

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

NOVEL NARRATIVES OF HISTORY: JURJI ZAIDAN'S
HISTORICAL NOVEL, *ABŪ MUSLIM AL-KHURASĀNĪ*

by
FLAMINIA MARK BALDWIN

A project
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
to the Centre of Arab and Middle Eastern Studies
of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences
at the American University of Beirut

Beirut, Lebanon
April 2019

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

NOVEL NARRATIVES OF HISTORY: JURJI ZAIDAN'S
HISTORICAL NOVEL, *ABŪ MUSLIM AL-KHURASĀNĪ*

by
FLAMINIA MARK BALDWIN

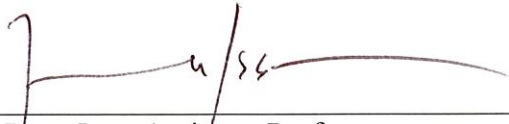
Approved by:



[Signature]

Dr. Zeina G. Halabi, Assistant Professor
Department of Arabic and Near Eastern Languages

First Reader



[Signature]

Dr. Rana Issa, Assistant Professor
Department of English

Second Reader

Date of project presentation: April 24, 2019

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

THESIS, DISSERTATION, PROJECT RELEASE FORM

Student Name:

BALDWIN

FLAMINIA

MARK

Last

First

Middle

Master's Thesis
Dissertation

Master's Project

Doctoral

I authorize the American University of Beirut to: (a) reproduce hard or electronic copies of my thesis, dissertation, or project; (b) include such copies in the archives and digital repositories of the University; and (c) make freely available such copies to third parties for research or educational purposes.

I authorize the American University of Beirut, to: (a) reproduce hard or electronic copies of it; (b) include such copies in the archives and digital repositories of the University; and (c) make freely available such copies to third parties for research or educational purposes
after:

One---- year from the date of submission of my thesis, dissertation, or project.

Two----years from the date of submission of my thesis, dissertation, or project.

Three----years from the date of submission of my thesis, dissertation, or project.

F. Baldin

3/5/2019

Signature

Date

AN ABSTRACT OF THE PROJECT OF

Flaminia Baldwin for

Master of Arts

Major: Middle Eastern Studies

Title: Novel Narratives of History; Jurji Zaidan's Historical Novel *Abū Muslim al-Khurasānī*

Jurji Zaidan published almost all of his twenty-two historical novels in instalments in the literary-scientific journal he founded in 1892, *al-Hilāl*. Through a close analysis of one of these novels, *Abū Muslim al-Khurasānī* (1905), this paper will attempt to understand concept and narrative of history Zaidan puts forward. Thus, I focus mainly on the paradox between the aspects of the novel which suggest a factual, objective and scientific narrative of history (such as the publishing context) and the reality of the novel itself, which underlines the inherent fictionality of history.

The conclusions drawn from this analysis will always situate the novel within its context. I argue the changes in history writing in Arabic reflected in this novel can be seen as responses also to the material reality of the Egyptian social and economic context, and not only as a sign only of Westernization. The epistemological changes which have created changing and complex perceptions of history also cannot be disentangled from this material reality. The needs and desires of a new readership – upon whom the very existence of this series depended – shaped the novel just as much as the choices and education of the writers.

CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	v
Chapters	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. HISTORY AS NON-FICTION	3
III. HISTORY AS FICTION.....	19
IV. CONCLUSION.....	30
BIBLIOGRAPHY	38

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Abū Muslim al-Khurasānī was first published in 1905, serialized in Jurji Zaidan’s literary-scientific journal *al-Hilāl*. Bearing the full title *Riwāya Tārikhīya: Abū Muslim al-Khurasānī*, the novel was one of twenty-two that claimed status as “historical novels”, and which Zaidan said were aiming to “popularize Islamic history”.¹ Whilst this supposedly educational novel in many ways claims to portray an objective and almost scientific narrative of history, the story itself teaches us very little about the Abbasid revolution and the fall of the Umayyads. The use of an unreliable narrator in a world where truth is fickle and elusive, moreover, presents a history which is far more fictional than factual. The novel – one of the few which does not have a happy ending – is immediately confusing and disorienting.

In this paper, I will analyse the novel in light of its epistemological and socio-historical context. Looking first at the rise of science and the scientization of disciplines such as history, I will situate this attempt to present a scientific narrative of history in its epistemological context and as an example of changing understandings of time and society. Looking then at the fictional elements of the novel, I will argue that, particularly when compared to the history of history writing, this novel in many ways proves the inherent fictionality of history that has been argued by Hayden White and others. Finally, I will look at the novel within the tradition of history writing in Arabic and within social and economic context of Egypt at the turn of the century to understand

¹ Bahkou, “Using Fiction”, 69.

how, as a strange and hybrid text, it can be understood as an example of how notions of history, time and society were being actively renegotiated by both writer and reader.

This novel, I hope, can therefore help us to see how to best understand the changes in perceptions of history, and in Arabic literature generally, from the *Nahḍa* until today.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORY AS NON-FICTION

The novel was first published in 1905, serialized within the pages of *al-Hilāl*, a scientific-cultural journal set up in Egypt in 1892 by Zaidan himself. It is with this context that we will begin, one which embodies perfectly the epistemological shifts of the nineteenth century. This concerns, first and foremost, the rise of science as a popular and rational form of knowledge. As consequence, many different types of knowledge were reconfigured as scientific – reconceptualised as rational and analytical methods to deduce an objective truth. This is because, as Hayden White argues, post-Enlightenment European culture “displayed everywhere a rage for realistic apprehension of the world”. This realism was conceived within a “comprehension of natural processes which the physical sciences provided”, and stressed the direct relationship between truth and human reason.²

Marwa Elshakry’s analysis of the rise of science in the Arab world, however, locates its roots in Christian missionary work in Ottoman Syria, particularly American Protestant missions. Failing to produce high conversion numbers, Protestant missions began to turn to education and the promotion of reason and the natural sciences in an effort to bolster the authority of the gospel with the “cultural authority of science”.³ Science, within missionary schools and publications, was aligned with the Christian faith and theological vision, in an attempt to “exemplif[y] the superiority of Protestant rationality over the superstitious and irrational character of the Eastern Churches and of

² White, *Metahistory*, 45.

³ Elshakry, “Gospel of Science”, 179.

Islam”. Medicine, for example, was seen as culturally superior to the ‘healing arts’ whilst also allowing one to act “in the role of Christ in healing the body (and soul)”.⁴ These attempts to “evangelize through the back door”⁵ whilst simultaneously promoting “Western educations and the adoption of Western ways”⁶ has been described by Elshakry and others as “colonial evangelism”.⁷ The domination of scientific knowledge in the nineteenth century, therefore, cannot be separated from its colonial roots, from the desire to present a rational way of comprehending the universe in opposition to the “superstitious” and “irrational”⁸ Eastern doctrines, and from the creation of confessedly ‘secular’ curricula which allowed Protestant missionaries to maintain power through their ownership of knowledge.⁹

This was also achieved through the missions’ establishment of printing presses and support of the burgeoning Arabic press, printing a number of the era’s most influential literary-scientific journals, such as *al-Muqataṭaf*, which became the main source of scientific knowledge in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁰ These journals, many have argued, were both the predecessors and contemporaries of Zaidan’s *al-Hilāl*, and thus the journal – although itself not published by a missionary press – cannot be separated from this context, and the scientific knowledge it attempts to “popularize”¹¹ should also be seen, in part at least, as the product of this evangelical

⁴ Ibid, 178.

⁵ Fleishmann, “The Impact of American Missions”, 412.

⁶ Ibid, 416-17.

⁷ Elshakry, “Gospel of Science”, 174.

⁸ Ibid, 178.

⁹ Murre-van den Berg, “Introduction”, 14.

¹⁰ Ibid, 214.

¹¹ Ibid, 211.

and colonial project. Indeed science, Sara Mills argues, attempts to divorce itself from the political and social reality around it, by posing as the legitimate form of knowledge and appearing “free from the taint surrounding the commercial and political expansion that it underwrote”¹². Thus, by presenting itself as rational, independent and superior, science not only promotes “Western ways”, but also solidifies its singular narrative as the *only* acceptable narrative. This is emphasised by its universalising character, whereby scientific claims to transcend national or cultural borders due to its independent, superior, or perhaps even divine, nature.

This, naturally, also affected history writing, which came to be conceived of as part of the “human and physical sciences”.¹³ Beverly Southgate says that the aim of both history and science became “to replace earlier ‘mythical’ or fictional’ stories of the past with reliable ‘factual’ accounts”.¹⁴ A major implication of this is that society and history are characterised as something “composed of individual behaviours responding to natural stimuli”,¹⁵ and “the workings of the moral consciousness [are] scientifically studied as if they were the movements of the planets, and no attempt made to interfere with them”.¹⁶ Thus, the “capitalist market and modern urban society are understood, in effect, as part of nature”.¹⁷ Non-fiction as it is understood today emerged in the nineteenth century, a genre that proclaims to tell the (factual and objective) truth.

¹² Mills, “Knowledge, Gender, and Empire”, 35.

¹³ White, *Metahistory*, 45.

¹⁴ Southgate, ‘Fantastic Concoction’, 43.

¹⁵ White, *Metahistory*, xiv.

¹⁶ Southgate, *History Meets Fiction*, 100.

¹⁷ White, *Metahistory*, xiv.

Therefore, much like science “revealed the truth about nature” historians, as writers of non-fiction “revealed the truth about the past”.¹⁸

Another important influence on the conceptualization of history was the advent of modern archaeology, and this had a direct link to Egypt where, according to Jamal al-Din al-Shayyal, it affected the way heritage and history were considered in Egypt.¹⁹ In *Uncovering the Past: A History of Archaeology*, William H. Stiebing describes archeology as the attempt to “deduce facts about bygone societies and events” through the recovery and analysis of its material remains.²⁰ The mathematical, analytical tone of this phrase is no accident – Stiebing admits as much, saying that modern archeology in particular was influenced by “a scientific understanding of the world and the universe”.²¹ The study of a particular object, the ‘material remains’ of a society, shifted the focus of historical interpretation to the notion of historical fact, thus contributing to the illusion of an objective historical reality which can be dug up and found, and then narrated to the public. It is relevant that in Egypt specifically, British archeological interest was used to justify colonial presence in Egypt, possession of Egyptian artefacts, and even control of the territory. These archeological interpretations were later used to create the idea of a universal, evolutionary and forward-looking understanding of human history.

With regards to the study and writing of history in Egypt, Jamāl al-Dīn al-Shayyāl draws a distinction between medieval history (*al-‘aṣr al-wasīf*) and modern

¹⁸ Southgate, *History Meets Fiction*, 24.

¹⁹ al-Shayyal, *al-Tārīkh wa-l-Mu’arikhūn fī Miṣr*, 201.

²⁰ Stiebing, *Uncovering the Past*, 22.

²¹ *Ibid*, 22.

history, beginning in the nineteenth century with the *Nahḍa* and with the work of Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti Linking these changes to the various factors (such as the translation of European literature, the introduction of the printing press, rising nationalism, Muhammad Ali’s introduction of standardized schooling, and the new field of archeology), al-Shayyal argues that nineteenth century Egypt saw the scientization of history as a discipline and genre of writing. Whilst this rigid periodization is inaccurate, and notions of clean rupture are unhelpful in understanding the longer and more gradual transformations that the Egyptian cultural sphere saw,²² his analysis of the changes taking place within Egyptian society during the nineteenth century are useful for understanding the nature of these transformations, which did certainly pick up pace during this period. The rise of science in Egypt peaked during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (when Egypt was under British occupation), and thus it was during this era that many cultural spheres – such as history – became considered a ‘science’ (‘ilm). Boosted by Muhammad Ali’s educational reforms, history henceforth became “a science to be studied [and taught] in schools” (*al-tārīkh ka- ‘ilm wa-nadrusuhu fī al-madāris*).²³ The style of history writing changed accordingly, with writers like al-Jabarti and those after him abandoning *saj‘* and the chronicle form for a more “scientific” (‘ilmī) form of writing, using references to written texts (*yuḥawil istishārat al-marāji‘ ‘ind al-kitāba ‘an al-sanawāt allatī lam ya ‘ishuha wa-lam yara aḥdāthihā*) rather than relying on oral transmission (*al-naqal al-ḥarfī*) or contemporary

²² See, for example, Peter Gran, *The Islamic Roots of Capitalism* for more on this. With regards to history writing in particular, see Dana Sajdi, *Barber of Damascus* and her analyses of 18th century history writing in Syria.

²³ al-Shayyal, *al-Tārīkh wa-l-Mu’arikhūn fī Miṣr*, 202.

witnesses.²⁴ The Egyptian *Nahḍa*, for al-Shayyal, was a time in which previous forms of history writing, such as the contemporary chronicle, the *sīra*, and biographical dictionaries, were abandoned. Of course, these genres did not disappear overnight, and similar writing styles and referencing forms were used prior to this time. However, in so doing, al-Shayyal does indicate an important overall trend where history became an autonomous branch of science (“*astaqalla al-tārīkh ‘an [al-‘ulūm al-ukhrā]*”)²⁵ and attempted to put forward an objective, scientific, and linear narrative of history.

This perception of knowledge in general, and of history in particular, is reflected in the pages of *al-Hilāl*, where the Zaidan’s historical novels were serialized. Before getting to the instalments themselves, it is important to note that historical novels were not the only form of historical writing *al-Hilāl* published. A number of historical articles – sometimes serialised and sometimes as single-issue pieces – frequently appeared on the journal’s pages during its early decades, focussing on a specific region, time period, or figure. However, each issue contained a large number of articles on an extremely varied selection of topics – ranging from human anatomy to scientific discoveries to domestic hygiene to Arabic linguistics, to name but a few. It is important to remember that a contemporary reader would have picked up the issue of the *whole* journal, flicking from an article on astronomy to one on Egyptian history – the reading experience did not delineate the epistemological boundaries between different forms of knowledge. Stephen Sheehi has argued that journals such as *al-Hilāl* presented a “comprehensive nature of knowledge”²⁶, which “produced the intellectual,

²⁴ Ibid, 17.

²⁵ Abd al-Karim, introduction to *al-Tārīkh wa-l-Mu’arikhūn fī Miṣr*, ٢.

²⁶ Sheehi, “Arabic Literary-Scientific Journals”, 445.

political and social conditions for modernity”.²⁷ The rise of the encyclopaedia is an excellent example of this: an indiscriminating filter, simple and practical explanations, and above all, the idea of printing “useful” knowledge²⁸ are all primary characteristics of the genre. *Al-Hilāl*, interestingly, was not only written to be a monthly journal – it was also an encyclopaedia. Like other journals of its time, the publishers offered binding services to their subscribers, allowing them to collect the various issues into a bound volume which could be kept and consulted indefinitely.²⁹

What happened to history within this new “comprehensive” system of knowledge? History, I would argue, was presented within *al-Hilāl* as a science. Science and scientific knowledge were the dominant framework – the informative and simple narration of objective truth was the scientific umbrella under which most of its contents fell. History was no different. Published alongside scientific articles on topics such as botany, astronomy, health, domestic sciences, mechanics and many more, history was compared to, and made equivalent to, science. The language used was simple, informative and objective. Many of the articles contained illustrations which used a clearly diagrammatic visual language: the use of blank space, of generic types and the relationship between image and caption all resemble scientific illustrations popular at the time, particularly in journals such as *al-Hilāl*.³⁰ This was the very same context in which *Abū Muslim al-Khurasānī* was published. Thus, whilst many critics of Zaidan’s

²⁷ Ibid, 445.

²⁸ Holt, “Narrative and the Reding Public”, 43.

²⁹ Ayalon, *Arabic Print Revolution*, 95.

³⁰ For more on scientific illustrations in Arabic literary-scientific journals, see Hala Auji, “Printed Images in Flux: Examining Scientific Engravings in Nineteenth-Century Arabic Periodicals”, in *The Periodical Page as Visual Design*. Forthcoming.

fiction have looked at the novels in isolation,³¹ I would argue that the place to start is the journal itself – the readers, after all, would've read the novel as a supplement to the journal and hence each instalment was meant to compliment the contents of the journal itself.

A comparison between the instalments of *Abū Muslim al-Khurasānī* and the accompanying articles is an essential part of understanding the whole novel and can tell us a great deal about the intellectual world it was part of. The first instalment, for example, is introduced by an overview of *silsilat riwayāt tārikh al-islām* and the novel's place within that series.³² This introduction is not included in the single-volume novel issued later by *Dār al-Hilāl*, emphasising the strong relationship between journal and the first version of the novel, the version which would've been most read by contemporary readers. Published in October 1904, the issue of *al-Hilāl* which saw the novel's first instalment also included articles on the history of the Crimean war and subsequent Russo-Japanese relations, a history of the Arabic language, Fletcher's food and healthy eating theories, and the mechanics of automobiles. The second is similar, featuring articles on the battle of Waterloo and the fall of Napoleon, Arabic words in the Spanish language, the advised amount of sleep for children, and mating in various animal species.³³ The comparison between the novel and the historical articles is significant as it situates Zaidan's "history of Islam" within a global history, an important feature of 'modern' scientized history and scientific knowledge, which

³¹ Paul Starkey, Matti Moosa, Abjar Bahkou and Roger Allen have all presented analyses of one or more of Zaidan's historical novels which do not deal with the texts' relationship with *al-Hilāl* nor see this relationship as particularly important.

³² Zaidan, "al-muqaddima", J.

³³ *al-Hilāl* v. 13

presents itself first and foremost as universal. This is evident throughout the journal, where articles on the history of England (a series featured between September and November 1893) are seen alongside pieces on the history of Egypt or of Islamic civilization.³⁴

The comparison between the scientific articles and the historical novel are equally important. The introduction in the serialized edition, *al-muqaddima: silsilat riwāyāt tārīkh al-Islām* features a table with details of his previous novels and the languages they have been translated into, employing a mathematical and analytical visual language pertaining to the sciences and seen elsewhere in the explicitly scientific columns (*bāb al-akhbār al-‘ilmiyya; ṣiḥḥat al-‘a’ila*).³⁵ The fact the novel follows this, along with its publication alongside explicitly scientific articles, emphasises the extent to which it is seen as equivalent to science. The novels and the history that underlies them are presented as part and parcel of this new “comprehensive” system of knowledge.

The content and form of the novel itself exemplifies this, advertising itself as an entertaining medium for learning an objectively true and factually accurate narrative of history.³⁶ Although at first glance, the “historical novel” may seem to contradict the idea of a history as non-fiction, Raymond Williams has described the realist historical novel of the nineteenth century as the “handmaiden to history proper”.³⁷ Georg Lukács, the great theorist of the historical novel, agrees, arguing that the genre’s focus on

³⁴ *al-Hilāl* v. 2

³⁵ Zaidan, “al-muqaddima”, J.

³⁶ Zaidan, *Tārīkh al-tammadun*, 7; Zaidan, “Fadhlika al-Tārīkh” in *Abū Muslim*; Zaidan, “al-muqaddimah”, in *al-muqaddima*”.

³⁷ Williams, “Defence of Realism”, 229.

dialogue, dramatization, and humanity are part of a desire for authenticity, an attempt to portray history “as it actually was”.³⁸ In many ways the realist historical novel which the title *riwāya tārikhīyya* alludes to, with its emphasis on authenticity and clear division between fiction and the ‘history’ it rests on, is the companion to the scientized historical narratives of the same era. Indeed, Abjar Bahkou argues that, in writing these novels, “Zaidan’s basic task was to faithfully portray the past”³⁹ and the plot, to this end, was “dominated by historical facts”.⁴⁰

Firstly, the form of the serialized novel, with its progressive and linear narrative, has great implications for the temporality of the text, the periodization and perception of historical time. The sequential logic of the serialized form in the case of *Abū Muslim al-Khurasānī* is one of the most important features of the novel – not only is it what ensured the sale of copies, the loyalty of subscribers, and the survival of the journal, but also what drives the plot. Each instalment brings a new dramatic and significant event, something which is still obvious even when reading the full volume due to its action-packed feel. This sequential logic makes historical time into an evolving and linear trajectory: the accumulative logic of the serialized form reflects the accumulative, progressive and evolutionary logic of modern historical time, whereby certain societies or stages in history are perceived as ‘backward’ and less developed along a single, forward-looking path. Historical time is also suspended between issues and exists only *within* the linear narrative of the novel. Each time the narrative changes scene between Abu Muslim, Julnar or Salih, Zaidan introduces this change of scene

³⁸ Lukács, *Historical Novel*, 42.

³⁹ Bahkou, “Using Fiction”, 70.

⁴⁰ Walid Hamarneh, cited in *ibid*, 71.

with the phrase “*tarakna Julnar...*” / “*tarakna Abū Muslim...*” / “*tarkana Salih...*”. We, the readers, are in full control of the development of historical time (*tarakna*) which appears suspended for the duration of our absence – be it concentrated on another character, or between instalments. Time is frozen and reactivated only by the reading process. History, therefore, is “produce[d]”⁴¹ by the historical novel itself.

This sequential logic applies to the series of novels as a whole. *Abū Muslim al-Khurasānī*, as its readers would have been well aware, is only one novel in a series, and thus should be treated as such. The narrative both of this wider series is therefore experienced as a “temporality” – it does not simply record and narrate the past, but has the function of “inauguration, transition and termination of process”.⁴² Moreover, the introduction to the first instalment ensures the readers do not forget its relationship to its predecessors and its place within the wider (linear) timeline of Islamic history. Yoav Di Capua argues that this reflects Zaidan’s perception of history as “demarcated by various eras”, which are “distinct from the present” but fundamentally interconnected, a very linear “modern reorganization of historical time” which differs from that of his predecessors.⁴³ This perception of historical time has its roots in the linearity and causality of scientific knowledge, particularly influenced by the evolutionary structure of Darwinism..

Zaidan’s own words on the purpose and content highlight the importance of causality in his understanding of history. In the introduction to *Tārīkh al-Tamaddun al-Islāmī*, he explicitly cuts himself off from older historians, arguing they “*qallamā*

⁴¹ Dalley, *Postcolonial Historical Novel*, 7.

⁴² Ibid, 46.

⁴³ Di Capua, *Gatekeepers*, 59.

yashūrūn ilā al-asbāb allatī tarbuṭ tilka al-waqā' i'a ba'aḍuha bi-ba'aḍ".⁴⁴ His novels, on the other hand, will emphasise that each *wāqi'a* is directly related to its "*'alalihā wa asbābihā*" and "*mā nutija 'anhā*"⁴⁵ and thus highlight the cause-and-effect nature of historical progress. This cause-and-effect narrative has its roots first of all in post-enlightenment notions of human reason, which attempt to provide a rational analysis as the starting point of all scientific and intellectual endeavours. However, the influence of theories of evolution is also clear. Zaidan's involvement in the strikes at the Syrian Protestant College during the 'Lewis Affair' attests to his early interest in Darwin, and articles published in *al-Hilāl* later indicate that he not only "believed firmly in the veracity of the theory of evolution", but also "associated the growth of human knowledge [and religion] with an evolutionary process".⁴⁶ The causality and linearity of evolutionary theory is translated onto Zaidan's conception of history, demonstrated here by his promises to connect each historical event directly to its cause and consequence; he understood "the logic of the laws of nature" to always be "predictable and measurable"⁴⁷ and applied this to his understanding of history.

A second noteworthy aspect of the novel's form, which also alludes to a scientific conception of history, is the division between the 'factual' introduction and the 'fictional' body of the text. Jerome de Groot notes that it was common for the authors of modern historical novels to preface their fiction with an "author's note",⁴⁸ a kind of disclaimer acknowledging that the following work is one of fiction, but that it is

⁴⁴ Ibid, 9.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 10.

⁴⁶ Philipp, *Foundations of Arab Nationalism*, 39-40.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 38.

⁴⁸ De Groot, *Historical Novel*, 5.

based on sound historical fact – thus reinforcing the dichotomy between fact and fiction and assigning history to the former realm. The authenticity of the socio-historical setting and the importance of the historical conditions which generated the events of the past is one of the defining features of the modern historical novel, distinguishing it from previous historical fiction where the history was a “purely external choice of theme and costume”.⁴⁹ Zaidan replicates this with his “*fadhlat al-tārīkh*”, which, by providing an succinct outline of the historical (political) context, labels the action of the following novel as ‘fiction’ but the background against which is set as accurate, informative and indisputable. The introduction itself focuses mainly on the history directly preceding to the drama of the novel, first briefly describing Umayyad rule and emphasising the privilege Arabs enjoyed at the expense of the *mawālī* or *ahl al-dhimma*, then outlining the various factions that presented challenges to Umayyad rule.⁵⁰ This backwards-looking introduction (other than perhaps filling in the gaps in his chronology where the fiction falls short and thus ensuring a complete narrative), links the present to the past and thus emphasises the clear cause-and-effect logic of history and its linear and cumulative timeline. Whilst this informative introduction separates the fact from the fiction, Zaidan’s inclusion of a list of sources (*marāji‘a*)⁵¹ is what most clearly highlights the historical fidelity of his work and demonstrates his desire to present the historical element of his novel as factual and indisputable.

The third and final thing separating the fictional body from the factual preface is the inclusion of a character list, where the main characters of the novel are listed

⁴⁹ Lukács, *Historical Novel*, 15.

⁵⁰ Zaidan, *Abū Muslim*, 3-4.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 2.

along with their role: Abu Jafar al-Mansur, for example, is described as “*thānī al-khulafā’ al-‘abbāsīyyīn*”, whereas the *dahqān* is simply described as “*aḥad al-‘umarā’ al-furs*” and his daughter as “*ibnat dahqān Merv*”,⁵² clearly distinguishing the fictional characters from the real historical figures. Indeed, the fact the *dahqān* is merely called “*dahqān*”, and other fictional characters such as Julnar, Rihana and Salih are known only by their first name, whereas the ‘real’ historical figures are given full names emphasises their fictitiousness and their role merely as drivers of the plot, and further solidifies this divide between the factual and fictive elements of the text. If the historical novel is the “not the retelling of great historical events but the poetic awakening of the people who figured in those events”,⁵³ then, as Di Capua argues, human beings are both its products and its designers⁵⁴ – the agents of history and of the plot of this novel.

Finally, there are some other ways in which this novel attempts to portray an objective narrative of history in a scientific manner which can be found within the contents of the novel itself. First and foremost, whilst this novel shares many aspects with traditions of pre-modern history writing from the Arabic tradition (as we will see later), the most notable difference is the secular nature of this text. Robert Hoyland has argued that “fables and legends” were integral parts of history writing in the medieval period,⁵⁵ and Robinson adds that narrative devices that we might consider fictional, such as dreams, were commonly used by what he calls “Islamic historians.”⁵⁶ A biography of an important historical figure, for example, would detail “his virtues, his

⁵² Ibid, 2.

⁵³ Lukács, *Historical Novel*, 44.

⁵⁴ Di Capua, *Gatekeepers*, 57.

⁵⁵ Hoyland, “History, Fiction and Authorship”, 39.

⁵⁶ Robinson, *Islamic Historiography*, 152.

exemplary character, and *miracles*” (emphasis mine).⁵⁷ With relation to the 18th century in particular, Dana Sajdi’s work demonstrates that “miracles and wonders, poetry, dreams and interpretations” were all common elements of the chronicle genre.⁵⁸ In *Abū Muslim al-Khurasānī*, however, this is certainly not the case. Dreams and miracles are not only not absent, they are actively discredited as foolishness, and those who believe them ridiculed. Salih, the deceptive and trickster who is the main villain of the story, frequently pretends to use divination to trick his enemies and get his way – when they find out they have been had, they are embarrassed and ridiculed. This is most clear at the end of the story when he uses his position as a now respected diviner to convince the Abbasid caliph, Abu Jafar al-Mansur, of Abu Muslim’s treachery and have him assassinated. Abu Jafar al-Mansur, who has recently dreamt Abu Muslim, is only too ready to believe him. Thus, when, at the end of the story Salih is revealed as a fake and a trickster, we bear witness to a laughable scene where al-Mansur hangs his head in shame, and appears the fool whose agency has been taken from him. Zaidan’s use of dramatic irony only emphasises this, as the reader is aware of Salih’s tricks, and thus finds al-Mansur’s idiocy and naivety in falling for these false prophecies frustrating and ridiculous. This ridiculing of magic, divination, dreams and miracles is linked to scientific knowledge’s dominance. Science, especially within the colonial and evangelical context, derives its power by discrediting other forms of knowledge which are termed “irrational” or “superstitious”.⁵⁹ The notion of a singular, factual and scientific truth, as is reflected in this novel, comes at the expense of other forms of

⁵⁷ Ibid, 70.

⁵⁸ Sajdi, *Barber of Damascus*, 117.

⁵⁹ Elshakry, “Gospel of Science”, 178.

knowledge and understandings of truth – in this case, those related to divination and foreseeing the future.

This notion of singular truth also comes with the idea that science possesses a cold, unbiased and objective analytical lens. A self-professedly didactic novel, the true protagonist (and therefore presumably our educator) of this novel is Salih, a selfish 18harijite deceptive villain for whom *everybody* is an enemy and a target. A peculiar choice of narrator at first in many ways (as we will see later), it is notable that this is the only character in the novel who (at least after the death of the 18harijite leader Shayban, who is vilified anyway) sides with nobody and therefore has no bias – in some ways, he is a neutral narrator. Indeed, the supposed romanticism of historical figures’ “poetic awakening” is one of the main criticisms of the historical novel, with many claiming this leads the novelist to “change fact” and mislead or “hoodwink” the reader.⁶⁰ Thus, by shying away from portraying this history through the eyes of any participant who was truly invested in its outcome or partisan with one side or another, Zaidan avoids this and provides us with a seemingly neutral narrative of history, a key characteristic of scientific method and knowledge.

⁶⁰ De Groot, *Historical Novel*, 6.

CHAPTER 3

HISTORY AS FICTION

However, while the novel – as we have just established – in many ways claims to present an objective and scientific narrative of history, an analysis of the contents of the novel itself will reveal that it does something quite different in reality. The emotional world, the drama, and the narrative techniques that appear in this novel are anything *but* scientific and reinforce the fictive nature of history, demonstrating the impossibility of historical objectivity. Thus, Matti Moosa’s claim that “Zaidan’s main interest was history, rather than fiction”, to which the latter was subservient,⁶¹ can be discredited. Rather, Di Capua’s response that “he continually confused the two realms”⁶² seems more accurate, and we shall look at the possible reasons and implications of this ‘confusion’ later.

Moosa notes that in many of Zaidan’s novels, “fate and coincidence play a large role in the weaving together of historical events”.⁶³ *Abū Muslim al-Khurasānī* is no exception. Chance plays a surprisingly large role in causing and explaining events (some of historical significance) for a book that claims to highlight the rational causes and effects of each event. Some key plot points, which also later determine the outcome of key historical events, are governed by chance rather than by human reason. It is fortunate that, in the third chapter of the novel, Salih happens to run into Abu Muslim’s treasurer Ibrahim during a late-night stroll in the gardens, whereupon he not only

⁶¹ Moosa, *Origins*, 198.

⁶² Di Capua, *Gatekeepers*,

⁶³ Moosa, cited in Starkey, “Romances of History”, 354.

initiates his novel-long feud with Ibrahim, but also learns of Abu Muslim's character and background. It is through this conversation, which happened by chance, that the *reader* also learns this vital informational, critical to their understanding of the historical period Zaidan is supposedly attempting to dramatize. Similarly, Julnar only sees (and falls in love with) Abu Muslim by chance, having overseen him during a meeting with her father to which she was not invited, and then having his arrival fortuitously interrupt a conversation with her father, just before she was about to go to bed. Other than being the primary backdrop to the events of the novel, and a constant throughout the story, this love plays a crucial role in the way the battles leading up to the Abbasid revolution unfold. It is thanks to her love for Abu Muslim that Salih is able to engineer the death of Ibn al-Karmani, an important Arab leader in the resistance to Umayyad rule and fierce competition to Abu Muslim and the Abbasid *da'wa*. Similarly, the arrival of a shock storm on the eve of Abu Muslim's departure from the castle is what gives Salih time to develop his scheme and gain the trust of Abu Muslim. Finally, it is through some tactical vomiting during the assassination of Ibn al-Karmani that Salih narrowly and *unknowingly* escapes his same fate of death by poisoning, thus enabling not only the plot to continue, but also the enacting of some of the most significant events of the Abbasid revolution, such as the infidelity of the powerful Abbasid financier Abu Salma, the assassination of the Imam Ibrahim, the leader of the Abbasids, and even the execution of Abu Muslim, all of which happen directly at the hands of Salih. Whilst modern scientific narratives of history rely on rational analysis of every event in order to "make sense" of the past,⁶⁴ here, the cause for some of the major events of the Abbasid revolution are put down to chance. This contradicts Zaidan's own mission

⁶⁴ Southgate, *History Meets Fiction*, 153.

statement, to lay bare reasons (“*‘alalihā wa asbābihā*”) of each historical event, as well as one of the governing principles of enlightenment thought, the dominance of human reason. Although Zaidan has indicated that reason and science will show that the laws of nature are “predictable and measurable”,⁶⁵ this logic does not come through in the narrative of his novel.

Similarly, while non-fictional historical narratives rest on the notion of objective (historical) truth, the story of *Abū Muslim al-Khurasānī* takes place in a world of lies, deception and disguise where the notion of truth itself is elusive and fickle. The *dahqān*, Abu Muslim, Ibrahim, Abu Salma and Salih all deceive, lie to or trick someone to get their way; the plot itself is built on lies and selfish tricks. Disguise is one of the main narrative devices: Ibn al-Karmani is killed by Salih and Ibrahim disguised as dancers; Julnar and Rihana are fooled by his disguise as a fortune teller and thus believe Abu Muslim’s innocence; Salih, in his various disguises (incredibly, created merely by a change of hat) fools major parties in the conflict. His disguise as a blind fortune teller, however, finally brings him to his downfall when is forced to reveal his sight. Secondly, although Matti Moosa claims that Abu Muslim did, in the end, love Julnar back, I would argue this is not clear within the story. Although he does claim his love for her towards the end of the novel, there is nothing in his character prior to this which would lead us to believe him. So far, Abu Muslim has pretended to love or to trust various characters, *including* Julnar, in order to get his way. We are told at various points that Abu Muslim *cannot* love a woman and shuns marriage, as he is too invested in the fight and his own desire to win. Thus, when Ibrahim informs us that Abu Muslim has

⁶⁵ Philipp, *Foundations of Arab Nationalism*, 40.

suddenly decided he loves Julnar and is on a quest to find her, the reader is sceptical – after all, the last time he saw her she insulted him then narrowly escaped his attempt to execute her, fleeing with his sworn enemy, Salih. We do not see any evidence for these feelings from the man himself until he has been killed by al-Mansur. If he does love her, however, then everything we thought we knew of Abu Muslim is thrown into doubt. The faithfulness of the protagonists’ feelings for each other, a crucial element of the drama of this emotional novel, is uncertain. Coupled with the deceptive nature of the protagonists and the information they bring, by the end of the novel, the reader has a distinct feeling they know not what is true nor who to trust, a precise contradiction of the aims of non-fictional history or modern historical novels, which value “fidelity” and an attainable, objective truth.⁶⁶

Lack of trust and unreliability of information is a common theme throughout the novel, and one which manifests itself even more clearly through the use of an incredibly unreliable narrator – the kharijite court jester, Salih. Indeed, many of the historical events, such as the death of Imam Ibrahim, the fall of the Umayyads and assassination of Caliph Marwan, are related to us through Salih. We directly see the kharijite plot to takeover Merv, the assassination of al-Karmani, and the psychological reasons behind the betrayal of Abū Salma and the assassination of Abu Muslim through the eyes of Salih alone. Similarly, our knowledge of each character’s allegiances is told only through Salih, who alone seems to possess the knowledge of Ibn al-Karmani, Abu Salma, treasurer Ibrahim, and Abbasid caliph al-Mansur’s true motivations and loyalties. It is ironic that Zaidan choses such a dishonest and unreliable character as his

⁶⁶ Lukács, *Historical Novel*, 43.

primary narrator. Whilst Salih seems to know everything about everyone, the reader is told next to nothing about Salih. His origins are unknown, his kharijite allegiances are revealed only after several chapters, and we do not even learn his first name until about halfway through the novel, until which point he was only merely referred to as *al-dahhāk*, the jester. Our knowledge, for all intents and purposes, is his knowledge. However, his character is the master of disguise and of deception, working his way through life lie after lie and achieving all he achieves (detailed above) through dishonesty and trickery. To have such a character as the primary narrator and imparter of knowledge gives the reader a sense of anxiety, and does not encourage the idea that knowledge is knowable and concrete, but rather that nothing is ever truly certain and that everything we know, especially what we know through the primary narrator, Salih, is fundamentally unreliable.

Finally, the historical element - the aspects of the plot relating to the events of the Abbasid revolution, rather than the relationships between characters and personal desires of individuals - is worth taking a closer look at, especially as it is *this* which Zaidan is supposedly hoping to explain to and educate the public in. An analysis of the lessons this apparently “educational”⁶⁷ book teaches us is particularly revealing, and I would argue, contradicts the idea of it attempting to “faithfully” retell history “as it really was”.⁶⁸ Zaidan claims the aim of these novels was “*nashr ... tārikh lisānihim wa-ummatihim wa-bilādihim*” among “*qurrā’ al-‘arabiyya*”,⁶⁹ and the introduction to this novel in particular implies it will inform and educate the reader on the transition from

⁶⁷ Starkey, “Romances of History”, 557.

⁶⁸ Moosa, *Origins*, 199.

⁶⁹ Zaidan, *Tārikh al-Tamaddun*, 7.

the Umayyad to the Abbasid caliphate, particularly focussing on the revolution itself. It is surprising, therefore, that the main watershed moments in the history of the ‘Abbasid revolution do not feature at all in the narrative. Neither, on the other hand, do the social conditions which could have led to these events, bar a few passing references to the tyrannical rule of the Arabs and their attitude towards the *mawālī*. The contents of the *da’wa* and the power of the ‘Abbasid’s propaganda is unknown – their success is presented as a *fait accompli*. The defeat of the Umayyads, the death of Marwan II, the establishment of the Abbasid caliphate and accession of Abu al-Abbas and al-Mansur to the throne are all reported, also, as *faits accomplis*. We do not witness the events, nor therefore understand the scale or importance of them, the reasons behind them or even less so their immediate affects. Even when they are reported, this is often done so in a fleeting, almost meaningless sentence – the defeat of the Umayyads, for example, (surely the most important event in a retelling of the ‘Abbasid revolution) is revealed to us in a brief summary of recent events with very few words – “*wa Salih yataraddad ilaiyhā [Julnār] bi-l-akhbār, wa ahamuhā fī tilka al-sana inhizām Marwān bin Muḥammad ākhir khulafā’ banī umiyya*”.⁷⁰

What we are presented with instead, is an intense emotional world of drama, love and deception. At first glance, this seems to fit with the expectations of the modern historical novel, in which romance, for example, often plays an important role.⁷¹ However, the way in which untraceable and self-centred emotions – such as love or hatred – control the plot *and* the outcomes of historical events blurs the line between the factual and fictional elements of this particular historical novel, a fundamental aspect of

⁷⁰ Zaidan, *Abū Muslim*, 158.

⁷¹ De Groot, *The Historical Novel*, 2.

the genre. Moreover, as emotions themselves are subjective and individualist, one could argue they have no place in non-fictional narratives, which use rational analysis to present an objective and attainable truth. It is interesting, therefore, that when we do witness key historical events, we see them only in the context of personal rivalries and feuds, rather than understanding their military magnitude or political significance. Nasr bin Sayyar's flight from Merv and the city's takeover by Abu Muslim, for example, is obscured by Salih's quarrel with one of Abu Muslim's guard. It is only once this argument ends that he looks up and sees Nasr bin Sayyar fleeing and the black flag flying over Merv. Not only do we miss the action, but the event is then considered with regards to Abu Muslim's feelings towards Salih and the possibility of him having betrayed and deceived him, rather than emphasising the strategic and political importance of Merv and the implications of this for the future of the *da'wa*. The same is true of the death of other important military leaders which we bear witness to, such as al-Karmani and his son, both of whom are considered only as obstacles to Julnar's romantic interests and not in terms of Abbasid victory.

Similarly, much of the military history alluded to here contradicts the established tradition and the evidence of historical records. Details of history have been used to fit the drama of the plot rather than to educate the masses and "faithfully portray the past." Zaidan accurately includes the main characters in the fight for Merv in his book, indicating that he was well researched and had read the sources which detailed the events leading to the revolution. Their relationship to one another, the various allegiances, and the order of events, however, inaccurate. Whereas sources indicate that al-Karmani struck a deal with Shayban, the leader of the *khawārij*, and used their support to take control of Merv, in the novel not only does al-Karmani never fully take

control of Merv, he also is bitter rivals with the *khawārij*, who go to great lengths, through Salih, to have him killed. In this case, Zaidan has clearly chosen to emphasise the character of Salih as the treacherous and friendless villain and exacerbate the rivalries and tension between all warring parties, at the expense of so-called historical “fact”. Similarly, al-Karmani and Abu Muslim also have a brief alliance, cooperating to evict Nasr ibn Sayyar from Merv. In the novel, on the other hand, Abu Muslim and the al-Karmanis are bitter enemies from start to end, with Abu Muslim ending up having both father and son killed. Here, the alliance between the pair is tactfully forgotten in favour of an antagonism which emphasises Abu Muslim’s notoriety, determination and mercilessness.

In other instances, important assassinations are blamed on the wrong person, usually in order to emphasise the wickedness of Salih and the extent to which he controls the minds and actions of everyone around him. The death of al-Karmani at the hands of Ibn al-Harith was allegedly organised by Nasr Ibn Sayyar, whereas in Zaidan’s novel it is Salih who devises this scheme and oversees the operations. The events of the entire novel, the rivalry between Salih and Abu Muslim, and the romance between Julnar and Abu Muslim culminate in the latter’s execution by Caliph al-Mansur. Although there is ample evidence for the existence of a strong animosity between the two, and al-Mansur’s political motivations for having him executed, Zaidan portrays al-Mansur as unwilling, fooled, and manipulated by Salih, and the caliph even expresses remorse at his actions and shame at his foolishness. In reality, or as far as we can deduce, al-Mansur more than happy to have Abu Muslim executed and did so of his own accord. This theme of Salih organising most of the great defeats and deaths of the Abbasid revolution appears throughout the novel. Why exonerate the great rulers and

figures of history in favour of good characterisation and gripping plot, however, if the aim of this novel was to present an accurate and informative narrative of the past, in dramatized form? It is clear from these examples that the novel does not submit fiction to history, but rather prioritises fiction, incorporating history into this fictional and romantic world and thus “blurring reality and fiction”.⁷²

Thus, this “historical novel” fails, on many levels, to provide an objective, informative, or rational narrative of history it promised. No rational explanation is given for the way things turn out – the only common denominator linking all the events of the novel is the treachery of Salih, a man we know very little about. The events of the revolution themselves are either ignored or inaccurately portrayed. The underlying forces driving history are not progress, reason or even material realities, but rather chance, deception and selfishness. If modern historiography has an aim of “mass education”, an “impulse to teach and educate”, then the main lessons learnt from this novel are that human nature is essentially self-serving and truth is elusive and unattainable. The heroines of the novel and only positive characters are naive and pitiable, whereas every other supposed ‘hero’ is cruel, selfish and dishonest – Abu Muslim included. Indeed, the primary lesson of history to be learnt here is a dark one pertaining to man’s inaction in the face of evil, and the illogical and unpredictable cruelty of history. Men with influence shape the outcome of history and the violence of war fades, as one ruling class transforms into the next, with little practical change seen between the two eras. Not wanting to go into the ramifications of this message, or the political relevance at the time of regime change and rising nationalism in Egypt, it is

⁷² Di Capua, *Gatekeepers*, 57.

enough to say that this lesson demonstrates that very unscientific forces of love, chance and cunning have taken the reins of history. The rational and objective understanding of history suggested by the introduction, the publishing context and the choice of the “historical novel” form, on the other hand, has disappeared.

What can this tell us about the idea of history, in and of itself and as it is perceived its readers? Hayden White, Beverly Southgate and others, who have extensively studied the ‘scientization’ of history during the nineteenth century and beyond, have useful insights which can help us understand the emergence of modern history. Alexander Lyon Macfie has summarised these arguments by saying simply that “the concept of ‘true history’ is an oxymoron”; all history is in fact “a sort of fiction.”⁷³ Robert Hoyland locates this fictionality in the moment of selecting, organizing and editing the narratives of others into a narrative, a story or a plot.⁷⁴ Hayden White goes further, arguing that “narration is both the way historical interpretation is achieved” and the mode by which “understanding of matters historical is represented”.⁷⁵ It is the arrangement of the historical record into a “temporal order of occurrence”, a “chronicle” which allows it to be “organized into the story”.⁷⁶ The further identification of which *kind* of story it will be,⁷⁷ is and the creation of a “plot” and some kind of “formal coherence” is what provides the text with meaning.⁷⁸ Thus, the work of fiction and the

⁷³ Macfie, *Fiction of History*, 1.

⁷⁴ Hoyland, “History, Fiction, and Authorship”, 39.

⁷⁵ Hayden White, “The Politics of Historical Interpretation”, 116.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷⁷ This concept, termed by white “explanation by emplotment”, is merely one of many ways the author uses narrative or fictive techniques to provide his account with meaning. See *Ibid.*, 7.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

work of history do not appear so different after all. The notion of an objective and scientific narrative of history is, of course, impossible and any attempt to argue otherwise – through the categorisation of history as ‘non-fiction’, for example – merely hides this *inherent* fictionality behind a façade of scientific method and tone. The fact *Abū Muslim al-Khurasānī*’s does not provide the objective and scientific narrative of history it promises can, therefore, be read as a symptom of this and merely proof that try as one might to say otherwise, all historical narratives can be told, arranged and interpreted in a number of ways.

However, given the explicit contradiction between the novel’s claim to scientific accuracy and an informative narrative, and the reality of its content and message, I would argue that there is more to this novel, and its treatment of history, than the inherent fictitiousness of history shining through the façade of non-fictionality. The ‘façade’ of objectivity is so well constructed that it seems odd to then completely collapse this by not even trying to produce a narrative with an air of authenticity or an informative and factual tone. To assume this was a mistake on Zaidan’s part, or something he overlooked in his attempt to write ‘Western’ or ‘modern’ history, does wrong by him and by the text itself. Instead, I would argue that the contradictions we have identified here are not mistakes, but rather evidence of concepts of history and ways of writing and reading being *actively* negotiated by both writer and reader, to fit their context. The text, rather than confusing, piecemeal or “clums[y]”⁷⁹ should be seen as hybrid, and a result of the specific conditions that produced it.

⁷⁹ Philipp, *Čurġi Zaidān*, 235.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

Indeed, many modern critics, such as Roger Allen, Elizabeth Holt, and Yoav Di Capua, have seen these novels not as anomalies, but as reflections of local needs and part of wider trends and developments in the world of Arabic literature and/or history writing, in Egypt particularly. For Elizabeth Holt, Zaidan's novels are not unique but rather are part and parcel of a longer trend in the history of Arabic literature – that of the serialized novel.⁸⁰ The tradition of the serialized Arabic novel – a legacy Zaidan “inherited” – was in many ways a forerunner to the Arabic novel of Haykal and the like.⁸¹ These serialized novels responded directly to material and economic realities of late nineteenth century Egypt, by inscribing “the monetary illusions colonizing the silk and cotton markets of Syria and Egypt” in their form and content, and Zaidan was part of this.⁸² Many other comparisons have been drawn between Zaidan and others nineteenth century authors, reminding us that he was not working in isolation. For Di Capua, for example, the novels are more part of a growing trend of historical novels coming out of the expanding press and journalism sector and influence of “historicism” on this sector.⁸³ Allen, like Holt compares Zaidan's novels to the works of Salim al-Bustani, Yaqub Sarruf, Fransis Marrash and Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq, also situating him

⁸⁰ Holt, *Fictitious Capital*.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 93.

⁸² *Ibid*, 2.

⁸³ Di Capua, *Gatekeepers*, 52.

at a specific moment along the wider trajectory of the “development of the Arabic novel”.⁸⁴

Although all these authors’ works bear a number of resemblances, the most noteworthy comparison to make is that between the serialized novels of Zaidan and of Salim al-Bustani. Roger Allen notes that al-Bustani also often used his novels as an opportunity to educate his readers and provide lengthy descriptions of different locations’ history, as seen in his novel *al-Hayām fī Futūḥ al-Shām*, set in Tadmur/Palmyra.⁸⁵ Holt’s observations of another of al-Bustani’s novels, *Budūr*, highlight a number of similarities between his work and Zaidan’s, and thus can help us situate his novel as part of wider literary trends which were born of the material and economic conditions of Egyptian society under British occupation. *Budūr*, interestingly, also takes the fall of the Umayyads and rise of the Abbasids as its setting. Holt argues that the choice of such a setting is unsurprising given the contemporary context – the “social upheaval” and atmosphere of “rupture” and “regeneration” accompanying this transition was “not unlike the historical juncture being lived by al-Bustani’s contemporary audience” with the fall of the Ottoman Empire and increasing influence of the British and French in the region.⁸⁶ *Budūr*, like *Abū Muslim al-Khurasānī*, makes extensive use of duplicity and disguise, which, according to Holt, remind the reader of the “ruses of speculation” and the fact that, with colonial influence and wealth changing hands, “appearances were not what they seemed”.⁸⁷ Finally, she notes that a great many

⁸⁴ Allen, “Literary History”, 207.

⁸⁵ Allen, “The Arabic Novel”, 53.

⁸⁶ Holt, *Fictitious Capital*, 69.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 68.

novels during this period featured servants (particularly in regal homes) as pivotal characters, just as we see in *Abū Muslim al-Khurasānī*, where the *daḥḥāk* is the driver of the plot and the most virtuous character is Rihana, Julnar's *māshiṭa*. This trope, she argues should be seen as a response to an expanding industrial class (and readership) and their aspirations, a class which, we must not forget, were vital to the press industry. Most importantly, however, she argues that these characters speak most clearly to the economy of the time, which she describes as “a phantasmagoria of commodities subtended by unpaid debts, a haunted garden of spectral value, [and] the hope of alienating the labor of others”.⁸⁸

Paul Starkey, however, has somewhat problematically described the changes to Arabic literature from the nineteenth to the twentieth century as the “progressive substitution of Western literary genres ... for traditional Arab ones”.⁸⁹ Although the spread of Western literary tropes under the watch of European colonialism and cultural hegemony certainly cannot be denied, the word “substitution” implies a one-way process that does not account for the role of the Arab writers and readers in the active *renegotiation* of modes of expression and writing. I would argue that *Abū Muslim al-Khurasānī*, with its hybrid character, is an example of such renegotiation. Indeed, with the advent of the printing press, the rise of the newspaper, and the popularity of the serialized novel, forms of readership greatly changed. The needs and desires of this new “reading public” – upon whom the very existence of the literature depended – shaped the future of Arabic literature just as much as the choices and education of the writers.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 71.

⁸⁹ Starkey, “Romances of History”, 350.

An analysis of the novel itself will demonstrate how Zaidan caters to these needs. Indeed, although Abjar Bahkou argues that Zaidan mimicked European history writing in order to bring to his people a Westernized, secular and scientific history,⁹⁰ many aspects of the novel itself contradict this, and show how Zaidan engaged with the Arabic literary heritage, making use of a variety of motifs and tropes that would be familiar to his readers and were not merely influenced by translations of Western authors such as Walter Scott.⁹¹ Samia Mehrez notes that “prior to the professionalization of history towards the end of the nineteenth century” there is evidence for “strongly interactive relations between novelistic and historical narratives”.⁹² Canonical texts such as al-Masudi’s *Murūj al-dhahab wa-ma ‘ādin al-jawhar* are considered works of history, but also contain material such as “legends, anecdotes, genealogies, theology, folklore, and *belles-lettres*” which would be not be regarded as historical today.⁹³ Thus, while Zaidan’s emotional and fictional narrative in *Abū Muslim al-Khurasānī* does contradict elements of the novel’s context and introduction, it should not be seen as an anomaly or mistake, but rather understood as part of the character of history writing in Arabic which Zaidan is taking inspiration from. To an early-nineteenth-century reader of this novel, the fictive elements would not have been surprising and would have fitted in with the widespread understanding of what “history” is and what the “historian” does. Arguably, Zaidan is speaking to this audience. Indeed, as Chase Robinson has shown, it would be inaccurate to equate *tārīkh*

⁹⁰ Bahkou, “Using Fiction”.

⁹¹ Albert Hourani, Starkey notes, was another who argued that Zaidan’s novels were produced “on the model of Scott’s works. Starkey, “Romances of History”, 351.

⁹² Mehrez, *Egyptian Writers*, 3.

⁹³ Crabbs, *The Writing of History*, 29.

directly with history and *mu`arrikh* directly with historian;⁹⁴ different and more nuanced understandings of these concepts, prior to the gradual “professionalization” of history as a type of non-fiction, must be considered.

Georges Corm has described Zaidan’s novels as “a kind of historical encyclopaedia of the most interesting Arab and Islamic heroic figures”.⁹⁵ This concept, however, had already existed for centuries in the form of *sīra* literature and biographical dictionaries – the very *ma`ājim* or *fahāris* that Zaidan claimed to separate himself from.⁹⁶ Dana Sajdi, in her study of changing historiography in eighteenth-century Syria, has argued that what linked these dictionaries to other forms of history writing, such as the *sīra dhātīya* and the *ta`rīkh* diaries was an emphasis on the individual, and this flourished with the increased popularity of these two genres in the eighteenth century.⁹⁷ Thus, Zaidan’s focus on famous characters of history, something which connects many of the novels in his series, can be seen as continuity with this genre of recording and narrating history in Arabic..

Finally, the needs of the Arabic reading public also, of course, also affected the language and style of the novel. Stephen Sheehi’s analysis of *al-Hilāl*’s subscription history has allowed him to conclude that the journals and its stories were frequently read aloud “to illiterate members of the family” as well as in “villages, cafes, kitchens, and informal gatherings”.⁹⁸ The reliance on dialogue and repeated use of *qāl*

⁹⁴ Robinson, *Islamic Historiography*, 72.

⁹⁵ Corm, “Jurji Zaidan”, 47.

⁹⁶ Zaidan, *Tārīkh al-Tammadun*, 9.

⁹⁷ Sajdi, *Barber of Damascus*, 115-144.

⁹⁸ Sheehi, “Arabic Literary-Scientific Journals”, 443.

and *qālat* to introduce new speakers, which Philipp and Starkey have criticised the dialogue as repetitive “wooden” and dull,⁹⁹ can be seen as a reflection of this reality. The repetition of *qal* and *qālat* not only references the older form of the *maqāma*, but would facilitate group reading. Similarly, the simple language would incorporate the expanding reading public, which was accommodating a growing bourgeoisie as well as a female readership and a younger audience (who by 1914 were one of the main clients of these more ‘popular’ forms of fiction).¹⁰⁰

While the novels are explicitly aimed at educating the masses, who could would find “pure history” too heavy,¹⁰¹ the nineteenth century changes to printing practices and literacy should not be the only context we give this rise of ‘popular’ history. Dana Sajdi has demonstrated that one of the main features of eighteenth-century history writing was decreased influence of the ‘*ulamā*’ and popularization of the genre. It was during this period that, “[f]ree from the obligation to establish before his peers the elite pedigree of authority” it became “possible for anyone who is literate to become a historian”.¹⁰² Similarly, Abd al-Muhsin Taha Badr has commented that Zaidan’s novels dipped into an existing and powerful tradition of “*sha ‘abī*” literature in order to relate to a wider audience.¹⁰³ We have already established that the simple language was part of the novel’s ‘popular’ element. Another aspect which arguably links *Abū Muslim*

⁹⁹ Philipp, *Ġurġi Zaidan*, 235-6; Starkey, “Romances of History”, 354.

¹⁰⁰ Holt, *Fictitious Capital*, 167. Elizabeth Holt has tracked in great detail the changes to the Arabic reading public and its expansion during this period, in her article “Narrative and the Reading Public in 1870s Beirut” and book *Fictitious Capital: Silk, Cotton, and the Rise of the Arabic Novel*.

¹⁰¹ Zaidan, *Tārīkh al-Tamaddun*, 7.

¹⁰² Sajdi, *Barber of Damascus*, 117.

¹⁰³ Badr, *Taṭawwur al-riwāyah*, 99.

al-Khurasānī to “*sha’abī*” literature or “*al-’adab al-qaṣaṣī*” is the fast-paced nature of the narrative.

This style, however, is also strongly linked to the serialized form. Other than allowing the text to reach wider audience, Elizabeth Holt has argued that we should see the Arabic serialized novel as a reflection of the economic realities of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Literature had, by the turn of the century, become a “commodity”¹⁰⁴ and thus Zaidan and others like him should be seen not only as litterateurs and artists, but as “entrepreneur[s]”.¹⁰⁵ Zaidan’s writings in *al-Hilāl* were “strategically capitalized” using suspense, duplicity and intrigue in order to ensure the loyalty of subscribers and the success of his business.¹⁰⁶ As indicated earlier, it is important to situate Zaidan’s novels within this context and see them as not only a response to the needs and realities of the time, but also as a form of continuity from this established and successful serialized form.

Thus, the peculiarities of this novel and the changes history writing in Arabic was undergoing should be understood as responses also to the material reality of the Egyptian social and economic context, and not only as a sign only of Westernization. The West not merely acting on the East, who, in this scenario, becomes a passive receptor of cultural colonialism. Rather, we should understand the dominance of Western (and in this case scientific) ideas and forms of knowledge as ones that are also being actively renegotiated and incorporated into the Egyptian cultural sphere in ways

¹⁰⁴ Holt, *Fictitious Capital*, 112.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 55.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 115.

which serve the needs and realities of Egyptian society. This novel is, in a number of ways, a novel of paradoxes and contradictions – a novel which proclaims to teach its audience about the Abbasid revolution, but does not actually feature any major battles; a novel which claims to provide the reader with a factual and scientific narrative of history, but instead presents us with a highly fictional and emotional world; a novel which aims to show historical truth as objective and attainable, but does so in a world full of lies and deception where truth is fickle and the primary narrator unreliable. If this novel seems strange and confusing, however, it is because it is the reflection of changing times and changing needs, in an era where the printed word is mass-produced and readily available, readership and literacy rates are on the rise, financial speculation and colonial occupation mean “appearances are not what they seem”, and different ideas of Arab nationalism are gaining momentum.¹⁰⁷ The peculiarities of this novel, as we have shown, should be seen not as anomalies or ruptures, but as continuities, as part of a wider literary trend. The needs and desires of a new readership – upon whom the very existence of this series depended – shaped the novel just as much as the choices and education of the writers.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 68.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abd al-Muhsin Taha Badr, *Taṭawwur al-Riwāyah al-‘Arabiyyah al-Hadithah fi Miṣr (1860- 1938)*. Cairo: Dār al-Ma’ārif, 1976.
- al-Shayyal, Jamal al-Din. *Al-Tārīkh wa-l-Mu’arikhūn fi Miṣr fi al-Qurn al-Tāsia ‘Ashar*. Cairo: Maktabat al-Nahḍa al-Miṣriyya, 1958.
- Ayalon, Ami. *The Arabic Print Revolution: Cultural Production and Mass Readership, 1800-1914*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016.
- Bahkou, Abjar. “Using Fiction as a Vehicle for Popularizing History: Jurjy Zaidan’s Historical Novels”. In *The Levantine Review* 4:1 (2015): 67-85.
- Corm, Georges. “Jurji Zaidan as a Promoter of Modern Arab Identity”. In *Jurji Zaidan: Contributions to Modern Arab Thought and Literature: Proceedings of a Symposium, the Library of Congress (June 5, 2012)*, edited by Thomas Philipp, George C. Zaidan, and the Zaidan Foundation. Zaidan Foundation: 2013.
- Crabbs, Jack. *The Writing of History in Nineteenth-Century Egypt: A Study in National Transformation*. United States: 1984.
- Dalley, Hamish. *The Postcolonial Historical Novel: Realism, Allegory, and the Representation of Contested Pasts*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
- De Groot, Jerome. *The Historical Novel*. New York: Routledge, 2010.
- Elshakry, Marwa. "The Gospel of Science and American Evangelism in Late Ottoman Beirut." *Past & Present* 196, no. 1 (2007): 173-214.

- Fleischmann, Ellen. "The Impact of American Protestant Missions in Lebanon on the Construction of Female Identity, c. 1860-1950." *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 13, no. 4 (2002): 411-426.
- Holt, Elizabeth M. *Fictitious Capital: Silk, Cotton, and the Rise of the Arabic Novel*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2017.
- . "Narrative and the Reading Public in 1870s Beirut". In *Journal of Arabic Literature* 40 (2009): 37-70.
- Hoyland, Robert. "History, Fiction and Authorship in the first centuries of Islam". In *Writing and Representation in Medieval Islam*, edited by Julia Bray. London: Routledge, 2006.
- Lukács, Georg. *The Historical Novel*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969.
- Lyon Macfie, Alexander. *The Fiction of History*. New York: Routledge, 2015
- Mehrez, Samia. *Egyptian Writers between History and Fiction*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1994.
- Mills, Sara. "Knowledge, Gender, and Empire". In *Writing Women and Space: Colonial and Postcolonial Geographies*, edited by Alison Blunt. New York: The Guilford Press, 1994.
- Moosa, Matti. *The Origins of Modern Arabic Fiction*. Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1997.
- Murre-van den Berg, Heleen. "Introduction". In *New Faith in Ancient Lands: Western Missions in the Middle East in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries*, edited by Heleen Murre-van den Berg, 1-18. Leiden: Brill, 2006.

Philipp, Thomas. *Ĝurĝi Zaidan Zaidan, His Life and Thought*. Beirut: Orient-Institut der Deutschen Morgenlandischen Gesellschaft, 1979.

-----, *Jurji Zaidan and the Foundations of Arab Nationalism*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2014.

-----, Zaidan, George C. and the Zaidan Foundation. *Jurji Zaidan: Contributions to Modern Arab Thought and Literature: Proceedings of a Symposium, the Library of Congress (June 5, 2012)*. Zaidan Foundation: 2013.

Robinson, Chase F. *Islamic Historiography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Sajdi, Dana. *The Barber of Damascus: Nouveau Literacy in the Eighteenth-Century Ottoman Levant*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2013.

Sheehi, Stephen. "Arabic Literary-Scientific Journals: Precedence for Globalization and the Creation of Modernity". In *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 25:2 (2005): 438-448

Southgate, Beverly. "'Fantastic Concoction of the Human Brain': Virginia Woolf and the Fiction of History", in *The Fiction of History*, edited by Alexander Lyon Macfie. New York: Routledge, 2015.

-----, *History Meets Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 2014.

Starkey, Paul, "Romances of History: Jurji Zaidan and the Rise of the Historical Novel". In *The Long 1890s in Egypt: Colonials quiescence, Subterranean Resistance*, edited by Marilyn Booth and Anthony Gorman. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014.

Stiebing, William H.. *Uncovering the Past: A History of Archaeology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

White, Hayden, “The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation”, *Critical Inquiry* 9:1 (Sep 1982): 113-137.

-----, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1973.

Williams, Raymond. “A Defence of Realism”. In *What I Came To Say*, edited by Neil Belton, Francis Mulhern and Jenny Taylor. London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989.

Zaidan, Jurji. *Tārīkh al-tamaddun al-islāmī (al-juz’ al-awl)*. Cairo: Mu’assissah Handāwī li-l-Ta‘alīm wa-l-Thaqāfah, 2013.

-----, “al-Muqaddima: Silsila Riwayāt Tārīkh al-Islām”. In *al-Hilāl* 13, 1904.

-----, *Abū Muslim al-Khūrasānī*. Beirut: Dār Maktabat al-Hiyā’a.