Gail Ramsay

Blogs & Literature & Activism

Popular Egyptian blogs and literature in touch

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The sign on the cover, designed by Anwārī al Ḥusaynī, symbolizes a scale.

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Introduction

Social criticism has been a pervasive element in modern Arabic literature since its beginnings. This present book is also concerned with social criticism but in blog narratives and against the background of a long tradition of criticizing society through literary expression in the Egyptian national framework. It is also about ways in which the Arabic literary heritage, classical and contemporary, is put to work and recycled in Egyptian Arabic-language blogs. We will become aware that a number of the same societal and political problems that have and continue to been treated in the literature are brought up in Egyptian blogs. While social criticism will be shown to be a common thread in literary expression and blogging in Egypt, a central question is how bloggers use their cultural and literary heritage to advance their goals of changing social and political reality.

In 2008–2009, when a group of Harvard researchers, including ten Arabic-speaking researchers, explored the structure and content of the Arabic blogosphere in order to learn more about the impact of the Internet on civic engagement and democratic processes, they identified "a base network of approximately 35,000 active Arabic language blogs."[1] In fact, the Egyptian blogosphere emerged as the largest of the national Arab blogospheres, vibrant and politically conscious, "occupying a third of the regional blogosphere" as explained by then Al Jazeera senior political analyst Marwan Bishara.[2] The Egyptian bloggers whose blogposts are studied in this book belong to what may be termed the first generation of bloggers. They began blogging between 2004 and 2006 and by 2009 they were savvy Internet users, moving on to other social media platforms, mostly Facebook and Twitter. Although these bloggers cannot be considered the cause, their blogs form part of the backdrop to the Arab uprisings of 2010. As explained by Kristina Riegert: "… they are part of the wider media ecology that challenges or accommodates the power structures in authoritarian and transitional societies depending on the context and chain of events."[3] Our vantage point here is that this backdrop not only includes the mediascape but is part of a broad, Egyptian cultural scene. In other words, the blogs and posts, layout and imagery are in fact, part of the Egyptian cultural and political discourse, which includes literature.

The blogposts were written during the period from April 1, 2009 through April 30, 2010, approximately nine months before the January 25 uprising of 2011, also referred to as the January 25 Revolution (*Thawrat 25 yanāyir*) or the Lotus Revolution, took place in Egypt.[4] Bearing in mind the social and political conditions that have favored the formation

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1   Etling et al. 2009: 2-3, 52.
2   Bishara 2012: 89.
3   Riegert 2014: 68.
4   I chose to refer to the processes of January 25–February 11, 2011, culminating in the removal of former Egyptian president Hosny Mubarak as the January 25 uprising because I find Steven A. Cook's reasoning about the turn of events in the Arab world, beginning in Tunisia in 2010, useful to us in this study. As he explains, what we witnessed in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya are not best defined as revolutions: While "people in a number of Middle Eastern countries rose up and deposed their leaders," this did not lead to "actual change of state and class structure" something which "a successful

of a critical and activist discourse, we ask in which ways realities of this period impinge on narratives delivered in five popular Arabic-language Egyptian blogs. In what ways do popular Egyptian blogs reflect thematic, stylistic and other elements of intertextuality, and how are literary techniques employed to formulate criticism, protest and calls for action? By responding to questions such as these and highlighting aspects of intertextuality as revealed in these blogs, my aim is to demonstrate that the literary is not only an ingrained mainstay of modern Arabic culture. I argue that literature and blogging, being rooted in and sprung from the same discursive field, represent two sides of the same coin. In other words, social critical literary themes, as well as literary genres and techniques, are instrumental in criticizing corrupt leadership and society, whether in the form of traditional, print literature – as has been customary since the beginnings of modern Arabic literature in the early 1900s – or through blogposts in cyberspace in the 2000s.

Theoretical foundations

Teresa Pepe suggests that personal Egyptian blogs, "mainly written in Arabic," by "male and female authors … between 2005 and 2011," may emerge as "a new literary genre and a social uprising." Our task here is not to defend or defy the literariness of blogs in general terms nor to establish a new taxonomy of blog genres and sub-genres.[5] It may suffice here to note that the most popular Egyptian blogs, five of which are studied in depth here, are personal, media-oriented blogs that best qualify as Jill Rettberg's diary-style blog according to her genre definitions of blogs.[6]

While some blogs, indeed, may qualify as literary, others do not. As Rettberg explains: "Ultimately, whether or not you decide to define blogs as a medium or as genre depends on your perspective."[7] We are however, interested in an aspect common to both modern Arabic literary creativity in general and Egyptian literature in particular, that of social

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revolution requires" (Cook 2015). <http://www.the-american-interest.com/2015/10/26/the-middle-eastern-revolutions-that-never-were/> (last retrieved May 8, 2016).

5   Pepe: 2014: iii, 6, 17, 161 ff., 371. Pepe (p. 165) gives a list of basic factors constituting autofiction. These ten fundamental traits of autofictional works were listed by Philippe Gasparini (2008: 209) and are presented by Pepe as follows:
    1. Onomastic identity of the author and hero-narrator
    2. Subtitle: novel
    3. Primary importance of the narrative
    4. Pursuit of an original form
    5. Writing that aims to immediately articulate
    6. Reconfiguration of linear time (through selection, intensification, stratification, fragmentation, disorientation)
    7. A significant use of the present tense
    8. An effort to depict only strictly real facts and events
    9. The urge to reveal one's self truly
    10. A strategy that aims to demand active engagement from the reader.

6   Rettberg 2008: 20. Jill Rettberg's genre and sub-genre definitions include diary-style blog, filter blog and political blog. Peter Dahlgren's (2011) model of "trajectories" is another example of systemization of blogs. He poses online participation in civic life as *trajectories* (the direction of the engagement), *modalities* (the character of communication), *motivation* (why), *practices of sociality* (how it is kept going), and *visibility* ("where it ends up") (Dahlgren 2011: 91–100).

7   Rettberg 2008: 20.

criticism. The social critical aspect of Arabic literature is a corollary of Pepe's findings. She pointed out that her doctoral thesis "constitutes the first in-depth study that attempts to establish a definition of Arabic personal blogs as 'autofiction,'" a term signifying "a form of autobiographical writing based on an undefined reading pact that oscillates between fiction and non-fiction." She concluded that "blog autofiction" is both "literary and political" and that bloggers have an "ambition to use literature as a means of changing the society they live in."[8] While Pepe considered "the literariness" of blogs, our attention is directed towards the "political," the bloggers' ambitions to change the society in which they live. Our focus is on the various themes of social criticism expressed in modern Arabic literature and the literary techniques with which themes of social criticism are spelled out in popular Egyptian blogs.[9] While highlighting socially critical themes in the blog narratives we take account of the "reading pact" between blogger and reader sprung out of an overall discourse calling for societal improvement and change.[10]

Whether a blogpost is presented as a conventional literary genre such as a poem, an anecdote or a diary entry or as a journalistic, factual report of police abuse or harassment by State Security including graphic footage, all the bloggers presented in this study are concerned with their society and its condition. More specifically, I ask: How do blogposts visualize social criticism in specific themes and content, style and techniques, some of which have been and continue to be part of Arabic literary expression? In short, this study does not delve into the question of the "literariness" of blogs in the sense of probing whether blogs as a whole or in part may qualify as a new literary genre in Arabic literary creativity. It does however ask in what ways blogging emerges as part of the Egyptian cultural, political and social discourse and how social criticism connects literary expression and blog narratives in this discourse.

The concept of discourse as articulated by Michel Foucault will guide the coming discussions on blog narratives. This means that this study falls in line with a long tradition of scholarly work on literature posited on the foundational idea that the bloggers are shaped by their social experience and likewise shape this reality in different measure.[11] This

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8 Pepe 2014: 371.
9 Pepe 2014: 17, 371, 373. This may be compared with al-Sibāʿī, whose novels catered to the readership of his day, which was marked by a general desire for a more Western type of literature that might include romantic fiction, replete with adventure. On the other hand, his novels bore witness to his self-assumed task to criticize Egyptian society of his day especially with regard to the plight of women who were locked in by traditions and social pressures (Ramsay 1996: 203-205). Pepe finds that the "autobiographical blog… continues the role played by the autobiographical novel or novelized autobiography" and finds that like "the early modern writers, bloggers use the autofictional form as a way to expose … thoughts and emotions, usually considered private" (Pepe 2014: 17, 371).
10 Pepe 2014: 371.
11 Said 1993: xxii and Foucault 1972: 25. We do not divide the domain of societal discourse as suggested by William M. Dickey. He distinguishes between the discourse of physical space and that of "Internet and hyper-reality" in which an alternative persona can exist and as a result, can be captured, manipulated and measured. He argues that we should take into account that two discursive spheres are operating simultaneously, one of which works according to "classic Foucauldian monitoring," in the form of "panopticommodity" (the many observed/controlled by the few). The other is the domain of cyber space where post-Foucauldian surveillance works in the form of "synopticommodity," the few making themselves observable and thereby controllable by the many (Dickey 2010: 11-12, 112-113, 148, 179-183, 190).

understanding of discourse, as applied by Sabry Hafez to literature by Egyptian authors from the 1990s, will closely guide our analyses of narratives in the blogposts.[12] Hafez demonstrated the validity of this approach while observing that

> It is impossible to ignore the link between the despondency, loss and gloom that pervades the texts of the 1990s with the social and economic depression in which they were formed and under which the authors were given to build their future.[13]

The limits of social discourse may be challenged by individuals or groups who make their voices heard publicly, something that has traditionally taken place in modern Arabic literary expression and continues to occur in blog narratives today. In fact, Pepe found it important to study blogs from a "literary perspective and as a new autobiographical genre" because bloggers "contextualize blogging in relation to political events and the print literary sphere."[14] More specifically, Pepe concludes that

> The autofictional blog … continues the role played by the autobiographical novel and novelized autobiography in early modern times [...]. We … see a parallel in their [the bloggers', *present author's comment*] ambition to use literature as a means of changing the society they live in.[15]

As intertextuality will be employed as a theoretical tool when discussing blog narratives, a few clarifying notes on how we perceive elements of intertextuality and in what ways they tie in with the Foucauldian notion of discourse are called for. Intertextuality here refers to how blog narratives relate to and interact with other texts regarding content, style and structure in the vein of Gérard Genette (1982, 1997) and Jonathan Culler (1981). This means that intertextuality essentially has to do with how the present reactivates and remodels themes, motifs, scenes and structural devices from earlier texts and narratives.[16] The identification of intertextual aspects of any text depends to a high degree on the reader's education, erudition and cultural framework. This being the case, I do not claim to uncover every single intertextual thread of the blog texts, as this would be too vast a project for this study. Moreover, intertextuality does not necessarily mean that there is a genetic liaison between texts x and y. Rather, similarities observed between text x and y may be the result of common variables such as social structures, norms, ideals and thought impressing on them.

Culler's observations with regard to intertextuality have been exemplified by Aziz Douai, who finds himself prompted to reflect on Sinbad, the adventure-seeking sailor in *One Thousand and One Thousand Nights* when reading narratives by Arab bloggers. Douai proposes that

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12 Hafez 2011: 109.
13 Hafez 2011: 112.
14 Pepe 2014: 16-17.
15 Pepe 2014: 373.
16 This stance is similar to that applied in studies on intertextuality in modern literature from the Gulf. Consult Ramsay 2006a: 242 and Ramsay 2006b: 161-162 in which discussions are based on Genette 1997: 5-10, 51-52, 381 and Culler 1981: 103, 115.

> Arab bloggers resemble this ancient seafarer in being adventurous and conscious of the other … welcoming debate and discussion of any topic – politics, religion and relations between the sexes.[17]

This comparison between today's blogger and the literary character of Sinbad functions as an intertextual bridge between the literary past and the blogging of the present. From this position, we will become aware of some of the ways in which the bloggers upon whose posts this study is based bring up various strands of intertextuality in their posts. These elements of intertextuality, brought up from their literary and cultural heritage and emerging in their narratives, mirror Albrecht Hofheinz's observation that the internet and social media are part of a broad, discursive field, tied in with other expressions of culture.[18] As explained by Hofheinz, the internet can "be seen in part as a continuation of a much older story," and we need to study the internet in a longer historical perspective than has been customary in the field of internet studies on the Arab world.[19] In other words, the wider context of "a much older story," we argue, includes the literary discourse and its affiliations of literary bodies and venues for writers of fiction.[20]

An example of such a thread of intertextuality interweaving the literary and blog narratives becomes apparent in the chapter on former Muslim Brotherhood member Abdel Moneim Mahmoud ('Abd al-Munʿim Maḥmūd).[21] In his blog we will find a central theme gathered in the famous stanza of the poem *Irādat al-ḥayāh* (The will to life) by the Tunisian national poet Abul Qasim al-Shabbi (Abū al-Qāsim al-Shābbī), (1909–1934), henceforth referred to as al-Shabbi. These same lines were inscribed as graffiti on walls during the January 25 uprising and have continued as a banner for change and individual freedom thereafter.

Genette's intertextual concept of "paratext" is also relevant, especially with respect to Ahmed Shokeir's (Aḥmad Shuqayr) blog titled *Late Night Stories* (*Ḥakāwī ākhir il-lēl*) and Ashraf Al-Anany's (Ashraf al-ʿAnānī) blog *Sinai is where I am* (*Sīnāʾ ḥaythu anā*), with the subtitle "The poet Ashraf al-ʿAnānī's blog." In both of these cases, the title, located outside of the narrative text, serves to designate "as precisely as possible" its "most important

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17 Douai 2009: 138, 133-149. It may be noted here that one of the top ten Lebanese bloggers, Elias Muhanna, Ph.D. and Assistant Professor of Comparative Literature at Brown University, is known as Qifa Nabki (*Qifā nabkī*). *Qifā nabkī* are the opening words of the most famous *qaṣīda*, ode, in the Classical Arabic literary heritage, the *muʿallaqa* of the legendary "Wandering Prince", Imruʾ al-Qays, from the first half of the 6th century. For more on the blogger Qifa Nabki and the top ten Lebanese bloggers see Riegert & Ramsay 2012.

18 Hofheinz 2011: 1428.

19 Hofheinz 2011: 1428.

20 Cf. Ramsay 2009: 60. Here a post by the Egyptian blogger Shahinaz Abdel Salam's (Shāhināz ʿAbd al-Salām) blog *wa7damasrya* (<wa7damsrya.blogspot.com>) is treated. On July 2, 2009 she posts a letter of protest by Deputy Head of the diplomatic department at Egyptian daily *Al-Ahram*, Maḥmūd al-Nūbī, against state sequestering of land owned by poor farmers for a huge tourist site development in Luxor under the title *al-Arḍ, al-arḍ* (The Land, the Land). This title, indeed, the entire post alludes to the Egyptian author ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sharqāwī's modern classic, *al-Arḍ* from 1954, translated by Desmond Stewart and published as *Egyptian Earth* in English, 1962.

21 For full names of the bloggers in transcribed form, title of blog, its web-site and number of in-linking domains at the time of selection, see Appendix.

function" (that of "identification") while saying something about genre and content.[22] In other words, from the vantage point of intertextuality, including paratextuality, we will find that the boundaries between traditional print literature and digital communication in the form of blogging in cyberspace are far from clear-cut.

In keeping with our intention to highlight intertext and pay attention to the context of the social discourse in which the narratives of the blogposts have taken form, we will take into account the call of Egyptian-American digital media theorist and artist Laila Shereen Sakr to "contextualize the social media data with ethnographic and historical data."[23] Rather than asking about the "causational role of social media on social movements," we ask in what ways literary expression and discourse influence popular Egyptian Arabic language blogs.[24] This reasoning finds resonance in Lina Khatib's observations regarding the role of visual cultural expressions that were formed by and formed events in Egypt during the run-up to the Arab Spring and the January 25 uprising. Khatib found that the images were part of the revolutionary infrastructure, that the Egyptian blogosphere expressed oppositional visual art rooted in the local cultural context, and that blog narratives were often delivered in Egyptian dialect.[25]

Sakr employed her analytical methodology, Collaborative Cultural Analytics (CCA) in "a micro-study on #Tahrir and its significance within a historical narrative of 'revolts' or '*thawra*' in Egypt."[26] A significant point of departure for our discussions on the blog narratives refers to the her observation that

> [t]he revolutionary turmoil in Egypt did not emerge out of the blue and simply through a social media activism as is often depicted, but rather was precipitated through many years of internal pressures and growing social movements.[27]

This observation, also expressed by Hofheinz and made reference to above, is elaborated on by Sakr in historical detail. She argues that a discourse of *thawra* (revolt or revolution) was planted in Egyptian society from a long history of uprisings in Egypt. These reach from the

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22 Genette 1997: 4, 79, 80.

23 Sakr 2013: 253. Sahar Khamis *et al.* point out that the role of social media "as catalysts for political change and mobilizers for political action must be contextualized within the broader political and social structure in each country, with all their respective complexities and unique qualities" (Khamis *et al.* 2012:1).

24 Sakr 2013: 254. Laila Shereen Sakr is known by her moniker VJ Um Amel (أم أمل VJ Um Amel). This is the name of Sakr's persona on her internet site <vjumamel.com>. She publishes under both names.

25 Khatib 2013: 135. For further discussions on linguistic code in the Egyptian blogosphere, consult Ramsay 2012. Although the notion of the blogosphere as an Habermasian sphere has been contested, it may be worth while noting here that Mohammed al-Nawawy and Khamis discerned that Egyptian blogs suggested that the blogosphere in some measure provided a virtual Habermasian public sphere while "strengthening civil society and nurturing citizen journalism." Speaking of blogs as a possibility to "enact cultural citizenship" thus in extension forming "coherent counterpublics" Kristina Riegert finds that "…entertainment and information are resources for individuals' identity-building and forms of expression, feeding deeply held needs to know, speak, and build community with like-minded others. These drivers of digital cultural citizenship may be conceived as conditions that can develop into coherent counterpublics…" (Riegert 2015: 473-474).

26 Sakr 2013: 248.

27 Sakr 2013: 248.

Urabi revolt in 1882, against the Khedive Tewfik Pasha and British and French influence, to Saad Zahgloul's uprising against the British in 1919, the Free Officers' revolt against the monarchy in 1952, "to the bread riots of 1977, and to the leaderless revolution of 2011."[28] A convergence between elements such as information technology, internet and social media, with its manifold communication platforms, and the national narrative of *thawra*, combined with "communication habits," wrought mobilization on Tahrir Square and elsewhere in Egypt and was "identified by global witnesses as the 'Arab Spring.'" Sakr's point is that "stories, symbols, and popular imagination," in other words, part of a national "cultural production," "played a significant role in shaping the evolving national identity."[29]

Against this background of historical narratives of 'revolts' or '*thawra*' in Egypt we note that in the EU Seventh Framework Cooperation Work Programme (2012), one of the headings for requested research tasks within the European Union was expressed as follows: "Why 'early signals' of change were not robust enough, and why they were underestimated, need to be investigated."[30] Egyptian author and journalist Mohamed Salmawy (Muḥammad Salmāwī) seems to herald the eruption to come in Egypt in 2011 in his novel *Ajniḥat al-farāsha* (The wings of the butterfly) first published in 2011.[31] Deep-seated structural problems surface in this novel, such as poor governance, widespread corruption, vast class differences, poverty for the many and the aloofness of the elite with respect to the masses as well as the ubiquitous presence of State Security at all levels of society. Egyptian author of short stories and novels, and political and cultural commentator Ahdaf Soueif gives her view on the events of the run-up to the January 25 uprising thus: "A month before, a week before, three days before, we could not have told you it was going to happen."[32] My hope is that this study might shed light on these signals, as expressed in literature as well as more recently in social media, their roots hailing from the beginning of the former century, and erupting into calls for change and action on the ground in 2011. A lesson to be learned is that in order to avoid a situation in which eruptions such as the January 25 uprising in Egypt are followed by a re-establishment of a situation in which real change is absent, research needs to go beyond asking why "signals of change were not robust enough." As expressed by Steven A. Cook, for a revolution to be successful and for real change to take

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28 Sakr 2013: 248.
29 Sakr 2013: 248.
30 Abbreviated as the EU FP7 Cooperation Work Programme: Socio-economic Sciences and humanities. "SSH.2012.4.3-1. Social changes and political transformations in the Arab world", p. 42. <http://cordis.europa.eu/programme/rcn/18022_en.html> (last retrieved March 7, 2016).
31 *Ajniḥat al-farāsha* has been translated into English by Raphael Cohen as *Butterfly Wings* and published by the American University in Cairo Press, 2014. With a touch of humor Isabella Camera d'Afflitto quotes general manager of Al-Arabiya television and former editor-in-chief of London-based and Saudi-owned daily newspaper *Asharq al-Awsat*, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Rāshid, who proposes that if the Egyptian authorities had read more novels and fewer police reports they would not have found themselves taken hostage by activists, tweeters and facebookers in Tahrir Square (Camera d'Afflitto 2016: 93). Cf. al-Rāshid 2011
<http://archive.aawsat.com/leader.asp?section=3&issueno=11752&article=606149#.WA8dg_mLSUk> (last retrieved October 25, 2016).
32 Soueif 2012: 7. "…[T]he timing of Hosny Mubarak's collapse was totally unpredictable" writes Steven A. Cook (2012: 295).