic foundations—a failure the new generation rectifies. I again doubt that this understanding is right, for three reasons. Firstly, Sakakini like many others, already engaged Islamic foundations. Secondly, the new generation's search for more radical approaches must not be seen as a reaction to a failed strategy of previous generations, but rather represents an answer to changed social circumstances and, as such, a continuation of earlier struggles that merely puts these struggles in new contexts and on a different level (obviously many self-acclaimed or incorporated »Islamic feminists« live and work outside traditional Islamic contexts in Europe or the US). Thirdly, if there is a feminist failure, it is not an exclusively Egyptian or Middle Eastern one; the persistence of unjust social structures cannot be blamed on feminist activists, who fight against discrimination no matter under what label they fight. Rather, the persistence of gender asymmetry exemplifies how

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90  Werner Hirschauer, Un/doing Difference. Die Kontingenz sozialer Zugehörigkeiten, in: Zeitschrift für Soziologie 43, 3 (2014), pp. 170–191.

difficult it is to change social hierarchies, although social structures are subject to permanent change. It is therefore quite normal that a feminist critique has to adapt to permanent social change by also changing its modes of critique to address the changed expression of the persistent gender problem. If the current political and social conflicts around the world require Islamic re-articulations of gender equality, this need not be the yardstick by which previous articulations of women's emancipation should be measured. As mentioned above (see chapter VI.1), such projections of current concerns onto former times easily slide towards burdening the experiences of Arab women with expectations formulated in other places and for other times.

To unpack the notions of secular and Islamic feminisms more systematically, I start by discussing secularism and its discontent. For reasons of clarity, I reduce the various approaches to two opposing clusters of ideas: advocates versus critics of secularism. Therefore, I shortly present Jürgen Habermas as a typical advocate of secularism and discuss his position in light of criticisms voiced by Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood[91]. After that, I turn to Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety*, in which she reckons with Western (post-structuralist) feminism and uses her field research about a female Salafi group in Egypt to problematize the so-called »liberal project«, which excludes the religious Other[92]. What I will try to show is that both clusters of thought about secularism often entail truncated interpretations of the social complex that is circumscribed by the terms secularity, secularization, and secularism[93]; each of the two clusters criticizes the other's blind spot. To move forward, it is important to get them talking to each other in a more fruitful way. At the end of my considerations, I once again turn back to Widad Sakakini's location in this debate.

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91  Very helpful for my interpretation was Yolande Jansen, Postsecularism, Piety and Fanaticism. Reflections on Jürgen Habermas' and Saba Mahmood's Critique of Secularism, in: Philosophy & Social Criticism 37, 9 (2011), pp. 977–998. The main texts are Jürgen Habermas, Die Dialektik der Säkularisierung, in: Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik 2008, pp. 33–46; Talal Asad, Formations of the Secular. Christianity, Islam, Modernity, Stanford 2003; Saba Mahmood, Politics of Piety. The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject, Princeton 2005.

92  A very helpful summary of the debate surrounding Saba Mahmood can be found in: Sindre Bangstad, Saba Mahmood and Anthropological Feminism After Virtue, in: Theory, Culture & Society 28, 3 (2011), pp. 28–54.

93  My impression is that much of the blurring of the academic debate in English is due to the fact that there is no clear distinction between these concepts, and that there is rather general talk about »secularism« or even »the secular«, especially among critics. Secularism, however, is an intellectual position that advocates the clear separation of the secular and the religious. Secularity, on the other hand, assigns the religious a defined but negotiable place within the secular order. Secularization, in turn, characterizes the historical process by which the relationship between religious and profane was created and marked as problematic.

Habermas' concept of the »post-secular society« is already a reaction to the complaints voiced by various critics of the notion of secularism, for example Talal Asad[94]. According to this critique the liberal state »that expects *all* citizens to justify their political positions independently of their religious convictions or worldviews«[95] can have exclusionary effects. Exclusion may not affect all religious citizens, but those »who cannot or do not want to substitute every religious argument they might have for a particular concept of justice with a moral, universalizable one«[96]. Habermas admits that this kind of exclusion is unnecessary; he concedes that for a devout person, who conducts her daily routines on the basis of her religion, »genuine faith is not merely a doctrine, something believed, but is also a source of energy that the person of faith taps into performatively to nurture her whole life«[97]. However, Habermas distinguishes »genuine faith« from a faith with a »totalizing trait«, which he further links to »dogmatic authority« and »infallible truths«[98]. This kind of faith has to be kept out of public discourse because of its potentially irreflexive claims and the dangers of fanaticism. This is not only a reformulation of traditional secularist views about religious fanatics, but also of a Protestant criticism of Catholic truth claims. Yet, by drawing such a boundary between acceptable and unacceptable religiosity, Habermas attacks neither Protestantism nor Catholicism, but Islam; he simply argues that Islam has to become as self-reflexive as the Christian churches have been since the reformation. Habermas believes that »Islam still has this painful learning process before it« and that »the insight is also growing in the Islamic world that today a historical-hermeneutical approach to the doctrines of the Qur'an is required«[99]. Habermas' idea that Islam should follow a Protestant model not only testifies to »a rather unreflected Euro-centrism«[100]; he also seems unaware of the long tradition of inner-Islamic reform movements. As Yolande Jansen has put it, »here he defends precisely the kind of ideas about importing models from the West that students of colonial and postcolonial thinking are wary of«[101].

Saba Mahmood's work, following Talal Asad's line of criticism, »is premised on a view of particular Muslim women and men as the embodiment of difference or

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94  A main point of reference is Asad, Formations of the Secular.

95  Jürgen Habermas, Between Naturalism and Religion. Philosophical Essays, Cambridge/Malden 2008, p. 128.

96  Jansen, Postsecularism, p. 978.

97  Habermas, Between Naturalism and Religion, p. 127.

98  Ibid., pp. 127 and 129. See the analysis by Jansen, Postsecularism, p. 991.

99  Habermas, Die Dialektik der Säkularisierung, p. 10. »Dieser schmerzhafte Lernprozess steht dem Islam noch bevor. Auch in der islamischen Welt wächst die Einsicht, dass heute ein historisch-hermeneutischer Zugang zu den Lehren des Koran nötig ist.«

100  Jansen, Postsecularism, p. 990.

101  Ibid.

›radical alterity‹«[102]. By exploring the religious meetings of pious Muslim women of Salafi orientation, who see Western influences as a corrosive force in Muslim societies, Mahmood posits them as examples of an alternative lifestyle and the embodiment of an agency that »secular feminism« is unable to grasp because of its secular presuppositions. Moreover, she also charges liberal Muslim reformists with »closing down certain readings«[103]. Mahmood's work constitutes an important intervention, which challenged feminist scholarship as well as scholarship on Islam in general and sparked an intensive debate. This is not the place to recapitulate the shortcomings or inherent contradictions in her work, which have been identified by various scholars[104]. What is, however, important for our discussion is that Saba Mahmood, with the exception of four pages[105], »does not attempt to situate or contextualize the emergence of Egyptian Salafism or Salafism in general in historical terms«[106]. She completely leaves out the Saudi financing of Salafi publishing and infrastructure in Egypt, which goes back to the end of the 1920s[107]. Mahmood avoids addressing the issues that the cultivation of Salafi piety is »perfectly modern«[108], calls for a »discipling of pious selves«[109], and practises »intolerance and condemnation«[110] of other—especially Sufi—expressions of Muslim piety. She simply overlooks the historical construction of the whole phenomenon and thus endorses the Salafi self-perception of being an authentic, puritan movement.

In contrast, Beth Baron carefully shows in her historical portrait of the Egyptian Islamic activist Labiba Ahmad (d. 1951) how she stylized herself as a pious woman, left a photographical trail, especially of her annual pilgrimages to Mecca,

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102 Bangstad, Saba Mahmood, p. 30. For a critique of Asad's way of constructing Islam as a category of difference, see Sindre Bangstad, Contesting Secularism/s. Secularism and Islam in the Work of Talal Asad, in: Anthropological Theory 9, 2 (2009), pp. 188–208.

103 Saba Mahmood, Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire. The Politics of Islamic Reformation, in: Public Culture 18, 2 (2006), p. 346.

104 See Bangstad, Saba Mahmood, and Jansen, Postsecularism.

105 Mahmood, Politics of Piety, pp. 61–64.

106 Bangstad, Saba Mahmood, p. 40. Mahmood relates Salafism to Muslim reformers (Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad ʾAbduh), which is a historically problematic claim and which is astonishing, given Mahmood's critical stance towards reformers. For a critical discussion of the genealogy of »Salafism«, see Henri Lauzière, The Construction of Salafiyya: Reconsidering Salafism from the Perspective of Conceptual History, in: International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies 42, 3 (2010), pp. 369–389.

107 Bangstad, Saba Mahmood, p. 41.

108 Ibid., p. 39.

109 Ibid.

110 Ibid., pp. 39f.

and nurtured personal ties with the Saudi king[111]. Ahmad was able to finance a women's organization, a publishing house, and charity work. Her journal *al-Nahḍa al-Nisā'iyya* received »support from royal and wealthy donors, among them the Kings of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq«[112]. It was officially distributed by the Egyptian and Sudanese ministries of education in their schools, »the Syrian government purchased block subscriptions; and the Saudis subscribed to a ›large number‹ on the instructions of King ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Ibn Saʿud«[113]. Baron concludes:

> Such backing was unprecedented for an Egyptian women's magazine, and rare for any periodical. It showed that people in high places liked Labiba's message, which dovetailed with their conservative policies and upheld the social order. Her influential backers probably saw this Islamist journal and the modern but modest ideal Islamic woman it championed as a good counterweight to feminist and other secular literature[114].

Add to this that Bint al-Shati' was associated with this journal and served as its editor-in-chief for some time before her academic career in Egypt and the Arab world took off; she kept her distance from the nationalist and more secular Arab women's movement and was especially critical of the political left. In contrast, Widad Sakakini kept her distance from the Arabic women's press and established contact with various segments of the literary, political, feminist, and religious scene in Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria; her career, however, was clearly marked by ups and downs, successes as well as setbacks.

In this context, my thesis is that the main point in the controversial debate about Islamic feminism and the secular implications of Western feminism is not so much the presumably »liberal« tendency to exclude others—since Salafis are *grosso modo* neither more nor less tolerant than liberals. Rather, the main question is what counts as women's agency[115]. Women's agency can mean that women acquire and claim (religious or any other) authority or that they challenge and debate authority. As both forms of agency are equally important and the one presupposes the other, I

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111 Baron, Egypt as Woman, pp. 190f. and 206f.; eadem, An Islamic Activist in Interwar Egypt, in: Rudi Matthee/Beth Baron (eds.), Iran and Beyond. Essays in Middle Eastern History in Honor of Nikki R. Keddie, Costa Mesa 2000, pp. 215–234.

112 Baron, Egypt as Woman, p. 204.

113 Ibid.

114 Ibid.

115 This is also one of the points made by (»secular«) Haideh Moghissi, Islamic Feminism Revisited, in: Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East 31, 1 (2011), pp. 76–84. See also eadem, Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism. The Limits of Postmodern Analysis, London/New York 1999.

would argue for a relational point of view. In other words, a position qualifies not in itself as Islamic, secular or feminist, but only in relation and comparison to others.

Yet, Saba Mahmood's starting-point is to problematize the idea that »all human beings have an innate desire for freedom […] and human agency primarily consists of acts that challenge social norms and not those that uphold them«[116]. From here, she attacks the focus on the re-articulation and subversion of norms in Judith Butler's poststructural feminism[117]. For Mahmood, Salafi hermeneutics are totally different and an example of Talal Asad's idea of Islam as a »discursive tradition« that does not interpret its texts (in a dogmatic or literal way), but brings them to life through an ever-evolving set of discursive practices. This kind of tradition, as Jansen sums up Mahmood's view, »is not concentrated on ›unmasking‹ religious authority, and rather on seeking counsel in religious sources about ›the practicalities of daily living‹, where the Qur'an can be read ›as a source that can guide one through the problems of contemporary existence‹«[118].

However, I would argue that pious Salafi women not only embody religious piety and discursive authority, they also strive for their freedom to be pious and tend to subvert and discard (as far as possible) state laws, intellectual authorities, or social norms that they identify as not pious enough, non-religious or secular. Thus, it is absolutely possible in some sense that a woman can be a Salafi and a feminist at the same time. Yet, as the philosopher Martha Nussbaum has argued, »at some point, we must draw the line and deny that these approaches deserve the title ›feminist‹ at all«[119]. As Sindre Bangstad stresses, Nussbaum does not draw the line *a priori* and she »is not opposed to exploring feminist potentialities in religious traditions, but she is also quite clear about the fact that religious discourse and practice may at times lead to infringements of women's basic rights and that women may at times partake in these very infringements themselves«[120].

The problem is that the cluster of ideas, for which Saba Mahmood and some of the advocates of Islamic feminism more generally stand, can embed women's agency within puritan movements and identify their agency with embodied piety and religious authority. However, what this cluster of ideas mostly neglects is that the form of authority that is thereby strengthened can be detrimental for other women's rights. Bint al-Shati''s conservative authority and her selection to the committee for the reform of the personal status laws in Egypt contributed to the continued existence of polygyny in Egypt. Yet, she thereby fought against what she saw as Western

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116 Mahmood, Politics of Piety, p. 5.

117 Bangstad, Saba Mahmood, p. 33.

118 Jansen, Postsecularism, p. 984.

119 Martha Nussbaum, Women and Human Development. The Capabilities Approach, New York 2000, p. 187. This is also quoted by Bangstad, Saba Mahmood, p. 43.

120 Bangstad, Saba Mahmood, p. 43.

influence in law making and contributed to what she understood as legal security for polygynous wives. In this case, her agency is not only pious and discursive; it can be understood as subverting and unmasking what she saw as un-Islamic authorities and norms. The same goes for Widad Sakakini: When she personally attacked Bint al-Shati' and her views on polygyny, this must have been hurtful to Bint al-Shati'. The agency and authority that Sakakini acquired in the literary field was an asset for her. Yet, it could have negative effects on other women and their solidarity, for example, when she criticized them, neglected them or avoided publishing in women's magazines although she shared their cause. And, as discussed above (see chapter V.4), her books about early Muslim women as role models for emancipation could also be misunderstood and have the negative effect of strengthening Islamic authority over women rather than strengthening women's authority in Islam or over Islamic interpretations.

On a more abstract level, Mahmood's critique of »liberal« Muslim reformers, whom she charges with »closing down certain readings«[121], is a disparaging and problematic one, according to Bangstad, »insofar as *any* text is an act of interpretation based on certain readings, and as such forecloses *other* readings«[122]. Yet, if we look at it from the other side, it is also possible to view Widad Sakakini as a pious woman in the literary field. So understood, she was a representative of what Asad sees as the »discursive tradition« of Islam, re-writing its history to find guidance regarding contemporary concerns. She explored the feminist potentialities not only inside religious traditions, but also at the very beginning of the emergence of Islam. Put in Mahmood's parlance, we could say: Especially in her two books about the Prophet's wives and daughters, Sakakini was not really concerned with »unmasking« religious authority, but looked for counsel about »the practicalities of daily living« (Mahmood) in modern society by reading the sources and re-writing Islamic beginnings to find guidance for the problems of her »contemporary existence« (Mahmood).

This excursion into academic debates on the relationship between secularism, Islam, and feminism has taught us three inter-related things:

(1) With some justification, Sakakini could be interpreted as either an Islamic or secular feminist. It is close to impossible to determine with certainty whether she »was« essentially one or the other. Anyone who claims her for one camp or the other exercises the power of categorization and exclusion that Mahmood has criticized so fiercely.

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121 Mahmood, Secularism, p. 346.

122 Bangstad, Saba Mahmood, p. 37. For a succinct critique of Mahmood's critique of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, 1943–2010), see Jansen, Postsecularism, pp. 983–988.

(2) It is therefore more reasonable to determine Sakakini's position on Islam, secularism, and feminism in relation to other authors, such as Bint al-Shati'. In relation to Bint al-Shati', Sakakini seems more like a secular, yet not non-religious feminist. Bint al-Shati', on the other hand, might rather pass for an Islamic feminist, but more so if one takes Mahmood's pious Salafist women, not Asma Barlas' anti-patriarchal reading of the Qur'an as a yardstick.

(3) Instead of trying to determine whether Sakakini »was« an Islamic or secular feminist, it makes more sense to delineate her sense of belonging. She belonged to the literary field and its »secular« practices, and she positioned herself inside the broad movement of women's emancipation. She also belonged to a narrative tradition in and about Islam, though perhaps this is not exactly what Asad meant with a discursive tradition. She did not challenge the authority of the Prophet or of Islam as such, but she questioned the Prophet's harem as a place for the production of conservative gender relations. She thus »belonged« to those women who sought advice on important questions of contemporary life in the retelling of tradition. She also »belonged« to those women who fought for greater participation of women, but did not necessarily equate this with total equality.

Actually, Widad Sakakini had much in common with Bint al-Shati', but the dividing line between the two was crucial, although it was small. This dividing line was not absolute but relative, for both participated in similar, though not the same communities, read the same sources, re-articulated the same religious tradition, and essentially communicated with a similar readership. To reduce these women to a merely Islamic or a merely secular identity would be unsatisfactory because it would reduce complex identities, multiple affiliations and transnational connections to a simple opposition that did not exist in reality.

# Conclusion

Since it was my concern to show how strongly Widad Sakakini was committed to the cause of women and how her commitment was directly interwoven with her views of literature, religion, history, and politics, this study has focussed on her feminist voice. The aim was to make clear that she took up globally circulating feminist concerns, translated them into her local contexts, and rooted them in the Arab and Islamic past. She anchored these concerns in her biographies of activists, feminist essays, short stories, and historical narratives. Thus, she also adopted new and globally circulating forms of expression, which she translated into her contexts, such as writing essays, short-stories, and novels. In her case, not only were the concepts and ideas she took up mobile, her biography was also mobile and unsteady.

She asserted herself as a woman in the literary field and inscribed women's perspectives in modern Arabic literature, portraying a diversity of fictional and historical as well as semi-fictional or semi-historical characters. What makes her approach interesting are the multifaceted images of women. In her short stories and novels, she depicted a great variety of women's lives and lines of escape. She mostly depicted women's conflicts, showing that their negative reactions were a consequence of their social and psychological circumstances and that they had internalized male dominance through education and society (see chapter III). Even though there looms the ideal of a morally correct lifestyle in the background, she was aware of a practical diversity, which she captured in her stories. This is even the case in the portraits of the Prophet's wives and daughters, where she did not measure every woman against the same Islamic ideal (unlike Bint al-Shati' did, for whom Khadija served that role). Instead, she allowed for different role models, who did not have to be completely beyond any criticism ('A'isha). In this context, she also aimed to turn oppositions and hierarchies into dualisms. Thus, she tried to see the presumable opposition between favorite daughter (Fatima) and favorite wife ('A'isha) as a dualism with equally legitimate claims. She also saw no one-sided hierarchy between Orient and Occident, but aimed to find a balance between exaggerated traditionalism and exaggerated modernization. With her term of *inṣāf*, she does not argue against the biological sexes or for wholly overcoming their differences, she rather tries to turn gender hierarchy into a just balance or dualism. It goes without saying that this position is no ready-made solution for the underlying conflicts. Yet, as gender constructions and hierarchies are a constant beyond social transformations, her view can be understood as a way of saying that

we should not primarily fight conceptual binary, but should instead re-focus on the power structures inscribed within them.

Moreover, I have tried to deconstruct the label of »the Syrian pioneer of female short story writing« for her because it fixes her national identity and downplays her transnational connections as well as her other literary achievements (see chapter VI.1), since she was one of the first fully accomplished and acknowledged women writers. Her literary criticism and her feminist criticism often went hand in hand and she did not shy away from attacking dominant male players in the literary field (see chapter II.1). I have further drawn attention to the ways she was embedded in literary activities: she was connected to various literary schools, political and ideological camps as well as to a variety of women activists and writers (see chapter II). In her biography, I also tried to highlight the common interests between her and her husband, Zaki al-Mahasini—a constellation that seems to have been of benefit to both.

Questioning Sakakini's »Syrian« identity, I not only tried to show the possibilities and risks of transnational biographies using her as an example, I even understand her transnational life as a key to her work (see chapter VI.1). Her ascent—without a university degree—from humble family origins in Lebanon to the apex of literary productivity in Egypt was not predestined, rather several severe obstacles stood in her way (see chapter I). However, there is a deeper conflict behind the question of identity. Instead of talking essentialistically about her »being« (Syrian, secular, or Muslim), I find it more fruitful to explore her negotiation of multiple and sometimes contradictory ways of belonging to different literary movements, transnational peer groups, or nationalist and religious collectives. In this context, I have argued that her geographical mobility also induced an intellectual mobility, which can be detected in her writings that negotiate her belonging by moving back and forth in time and between different places. Her texts are not only reflections on places, local events, or customs. They often bring the past and the modern into conversation with each other. Using a language steeped in Qur'anic words and tropes for reasons of self-legitimatization as an author, she tried to write modern literature. Many of her narratives follow a feminist inversion of the classical Arabic ʿudhrī-plot structure and feature female protagonists searching for lines of escape from contemporary patriarchal society, striving for a higher meaning in life or admitting failure to find a way out. Her short stories also implicitly talk about the author and her thoughts and feelings, thus navigating her attachment to things, spaces, and other people—her belonging to the women's movement (without writing in women's journals), to the pan-Arab movement (without understanding it merely as a secular nation), and to the realistic school in modern Arabic literature (without being committed to realism throughout).

The analysis of Widad Sakakini's life and work also had the aim of making the difficult conditions of intellectual production in the Arab East during the

twentieth century more transparent. These difficulties were especially profound for a female player in the transnationally structured Arabic literary field. Her literary work, strewn over a dozen journals in various places, is still not easily accessible. Many of her rather short texts, portraits, and essays are repetitive, build on each other or are linked with each other, often in an invisible way. This study intends to explore the work in its entirety, investigating both its good points and its difficulties. That Widad Sakakini fought her way up despite unfavorable circumstances and despite opposition from various figures and that she did not shy away from conflict in spite of her own shortcomings is proof of her agency as a female author. That she was aware of the various difficulties she had to overcome is expressed by the epithet that Syrian politician and intellectual Muhammad Kurd ʿAli gave to her and that she proudly adopted in her self-description: She wanted to be regarded as »an untiring pioneer«.

Arabic literature, Arab nationalism, the history and religion of Islam, and the struggle for women's rights form the cornerstones of Widad Sakakini's thought over the course of sixty years. Her work is a good example of the well-established thesis that early Arab feminists had to fight the accusation that women's education and emancipation undermined families, religious beliefs, and the society as a whole. She responded to this accusation not only with the argument that the education of girls and women was necessary for their reproductive work in the family and for the national liberation struggle, but also with the thesis that women in early Islam were already able to live free lives, since Islam and Muhammad had liberated women (see chapter II.2). Thus, early Muslim women were precursors and role models of emancipated women in contemporary times.

Both modernity and tradition appear in a double sense in Sakakini's texts. Tradition is split into the prevailing ideas about women's traditional roles in society and a historically correct image of the past. Sakakini argued against the »traditional« women's roles with the help of her—more or less—impartial study of the past. Similarly, she split modernity into the (universal) call for emancipation and the Western claim of superiority and tried to show that women's position in early Islam anticipated modern Western claims and that Arab women's public engagement past and present can serve as an argument against Western colonialism.

Sakakini's idealized picture of early Muslim women forced her to explain what had happened between the early days of Islam and the present in terms of emancipation. She used the topos of the »decline« that had befallen Arabs and Muslims after five centuries of flourishing. In its criticism of non-Arab, mostly Turkish or Ottoman, Muslim rulers, this view of history bore clear overtones of Arab nationalism. It allowed Sakakini to bring together the *nahḍa* (»renaissance«) of the Arab people with the *nahḍa* in Arabic literature and the *nahḍa* of Arab women. In her view, a renewed participation of women in literature, society, politics, and religion could not be separated from the flourishing and modernization of Arabic literature and

the anti-colonial liberation struggle. In this way, she tried to bring women's demand for emancipation into harmony with the political demands of modernizing and stabilizing the societies of the newly emerging Arab countries. Her views formed a whole programme of understanding history, culture, and society; they staked religious as well as non-religious claims. Her argument for education and for women's political, social, and cultural emancipation with the help of examples from Muslim history is peculiar, though, I would argue, not unfamiliar among other early Arab feminists such as Zaynab Fawwaz and Huda Sha'rawi. What is, however, special about Widad Sakakini is that she presented this argument in her three books on early Islamic female figures—the two books on early Muslim women and her study on Rabi' al-'Adawiyya—and that she engaged in a fierce debate with her opponent Bint al-Shati' because of this (see chapter IV). Neither Sakakini's nor Bint al-Shati's treatment of the history of early Islam emerges from purely academic standards or interests; their work is very much informed by their belief that it was in women's interest to re-write history for contemporary uses.

   In the previous chapters, I have also pointed out some problems inherent in the works of Widad Sakakini. Her notion of women's literature revolves around the idea of revealing the secrets in women's lives, which obviously means that they are to be revealed to men, who themselves have a false image of women due to their different experiences and lack of knowledge (see chapter II.2). This notion is based in one sense on the binary between the male and female world and reinscribes it, even as, in another sense, it tries to overcome both the binary itself and its result– the false (male) images of women. Yet, the mysteries that Sakakini's protagonists reveal are essentially restricted to the psychological level. Sakakini's call for Arab women's literature means a transgression of gender boundaries, since she as well as other women entered the literary public and dared to speak up. Nevertheless, she shied away from literary transgressions in sexual matters and thought nothing of challenging the social boundaries of what is understood as decency. She rejected women's literature that (sexually) revealed too much, was superficial and used dialectal, i.e. ordinary language. The fact that she rejected sexual phantasies and transgressions, which in her opinion only satisfied the taste of men, was certainly also due to the fact that she advocated the edifying aspect of women's literature, which can stand in contrast to the socially corrosive force of sexuality. For Sakakini, the main task of education and literature was to contribute to the building of a renewed Arab-Muslim society. Although she also wrote about morally questionable women, she did not go into detail when depicting what she saw as women's deviations, lesbian relation in *Shudhūdh*[1] or the seduction of men in *'Ayn al-Shayṭān*

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1 This story remained unpublished during her lifetime and has been printed by OTTOSSON BITAR, I Can Do Nothing, pp. 221–224.

(see chapter III). She rather used the so-called deviations for a criticism of patriar-
chal society (the callous husband) or an uplifting message (spiritual purification).
Although marriage between a man and a woman is presented as the norm, her
female protagonists are forced to overcome their marital bonds in both stories to
be able to live again. This constellation is also visible in several other short stories,
which mostly focus on women in the conjugal family, not in the enlarged Arab
family with its complex and extended familial and social relations.

As the monogamous family has increasingly become the norm since the turn of
the twentieth century, family law was constructed around it, defining obedience
and childrearing as the women's domain. Sakakini criticized the limiting effects
of the modern marriage market and the contradictory expectations to which girls
and women were increasingly exposed; yet, her stories often tacitly presuppose
the hetero-normative, conjugal family. Although she was critical of the gendered
roles in domestic work, she also insisted that the exercise of political rights should
not deter women from their »first function« and »distract them from their nature
and home« (see chapter II.2). Her concept of *inṣāf*, the fair treatment of women,
can therefore bear different, even opposing interpretations. It can be understood
as a situational call either for the equal or for the different treatment of women. It
can also be understood as a rather conservative concept that dresses up a plea for
women to be devoted to their »original« function in new language. The point of my
analysis was that her term again seems to balance the different expectations and
challenges that women had to face.

As initially mentioned, Sakakini used the authority of Islam and Arab-Islamic
history to argue for women's emancipation. It is not easy to say whether her admi-
ration for early Arab women stems from their pioneering role as Muslim women
or from the fact that they represent purely Arab women. Very likely both views
are mutually dependent, as Sakakini usually made no distinction here. Thus, the
fictional biographies of early Arab-Muslim women served as much as religious
role models as they were nationalist ones. Moreover, Sakakini's image of early Is-
lam was very much informed by processes of inclusion and exclusion according
to the necessities of contemporary Arab nationalism. Thus, she pleaded for Arab
and Muslim unity, creating an inclusive picture for Shiite Muslims and Christians,
while Arab Jews held a rather ambivalent position. The inclusion of Shiite Islam
seems not totally convincing, since she played the reversal of the gender hierarchy
in Fatima's case out against the caliphate claims of ʿAli. Another critical point in
her approach to early Islam is that she tacitly approves of the authority of Islam,
while obviously challenging the Islamically legitimized gender hierarchy. This strat-
egy can only work until the question of the correct interpretation of Islam arises
(see chapter V). It can also have a contrary effect: The idealization of the agency of
early Muslim women can strengthen the idealization of Islam—and thus male legit-
imatization processes based on it. Bint al-Shati"s objection that Sakakini's treatment

of early Muslim women was methodologically and historiographically questionable is certainly justified to a certain degree, yet weakened by her own approach, which Sakakini subjected to the same kind of criticism.

Taken together, I designated Widad Sakakini's thought as »Arab feminist«, encompassing secular, political, cultural, and religious components, but leaving their prioritization open, because neither the designation as a Muslim feminist nor that as a secular feminist would be appropriate for her case. Either would reduce her complex writing strategy to a single category of differentiation. Drawing on a relational point of view, I believe that a writer's position does not qualify in itself in absolute terms as secular, nationalist, Islamic, or feminist, but only in relation and comparison to others (see chapter VI.2). In this regard, her approach to the Prophet's wives and daughters was determined by a woman's perspective and was certainly more consciously feminist than the approaches of other contemporary male or female writers (see chapter III). This is not to say that a different, more radical, and historically critical approach of feminism guided by gender equality is not thinkable. Yet, an idealized notion of feminism from today's perspective should not be our primary measuring stick. Widad Sakakini's approach to women's emancipation might not be the kind of feminism that today's readers wish to identify with—it might be too tame for a feminist, too progressive for a Muslim, too uncritical for a historian, and too religiously tinged for a women's rights activist.

Yet, what this case study on Widad Sakakini's feminist voice argued against is a reductive understanding of her role as a »pioneer« (see chapters IV.5, V.4 and VI). There are two opposing forms of this reductionism, a historical and a normative. The historical reductionism sees her as a precursor of a feminism yet to come. In this view, she represents a feminism that is still developing and not yet fully self-aware, partly being ahead of her time, partly falling behind her own insights, but certainly not at the cutting edge of the newest fad of feminist theorizing. Consequentially, her work has been criticized as contradictory and not really emancipatory and even accused of presenting misogynistic themes. However, my analysis of the historicity of Widad Sakakini's work shows that she was fully aware of the importance of speaking and writing as feminist acts. Insofar as feminist theory has come to question the strong polarization between the assertion of women's difference from men and the demand for women's equality or sameness, this questioning can already be found in Sakakini's use of the term *inṣāf*, which can be interpreted as a search for a balance between both positions. Insofar as some of today's feminist scholars are looking for a blending of secular and Islamic forms of articulation to express emancipatory demands better, more radically, and more popularly, they could already find this tendency in Sakakini's work. When other feminists today try to answer the devaluation of everything feminine not with the devaluation of the masculine but with a spiritual quest to heal the gender conflict, this approach can also already be found in Sakakini's work. When some modern feminists contrast cold »male«

reasoning with the logic of emotional interaction and human relationships, then examples for this opposition can also be found in Sakakini's narrative work. When scholars unmask the historical construction of inequality in religious texts and ponder on the question of what follows from this for our times, then the same attitude and the same difficulty can already be found in Sakakini's approach[2]. In this sense, I do not think it is productive to put her into a misconstrued category of a historical »pioneer«, if this is to say that her ideas were once ahead of her time, but are now outdated. Moreover, I expressed strong reservations about theories that try to explain the supposed failures of Arab feminism and claim that it was or is not radical enough and hampered by social conditions.

The second reductive view of a »pioneer« understands her as a feminist, but burdens her with unspoken expectations. While representatives of the first view see a fundamental historical difference between recent forms of feminism and the pioneer stage, representatives of the second view understand that each era has to fight its own struggles for emancipation, which must be fought with the means at its disposal. Although the latter critics hold that positions change over time in response to changing conditions, they not always realize sufficiently that the internal norms of social struggles are also changing. Thus, they tend to fill the category of the »Arab woman writer« with homogenizing ideas about what an Arab or Muslim feminist has to be and which struggles women have to fight[3]. Underlying this is an implicit notion of a »correct« way to do feminist critique. While these critics acknowledge that »pioneers« responded to the social and political challenges of their time, they tend to distinguish between different positions and categorize them as either worthy of praise or criticism and as either secular or Islamic. In Sakakini's case, criticism of her work followed primarily from a reading of her texts as purely literary products, from a critique of her discursive and aesthetic way of representing women's lives. However, being a feminist does not at all mean being an infallible writer or having to be treated as such; rather, it is the way one criticizes the social conditions under which women live.

Both reductive approaches help to create the canon of »pioneers«. There are paradigmatic cases of feminist pioneers, such as Zaynab Fawwaz and Huda Shaʿrawi, and more controversial ones, such as Bint al-Shatiʾ. Sakakini's texts have not acquired canonical status in the overlapping three types of canons: the pedagogical, cultural,

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2  For these tendencies in modern feminist debates see Parsons, Redeeming Ethics, pp. 206–223.

3  The significance and construction of unified categories such as »woman« and »feminist« is contested terrain between various trends in modern feminism. For the debate between difference feminism, diversity feminism, and deconstruction feminism see for example Mary G. Dietz, Current Controversies in Feminist Theory, in: Annual Review of Political Science 6 (2003), pp. 399–431. Here, I apply this form of critique to the category of the »Arab woman« or »Arab feminist« without going deeper into details.

and academic canon. Her texts are not taught as key texts to students, they do not represent a salient part of the popular cultural memory, and they are not often referenced in academic works. Attempts to change this state of affairs were sparse and have not been very successful with respect to the cultural canon[4]. With regard to the international academic canon, Ottosson Bitar's study treated Sakakini as a female pioneer of short story writing, but precisely not as a feminist pioneer. In the academic canon, canonical texts form the material that historians and theoreticians cannot bypass and either have to incorporate or refute, when they write about a certain topic or test a new approach. Canonical cases and texts are a terrain on which people fight interpretative and theoretical battles. Therefore, the canon is not stable, but continuously changing, since texts, which are regarded as central, serve different purposes and some of them can be discarded in the course of time.

What this case study then tried to show is that Widad Sakakini's feminist voice has wrongly received little attention. What I hope my study can contribute to feminist studies is a consciousness of what it means to unpack the category of »Arab women writers« and that it is important to free a figure such as Widad Sakakini from unspoken expectations, expressed for other times and places, and pay more attention to her relationship with her specific social contexts. I find it necessary to focus on Widad Sakakini's specific relationship to her social environment and see her not as an isolated actor, but as someone who expressed the concerns of her generation. In this respect, I discussed Sakakini's work as a response to social transformations (see chapter I.1 and III.1) and looked at its entanglements with Arab nationalism and Muslim thought. I also saw her texts in relation to other male and female interlocutors (see chapter II), compared them with Bint al-Shati''s approach (see chapter IV), and analyzed her plots as a reworking of Arabic literary conceptions (see chapter III).

I further highlighted that women's struggles have been shaped by and are conducted within their specific social conditions. They are informed by the women's daily experiences, which also determine the ways in which they bargain with patriarchy[5]. Moreover, women's struggles are being waged simultaneously at different levels—this study focused on transformations in literature, religion, society, and politics—and cannot be won individually, as they are always interwoven with each other as well as with other problems and interests. In particular, I have described the emergence of the Arabic literary field as a gendered practice, while emphasizing that the emergence of this gendered field was a constitutive condition for the possibility of intellectual as well as feminist struggles (see chapter II). As Widad

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4 For the cultural canon see the works of ʿĪsā Fattūḥ, the master thesis by Shuʿayb, and Shaʿbān, Qirāʾa.

5 Deniz Kandiyoti, Bargaining with Patriarchy, in: Gender and Society 2, 3 (1988), pp. 274–290; eadem, Islam and Patriarchy. A Comparative Perspective, in: Nikki R. Keddie/Beth Baron (eds.), Women in Middle Eastern History. Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender, New Haven 1991, pp. 23–42.

Sakakini's struggle for autonomy and recognition inside the literary field required all her »untiring« energy, to state her failure would be out of place—delegitimizing her life and work. Similarly, the continuing struggle against gender inequality is part of the human condition, for which short-sighted ideas about failure seem too narrow, as already Sakakini herself remarked (see chapter II.2).

My study constructively takes up an insight that Deniz Kandiyoti once formulated when she stated that scholarship on gender relations in Muslim societies has remained closely tied to two opposing pre-conceptions. While some scholars treat the main tenets of Islamic religion and their implications for women, other scholars mainly locate women as actors and subjects in processes of socioeconomic transformation[6]. The first approach often follows »a predominantly ahistorical consideration« of Islam and »presents historical facts as flowing directly from ideology«. Muslim feminist scholars of this tradition typically try »to establish Islam's compatability with the emancipation of women«. The second approach does not use Islam as an analytic category, therefore »the specificity of Muslim women's subordination and the possible role of Islamic ideology and practice in reproducing it are thus lost from view«. Kandiyoti summarizes her observation with the words: »This leads to a paradoxical situation whereby Islam sometimes appears to be all there is to know, and at other times to be of little consequence in understanding the condition of women, or more broadly, gender relations in Muslim societies.« For the academic discussion, this means the choice between two already decided claims. Either the feminist critique cannot go beyond the claim that Islam and emancipation are compatible, or it simply states that Muslim women's struggles are no different from any other women's struggles against male dominance. Neither conclusion is satisfactory as it remains unclear what academic analysis is trying to achieve and establish beyond compatibility and sameness. My study on Widad Sakakini's life and work tried to overcome this impasse and combine the constructive elements in both approaches. On the one hand, I have explained how Widad Sakakini resuscitated early Islamic history in order to formulate an indigenous feminist project; on the other hand, I have shown that her retelling of Islamic history is embedded in the ongoing social transformations of modern Arab societies. Thus, I tried to connect her plea for the just treatment of women to the existing gender hierarchy, her depiction of conflicting norms and expectations in short studies and essays to real changes on the marriage market.

The main challenge for any feminist criticism—whether it is formulated through portraits of the Prophet's wives or the re-reading verses in the Qu'ran—is to find a transition from mere criticism to meaningful action and thus to social change. There is no direct path from idea to text to social change because it is not enough to

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6  For the following quotes see KANDIYOTI, Islam and Patriarchy, pp. 23f.

make women »aware« of what they already know from their life experience, namely that they are victims of a symbolic power many women have internalized and thus help to stabilize. Rather, following Bourdieu[7], the working basis of any gender hierarchy, the complicit interaction between women and men, can only be revoked if the legally, culturally, and religiously authenticated cycles of legitimatization for this gendered order are broken through disobedient behavior. Since gender polarity and hierarchy become effective through the practical—partly conscious, partly unconscious—consent of most women and men, their common behavior—for example on the marriage market—reproduces the asymmetries that are present in the symbolic order. Therefore, the politicization of the supposedly private or sacred and the criticism of the self-evident have to inform acts of resistance against the hierarchical order, according to Bourdieu. Does this thought already constitute a manual for comprehensive insurrection and the elimination of all injustice? Or, would such a manual not be the beginning of new injustice?

In this sense, the act of Sakakini's female protagonist in *al-Sajjāda* (*The Prayer Rug*), who sets her husband's prayer mat in flames, represents an interruption of daily routines that seems a far more effective praxis of inducing change than all the portraits of virtuous women or different re-readings of Qurʾanic verses that have already been read a hundred times. Unfortunately, this text remained unpublished in Syria during Sakakini's lifetime as it was censored by the state[8]. I come back to this short story at the end of this study precisely because it gives us an example of a text as disobedient behavior as well as an example of the difference between text and action. Moreover, it is an example that stands equally for the embeddedness and relationality of feminist struggles, which happen neither in isolation from other concerns nor completely dominated by other concerns, political, religious, or otherwise. There is even more to this short story, as the shaykh joylessly returns to a new prayer rug in the end. The open ending symbolizes the continuing loose ends of the feminist struggle. As readers, we are allowed to have doubts about whether the wife's uprising, inevitable as it was, has succeeded. If we assume that the act alone was not her goal, the short story raises the questions of what happens afterwards, whether an individual act of resistance can change the structures, whether there will be healing and redemption, and whether this is really the way to establish the »Kingdom of equal partners […] here on earth«[9]. I am inclined to underline, as a concluding remark, that it is not Sakakini's or women's task alone to tie up these loose ends. There is already great merit in unravelling them further in order to challenge the unjustly fixed ordering of the world that presents itself as the natural

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7 Bourdieu, Männliche Herrschaft, pp. 193–200.
8 It was printed for the first time by Ottosson Bitar, I Can Do Nothing, pp. 224–230.
9 Parsons, Redeeming Ethics, p. 210.

order of things. I hope to have shown convincingly on the previous pages that Widad Sakakini exactly did this in many of her writings. It is up to others and us to draw the right lessons from this.

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