

Arab Women Bloggers: The Emergence of Literary Counterpublics

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Abstract

Cyberspace as a forum for expression, mobilization, dissent and the organization of alternative social and political networks has been a distinct feature of the new global order since the 1990s. Cyberspace as a forum for alternative expression is also making inroads in the Arabic literary establishment. In 2008, Dar al-Shorouq, an established privately-owned Egyptian publishing house, published three collections of short stories by three women bloggers, Ghada 'Abd al-'Aal, Rihab Bassam and Ghada Mohamed Mahmoud. In this article, I argue that cyberspace, particularly the noted proliferation of literary blogs and blogging among Arab youth, has created new literary public spheres, or 'competing counterpublics', that are breaking the monopoly of mainstream literary spaces and changing tastes. I also argue that cyberspace has been particularly conducive to the participation of women in the literary field, and pose questions about the implications of the emergence of cyber counterpublics on the Arab literary establishment and the canon of Arabic literature.

Keywords

cyberspace, blogging, Arab women, literature, counterpublics

Introduction

Cyberspace as a forum for expression, mobilization, dissent, and the organization of alternative social and political networks has been a key feature of the new global order since the 1990s. At the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the emergence of new venues and means for communication and coordination, such as websites, blogs and social networking sites, was almost unimaginable. The twenty-first century has seen the rapid rise of blogging in the Middle East. It has, in fact, become a key feature of the region's cultural and political map. Bloggers in Iran, Egypt, Lebanon, Bahrain, Kuwait, Algeria, Syria and Jordan, mainly young men and women, have, arguably, changed the practice of politics, forming news spaces for 'mediated politics' (Khiabany and

Sreberny 2007a: 12) and created new platforms for political discussion and debate. Sidelining state control of the media, bloggers 'became a form of independent news agencies, giving the grassroots up-to-the-minute news and other information' (El-Gody 2007: 221).

Arab bloggers have organized demonstrations and public protests, signed petitions and rallied sectors of society that have not, traditionally, had access to political forums. In 2005, bloggers in Lebanon debated the political complexities surrounding the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri, the Lebanese prime minister. In 2006, Kuwaiti bloggers 'helped unleash a "virtual" campaign for election reform' (al-Roomi 2007: 152). Between 2003 and 2007, Riverbend (the pseudonym of a young Iraqi woman) posted political analysis and insights about social and cultural life in Iraq on her blog, *Baghdad Burning: reports on life in Iraq under occupation*.¹ In Egypt, bloggers recorded and exposed state violations against civilians: with their cameras and laptops they videotaped incidents of torture and posted them on YouTube for the world to see. It is largely thanks to their efforts that many state transgressions have become public and are being investigated and discussed, as these blogs acted as 'a societal watchdog and instigator of social and political activism' (Otterman 2007: 7). The power and potential threat of cyberactivism has prompted the formulation and implementation of strict censorship laws to regulate internet usage in many Arab countries.² Notwithstanding, bloggers continue to make noticeable inroads in the political and social fabrics of states. A measure of the success of bloggers in shaking the state hold on forums for public participation and expression can be clearly detected in the violent and harsh responses of state police in the Middle East to cyberspace activists (see El Gody 2007).

The role of new media in the transformation and redefinition of the Arab public sphere has been the focus of much research.³ Drawing on Habermas'

¹ Riverbend's blog (<http://riverbendblog.blogspot.com/>) was written in English. A selection of reports from her blog were published in a book entitled *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq*, introduction by James Ridgeway and foreword by Ahdaf Soueif (New York: The Feminist Press, 2005). It was shortlisted for the Samuel Johnson prize in 2006, and won third place of the Lettre Ulysses Award for the Art of Reportage in 2005.

² El-Gody points out that some of the measures 'put seven Arab countries on the list of the top 15 enemies of Internet freedom', and that 'Tunisia has developed the region's most detailed Internet-specific laws' (2007: 224).

³ About the effect of new media on the Middle East, see Loubna H. Skalli, 'Communicating Gender in the Public Sphere: Women and Information Technologies in the MENA', *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 2, no. 2 (Spring 2006): 35–59; and Marc Lynch, 'Blogging the New Arab Public', *Arab Media and Society*, no. 1 (2007). About how the modern media enabled the rise of voices that 'are fragmenting and contesting' hegemonic rule, see Dale F. Eickelman and Jon Anderson, *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emergence of the Arab Public Sphere*

notion of the public sphere as a democratic liberal arena where private citizens come together to discuss, debate and achieve consensus on public issues, ‘a theatre in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk’ (Fraser 1990: 57), researchers have explored the various implications of new media in the Arab world in enabling voices and promoting public debate. New technologies have enabled wider participation in debates and have rendered the Arab public sphere more inclusive, as demonstrated by Marc Lynch, in his analysis of programs on al-Jazeera dealing with Iraq (Lynch 2006). Referring specifically to blogs, Lynch, however, remains skeptical about the ability of bloggers ‘to lead a revolution, [but] they hold out the prospect of a new kind of Arab public sphere which could reshape the texture of politics’ (Lynch 2007a: 3–4). Alternatively, Dale F. Eickelman and Armando Salvatore have put forward the idea that there is a ‘multiplicity of over-lapping public spheres’ in the Muslim world (2002).⁴

Feminist researchers have drawn on revisionist critiques of Habermas, particularly Nancy Fraser’s concept of ‘counterpublics’. Fraser and others have demonstrated that there are always ‘competing counterpublics’ (Fraser 1990: 61), that the idea of *the* public sphere is contingent on excluding other, weaker publics, that the Habermasian assumption about the possibility of bracketing inequalities is not possible and disregards exclusions based on race, class and gender, among other things. Loubna Skalli highlights Middle Eastern women’s interventions in revising discourses on women and gender. She surveys diverse forms of women’s participation in public debates, focusing on women’s creation of alternative spaces—publishing houses and research centers, e-magazines and websites—making a case for how Middle Eastern women ‘engender the public sphere’ (Skalli 2006: 53). Similarly, and based on the study of Heya TV, ‘the first pan-Arab television station among 205 Arab satellite channels to specifically target Arab women’ (Matar 2007: 14), Dina Matar has argued that Heya has contributed to ‘the creation of an Arab feminist counterpublic’ (2007: 24).

Cyberspace, in general, and blogs in particular, have also opened up new forums for alternative cultural and literary expression. And while the role of political blogs in shaking hegemonic state discourses and power in the Arab world has attracted much critical and media attention, the impact of cultural bloggers on cultural institutions and practices remains to be explored. In this

(Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 1; and about the ‘multiplicity of over-lapping public spheres’ see Eickelman and Salvatore, *The Public Sphere and Muslim Identities*, *European Journal of Sociology* 43 (2002): 92–115.

⁴ Also see Eickelman and Anderson, *New Media in the Muslim World*.

article, I argue that cyberspace, particularly the noted proliferation of literary blogs and blogging among Arab youth, has resulted in the creation of new literary public spheres, or 'subaltern counterpublics', to use the term coined by Nancy Fraser (1990), and new forums for subversive or alternative literary genres, languages and styles that are adjacent or parallel to mainstream literary centers. 'Literary public spheres' is used in this article to designate circles, gatherings and groups that meet and exchange ideas and set literary tastes and rules; in other words, constructing the canon or the tradition of a given literature. Traditionally, writers and critics in the modern period met and exchanged ideas in literary salons, and then later in coffee houses, cafes or *qahwas*. I argue that new *literary* counterpublics have been enabled in cyberspace, and that cyberspace has been particularly conducive to the participation of women in the literary field. I ask, what are the implications of the emergence of cyber counterpublics on the Arab literary establishment, and hence on the canon of Arabic literature.

I focus on three women bloggers in Egypt, whose short stories posted on their blogs over a number of years were subsequently published in 2008 by Dar al-Shorouq, a well-established, privately-owned Egyptian publishing house. The three publications *'Ayza atgawiz* [I want to get married] by Ghada 'Abd al-'Aal, *Urz bil-laban li-shakhsayn* [Rice pudding for two] by Rihab Bassam, and *Ama hathihi fa raqsati ana* [This is my own dance] by Ghada Mohamed Mahmoud, initiated a series of literary *mudawwanat* (blogs). Most of the stories are written in colloquial dialect; the writers are young newcomers to the scene; and some of the topics dealt with can hardly be considered 'high' literature by the Arab literary establishment. The history and general direction of Dar al-Shorouq should be taken into consideration: its owner, Ibrahim al-Mu'allim, is president of the Union of Arab Publishers; it is hardly an avant-garde publisher, rather is very much a beacon of the status quo; its publishing history is predominantly liberal Islamic; and the focus of its venture into the literary field has not been to discover new talent, but to republish the classics of Arabic literature. Given these factors, the three collections I discuss merit some consideration and reflection. More importantly, these collections, particularly, *'Ayza atgawiz*, were instant hits and were on the bestseller lists of several bookshops.⁵

Virtual Literature and the Formation of Counterpublics

The literary public spaces available to writers in the modern period to meet and interact have changed dramatically over the last hundred years. At the end

of the nineteenth century, writers gathered in private literary salons run by prominent public figures. The famous salon of Princess Nazli is credited for bringing together Muhammad Abduh, Ahmed Lutfi al-Sayyed and Qasem Amin, a meeting which resulted in the publication of the renowned book *Tabrir al-mar'a* [The liberation of women] in 1899. May Ziyada (1886–1941), Lebanese writer and poet, also presided over a literary salon which was frequented by prominent writers such as 'Abbas al-'Aqqad and Mustafa Sadiq al-Raf'i in the early decades of the twentieth century. Gradually, the literary salon no longer became the most common meeting place of writers, and the coffee house, or *qahwa*, became the focal point for literary gatherings, a place where writers and literary critics congregated regularly, discussed politics and public affairs, and, at the same time, formulated criteria for literary taste.

Two coffee houses stand out in Egyptian literary history: al-Fishawi and Café Riche. Taha Husayn, Tawfiq al-Hakim, Ahmad Fu'ad Nijm and Najib Surour are just a few of the prominent figures who frequented Café Riche. Naguib Mahfouz (Egyptian novelist and Nobel Prize winner) held his regular Friday meetings there from 1963 as well. However, by the second half of the twentieth century, things had changed. The history of Café Riche is symbolic of the transformation that befell many cultural centers: it was established in the early twentieth century⁵ and held plays and concerts by Munira al-Mahdiyya (the most famous singer of her time) and the young Umm Kulthum (Egyptian singer who achieved legendary status in the twentieth century); it became a famous meeting place for artists and writers in the 1960s; it closed down at the end of the 1980s and was reopened in 1999. No longer a cafe, it is now a restaurant and a tourist attraction, a monument of a past era. In a project that documents the history of small businesses in Egypt, Karim al-Sayed and Dina Waked argue that downtown cafes in the 1960s were 'pseudo-political parties, with each place having a political tint that identifies it' (2005: 23). According to them, Café Riche was 'moderate left', as it housed liberals such as Naguib Mahfouz and Yusuf al-Siba'i. This function of cafes gradually diminished as formal political parties were established in the late 1970s. In addition, the

⁵ It is not easy to obtain accurate statistics to substantiate this point. I am depending on discussions with reputable booksellers, and the fact that the books have been reprinted several times. Also, Mona al-Shazli, TV presenter of a popular TV program, *al-Qahira Massa'an* said that the three collections were on top of the list of bestsellers at the Cairo Book Fair in 2008 (*al-Qahira Massa'an*, 11 February 2008).

⁶ The café was probably established in 1914, though according to some accounts, it dates back to 1908. For an account of the history of Café Riche, see Karim al-Sayed and Dina Waked, *Café Riche: A Small Business in a Large Environment*, paper presented at the Young Scholars Conference, American University in Cairo, February 2005.

centrality of the downtown area as the cultural, political and commercial heart of Cairo eroded as new centers gradually mushroomed all over the city. Other factors, such as the spread of audio-visual culture as well as the rise of oil cultures at the end of the 1970s, all contributed to the demise of cafes as intellectual centers (al-Sayed and Waked 2005: 21–24).

So, if not in cafes, where do writers and critics meet? What are the new intellectual hubs? The 1990s witnessed a marked increase in the establishment of new publishing houses that were not state-owned, but run by entrepreneurial publishers, such as Dar Sharqiyyat, Dar Merit, Dar Malamih and many others. These new publishing houses that mushroomed throughout the 1990s became literary hubs where young writers congregated and interacted. At some level, they displaced the prominence of the more famous cafes where writers of the 1960s used to meet. The gradual increase in these small publishing houses has made it much easier to publish—some would argue, has made it too easy—and has certainly facilitated experimentation and innovation. The diversity of the publishers, ideologically, politically and socially, has inevitably widened the literary spectrum of writers and styles. No longer are writers limited to state publishing houses, or independent commercial publishers with an eye on the wider Arab market: they are now able to choose from a wider list of publishers that are more receptive and supportive of innovation and diversity. All in all, this situation has certainly led to a marked increase in the publication of literary works written by traditionally marginalized groups in society, or writers with little or no access to established literary centers.

In addition to the multiplicity of publishing opportunities that are now available to writers, the marked increase in internet access in the last decade, and especially the emergence of the blogosphere, has created more forums for literary expression. Blogs have become sites for literary discussions, for advertising work, for eliciting feedback and opinion, for the exchange of views and contacts and for sharing literary texts; in other words, practices that brought writers together and were traditionally carried out in the literary cafes. In addition, cyber social networks, such as Facebook, have also created forums for discussion and the exchange of ideas and have enabled the emergence of a multiplicity of communities, literary and otherwise. Facebook is now an important site for information about publications, seminars and talks, as well as critical appreciation of cultural products.

A key characteristic of blogs is their accessibility to a wider public: anyone with access to the internet can either be directed to or can stumble on a blog and eventually join the community around it. This is radically different from previous intellectual meeting points, such as literary salons or coffee houses. Salons were accessed by invitation only and were strictly regulated by their

hosts and a very small circle around them. They were hardly accessible to wider participation. Coffee houses, which became intellectual hubs for the literary and cultural elite, though public places in principle, and seemingly accessible, were usually closed to a small circle and were strictly regulated and controlled.⁷ The accessibility of the blogosphere has certainly encouraged many women, who would not have had easy access to literary circles, to write and disseminate their writing to a wider audience. Cyberspace also provides a measure of anonymity, and in some cases complete anonymity, especially to bloggers and their circles of friends and commentators. Anonymity facilitates the initial access to and participation in a given circle; it enables a certain haven of invisibility that would not be possible in a physical environment that depends on personal contact. Moreover, presence in virtual space is not governed by the same rules of presence in physical spaces: it allows for masquerading, for a choice of identity or identities, all factors that alleviate some of the constraints that limit free expression and interaction. There is also less pressure on the individual to conform, or perhaps the rules of conformity are different. Finally, joining the circle of a blogger, or a group on Facebook, can take place at one's own pace and allow for gradual integration. I argue that these new material conditions of cyber presence, particularly anonymity and accessibility, have a great deal of potential for literary experimentation and the enabling of new voices.

From the Blogosphere to the Printing Press

The phenomenon of Arabic virtual literature is a mark of the twenty-first century.⁸ Blogging as a phenomenon resulted in a surge in writing, literary and

⁷ This is based on a discussion that took place at a panel entitled *Café Riche: Reflections on 100 years of a Modern Egyptian History*, at the MESA annual meeting (23 November 2008) in Canada. Participants in the panel, Dina Hussein, Alia Mossallam, Hoda Baraka and Lina Attalah, presented papers about different aspects of *Café Riche*, as part of a project that began at the American University in Egypt to document small businesses. When asked about how inclusive *Riche* was, they responded that the literary gatherings there were always very exclusive and that newcomers needed to be introduced. One participant, Dina Hussein, described it as a 'gated community'.

⁸ The spread of Arabic electronic journals and magazines has encouraged novelists, poets and short story writers to publish their work on the internet with the view of accessing a wider readership, and different readership. A case in point here is the publication of Sun'allah Ibrahim's novel *al-Talassus* [Eavesdropping/voyeurism] in the electronic magazine *al-Kalima* (issue 2, February 2007) before it appeared in print form (<http://www.al-kalimah.com/data/2007/2/1/Sonaaalahibrahim.xml>). These texts, however, fall outside the scope of this research.

otherwise. Much of this literature was not considered 'literary' by some of the authors themselves, or by their readers. Most of it crossed generic distinctions between literary genres and styles. Moreover, the bulk of these writings was never intended for publication in conventional print venues. However, as the content of blogs gained wide readership, they attracted the attention of 'print' publishing houses. In 2007, Dar Malamih, owned by activist blogger Mohamed al-Sharqawy, published literary works that were initially disseminated and read in blogs, such as *al-Nabi al-ifriqi* [The African prophet], a collection of texts written by blogger Mina Girgis. Similarly, *Rogers*, a novel by Ahmed Naji, was published in print form. The novel was posted on Naji's blog, and he invited readers to comment and make changes if they wished, hence creating an experimental interactive novel. These publications are by writers who are also bloggers, and who used their blogs to publish their literary works. The print version, in some cases, acknowledge the presence of the blog and cite its electronic address. The year 2008 witnessed the emergence of the word 'blog' as a literary genre to describe collections of articles, essays and short stories. A number of publications appeared that same year. Dar Uktub started publishing a series called 'Egyptian Pocket Blogs' *Mudawwanat masriyya lil-jayb*. The first book in the series appeared in 2008 and was entitled *Mashru' watan* [Project for a nation]. Another followed in the same year, *Misr fi qit'at gatow* [Egypt in a piece of cake], and a third in 2009, *Ana untha* [I am female]. Three more publishing houses, Dar al-Katib, Dar al-'Ayn and al-Dar, all published blogs in various formats. All of these publications identify the site of the blog for reference. Some of the blogs are accompanied by comments and readers' reactions. On the whole, there is considerable room for experimentation with new styles and forms of presenting the written material.

All of the publishing houses mentioned above have been recently established and are owned and run by young men and women. The publishers are electronically savvy, and are comfortable with new technologies and media. They belong to a disillusioned generation that has lost faith in formal institutions and older generations. This new generation of publishers is keen on preserving their independence from state-owned publishing venues and mainstream literary circles. Their newly-founded business ventures are mostly self-financed, and largely depend on donations by friends and supporters. In fact, some of their projects are not-for-profit, i.e., books are sold at cost to make them affordable to larger sections of the reading public. In the third collection of blogs published by Dar Uktub, one of the bloggers, Nawwara Nijm, recounts that she was initially hesitant to give her consent to the print publication of one of her blogs as part of the collection entitled *Ana untha* [I am female], because she objected to turning blogs, which were accessible and free

of charge, into commercial commodities. She then contacted the two editors, Ahmed Mihanna and Ahmed al-Buhi, who assured her that the series was not for profit, and that the goal of publishing them in print form was to make them accessible to readers who did not have access to the internet. The background for this discussion is that blogs and bloggers have been the subject of much controversy in Egyptian media, and have been represented as either irresponsible outlaws and heretics, or, freedom fighters who expose corruption and state violations (Nijm 2009). Consequently, the idea of publishing excerpts from blogs serves to dispel some of the myths surrounding bloggers and allow ordinary citizens to judge for themselves. Paradoxically, publishing which costs money, unlike posting writing on the internet, in this instance, is put forward as a strategy to reach more audiences, audiences—those that do not have the privilege of internet access.

This particular series, 'Egyptian Pocket Blogs', is presented as a project with national implications. In the first book in the series, *Mashru' watan* [Project of a nation], the selected excerpts from blogs are framed by an introduction and a conclusion, each written by one of the editors, in which they outline the philosophy behind the series. In the introduction, Ahmed al-Buhi notes that the year 2008 marks the 60th anniversary of the Palestinian *nakba* (catastrophe) in 1948, and identifies this date to mark the time that has passed since the formation of 'the dream to have a nation that guarantees security, safety and dignity' (al-Buhi 2008: 7). He then says that for four years, he had entertained another dream, 'a dream that the people, *al-sha'b*, write for themselves, and shape their culture by their own free will' (al-Buhi 2008: 8). This dream, stated in a manifesto-style introduction to the series, is then foregrounded on the cover page in the following sequels, *Misr fi qit'at gatow* [Egypt in a piece of cake], and *Ana untha* [I am female], stating that the book is authored by the Egyptian people (*kitab yu'alifuhu al-sha'b al-masri*). In the conclusion, written by Ahmed Mihanna, the philosophy behind the project is stated more clearly:

In my search among these creatures that are alive with our words, entities that we metaphorically call blogs... I found many views that are absent from society and its limited values, works that do not beg at the feet of the state or its famous intellectuals... I found the demise of hope in the words of those who were failed by a nation that did not satisfy their sense of belonging... I found *mughtaribin* (expatriates) living inside the nation (Mihanna 2008: 259).

Both editors emphasize the nationalist credentials of the blogs, the diversity of views, and their independence from state control. There is a conscious attempt to regain and revise the meaning of a nation, or a national project, by foregrounding the unheard voices of the *sha'b* (the people), which are

historically sidelined by state discourses and official points of view. There is also the suggestion that these blogs are the unmediated expressions of ordinary Egyptians, making the project populist and non-elitist. The selected texts have already been published on the internet, reached a wide readership, attracted the attention of several commentators, and more importantly, have done so without going through formal venues of selection or censorship by a publisher, a journal editor, or by a cultural elite. In this sense, they are the 'true' or unmediated voices of the nation, voices that can potentially contest the hegemonic national narrative propagated by the cultural elite and ultimately redefine it to be more inclusive and diverse.

Three Literary Blogs

Ghada 'Abd al-'Aal, author of *Ayza atgawiz* [I want to get married], started her blog, *wanna b a bride*, in 2006. She was a 29-year old pharmacist who introduced herself in this way: 'I represent 15 million young women between the age of 25 and 35, who are pressured by society on a daily basis to get married, even though it is not their fault that they have not married yet'.⁹

She announces her desire to get married, a desire, she tells us, that is implanted in young girls in the Arab world at a very young age. The title 'wanna –b a bride' (written in English on her blog) sets the tone and attitude of the writer. The blog consists of short stories that are extremely funny, witty with a touch of satire. They are also unorthodox and almost iconoclastic in many ways. There is a sustained tongue-in-cheek attitude: while satirizing social affectations and ills, in the same breath, she makes fun of her own failings. All the stories are about the difficulties of marriage—getting married, finding a suitable partner—in a conservative society that looks unfavorably on unmarried women, a society that condemns relationships before marriage and yet limits opportunities for men and women to meet. Marriage for Arab women is certainly the one achievement they are expected to accomplish and are penalized socially if they do not, even if they excel in all other areas of life. The title and primary theme of the blog is unorthodox and quite daring, as it is she, the woman, who is proactive in seeking marriage and reveals her desire for this commitment. Whereas it is perfectly acceptable and even laudable for men to declare their desire to marry, women would be seen as forward and shameless if they voluntarily, much less forcibly articulated this desire in public.

⁹ 'Abd al-'Aal's blog: <http://wanna-b-a-bride.blogspot.com/>, accessed 28 September 2008.

‘Abd al-‘Aal’s stories are comedies of manners that satirize the institution of marriage and the social norms and practices that regulate the relationship between men and women in society. The collection is full of hilarious situations, and witty comments about the day-to-day business of courtship. In a story entitled: ‘Why pay more if you can pay less’, she foregrounds the commercial aspect of arranged marriages and the way courting has been transformed into a charade of rituals, comparable to military maneuvers between two sides trying to ensure minimum damage should the prospect fail (‘Abd al-‘Aal 2008: 155).¹⁰ We meet an array of stock characters: the conventional matchmaker, *tante shukriyyalbishariyya* (meaning someone who meddles in other people’s business), the group of women competing over potential suitors; the concerned mother; the keen but exasperated father; and ten disastrous suitors. For example, there is a man who comes to propose to her with his two other wives; the police officer who interrogates her and her family and sends a vice detective to her place of work to inquire about her conduct; a suitor who is miserly; a ridiculous football fanatic who blows up and becomes insulting when his favorite team is criticized; and the spoiled son of a famous medical doctor who amuses himself by deliberately misleading young available women. All the male suitors are parodies of idealized manhood, or idealized expectations of masculinity. She is particularly relentless in satirizing the modern man, or ‘modern’ masculinities, and exposing the disconnect between the idealized image and real life types. The suitors exhibit qualities that go against the grain of ideal manhood as represented in the dominant national imaginary. In addition, they are parodies of cultural types that are easily recognizable. Waiting for one more visit from a suitor who is highly recommended by the matchmaker, the bride daydreams about him and recalls images of her dream suitor:

Ahmed ‘Abd al-‘Aziz in *Money and Sons*, Sherif Munir in *Hilmiyya Nights*... It would be even better if his teeth are all crowded like those of Nabil al-Halafawy... men with character and an air that commands respect must have some flaws... I am totally off handsome people. I want an ugly suitor, definitely not one who resembles the members of the policy committee (‘Abd al-‘Aal 2008: 32).

The references above are to well-known actors (‘Abd al-‘Aziz, Munir, and Halafawy) in popular TV series, whom she playfully juxtaposes to another group of men, the predominantly rich businessmen who entered the field of politics by joining the policy committee headed by President Hosni Mubarak’s son Gamal. The examples are culturally specific: Egyptians immediately laugh

¹⁰ All quotations are taken from this edition.

at the caricature portrayal of famous figures, and also double up with laughter at the witty dismissal of a new class of political elites whose rise to power accompanies a highly disputed succession project.¹¹

‘Abd al-‘Aal said in an interview that the target of her satire is not men, but the traditions of courtship, especially *gawaz al-salonat* (salon marriage or supervised courtship). These traditions are often the only recourse many women have to marriage as a result of the stringent social restrictions on the mixing of men and women, as well as the stereotyping of gender roles and qualities. She challenges cultural concepts and practices that disempower women by revealing that they are void of any meaning in the real world. In *Hub ah hub la* [To love or not to love], she recounts how her mother indoctrinated her in not accepting male friendship during her university years as the proper conduct expected of respectable young women. She followed her mother’s advice to the letter, and strictly avoided her male colleagues. Then, after graduation, and after a succession of undesirable suitors, she found herself reprimanded by her aunt for not managing to secure a husband while still at university. She was totally shocked as her aunt’s remark contradicted all the advice she was given by her mother about acceptable behavior for young women. She was left confused and unsure about the values that are passed on to women, about the double standards applied to the upbringing of girls, and about her own behavior, whether she was right or not. In *‘an al-riqa wal-unutha* [About tenderness and femininity], she deconstructs cultural perceptions about women’s nature by focusing on the lives of real women.

Where, people, can we find this femininity we keep hearing about? My mother spends her day in the kitchen. Our neighbor, aunt Suhayr washes and hangs the clothes all day and night... Manal, who was our role model for tenderness and serenity now [after marriage]... is awake all night because the boy is crying, and all day because the boy’s father wants to eat and drink... and needless to say, her 24-hour vigil shows clearly on her face. (‘Abd al-‘Aal 2008: 28)

She also addresses some of the more negative stereotypes associated with women’s power. In *Difa’an ‘an al-mar’a al-masriyya al-muftariyya* [In defense of the strong and spiteful Egyptian woman], she recounts classic male complaints about their wives spending all their money, or neglecting them, or even getting violent with them. With a tongue-in-cheek approach, she announces

¹¹ The establishment of a policy committee in the National Democratic party, the ruling party in Egypt headed by the President, with Gamal Mubarak, son of the President, as its secretary general, triggered a heated debate about an announced plan for Gamal to succeed his father as President. The policy committee has succeeded in attracting a wide range of members, but is most noted for a young generation of businessmen who are very close to Gamal.

that this is a specifically Egyptian problem; that the majority of Egyptian men complain about their wives, but that Egyptian women are too strong and spiteful:

Some may imagine that I am trying to contest this charge. No. Absolutely. *absolutli*. I hereby testify that I am a typical Egyptian spiteful woman. Yes I am too strong and spiteful, even though I have not married yet, and do not have a man in my possession to administer the spiteful approach condoned by the society of wild women. (‘Abd al-‘Aal 2008: 54)

She then goes on to give reasons why Egyptian women must be strong and spiteful, and draws up a list of male failings, such as not helping with housework, shirking responsibility and so forth. The story, like most of the stories in the collection, is a light-hearted satire of social stereotyping of masculinity and femininity.

Urz bil-laban li-shakhsayn [Rice pudding for two] by Rihab Bassam consists of short stories posted on her blog, *Hawadiyt* [Stories].¹² The presentation of her bio at the end of the collection makes no large claims, and explores the inner self without pretentiousness. She tells us where she graduated from, where she works and then adds,

Rihab started writing her blog, *Hawadiyt* in 2004. She spends her time daydreaming and reading. She has made a few absurd attempts at painting, playing the piano and learning Spanish. However, she is good at knitting colorful scarves. Rihab believes that she was born to hunt dinosaurs, to gather flowers, to tell stories and to laugh. She was born to... walk naked through sunny days. No one should try to convince her otherwise. (Bassam 2008: 124).¹³

The collection consists of short stories that express the thoughts and inner workings of the mind of the author, or her many personas. The point of view is consistent: for although the stories are about different topics, states of mind, and experiences, reading them together paints the portrait of a sensitive, intelligent young woman struggling with the daily challenges of life in Cairo. The story *Taq hanak* is a concrete portrayal of how anger can build up over little things, resulting in a general feeling of ennui. Bassam deftly weaves together the mundane and trivial incidents that can ruin a day:

I wake up, fighting off a headache. I want my coffee immediately! I remember that I wrote a large part of a long story while asleep. I try to recall it, but fail. I get angry. I concentrate a bit more. I remember it! In the kitchen, I discover that we

¹² <http://hadouta.blogspot.com/>, accessed 28 September 2008.

¹³ All quotations are taken from this edition, and translations are mine.

have run out of the coffee I like. I get angry. I open a yoghurt pack, find it very bitter, and I get angry. I had asked the grocer not to send this particular brand, but he sent it anyway. I decide to take a bath. I go into the bathroom, take off my clothes and cannot find the soap. I get angry. (Bassam 2008: 27)

In *A'maq a'maqi* [The inner depth of my soul] the narrator explores her inner self by describing the contents of her handbag. As she pulls out one item after another, she sheds light on her multiple identities, her interests and her likes and dislikes. She has a small notebook in which she records her expenses, her to-do list, words and phrases she heard in films and plays, addresses and colored paper clippings. In this magical bag she also carries a small dictionary, colored pens, a watch that needs a battery, chewing gum, perfume, lipstick, her mobile phone, sunglasses, to name only some of the items mentioned. The contents of the bags are listed, followed by a short comment in brackets, or a parenthetical statement that immediately personalizes the item and helps shed light on one aspect of the narrator's self. We discover that she carries lipstick though 'she did not wear any before going out to work, but she always carries it with her in case of an emergency!' (Bassam 2008: 31) There is a little wallet with her business cards as well as her personal cards, whose design triggered a debate where '(some argued that the design very well suited my character "It is very much you!" while others held that the cards could very well be an advertisement for a beauty salon!)'. The color of her wallet is 'a soft baby blue, with few delicate flowers made up of light pink and yellow threads' (Bassam 2008: 32). She also carries a small piece of cloth from the Palestinian *hatta* (headdress) and in the side pocket of the handbag is a sticker, which reads: 'Never grow up!' (Bassam 2008: 33). The narrator's inner self is revealed through her treasured possessions, the small trivia she carries in her handbag, but which also constitute who she is.

In a story called *Asbab basita* [Simple reasons], Bassam manages to condense the reasons that result in estranged relationships between men and women in one simple refrain. 'Why don't you hold my hand when crossing the street?' is a question posed by a young woman to her boyfriend at the beginning of the story, and then repeated four more times, charting the development of their relationship as they get married, have children and grow old together. Each time, her partner finds a reason why they should not hold hands when crossing the street, at first, because 'imagine if one of your relatives saw us?' then, 'we are not teenagers my dear. We are a respectable married couple' (Bassam 2008: 70). At the end, the narrator reveals that she really wanted him to hold her hand while walking in the street, for no particular reason, simply because he wanted her hand in his. This very short story in which a simple question is repeated five times summarizes in a nutshell how

people can be enslaved by social restrictions and how these restrictions can drive people apart. The refrain, ‘why don’t you hold my hand when crossing the street?’ became a joke that circulated on the internet to describe life before and after marriage.

In *Urz bil-laban li-shakhsayn* [Rice pudding for two], cooking is a metaphor for the expression of love. The recipe for how to make rice pudding is a recipe for how to move beyond differences and grievances and engage in a love relationship:

Put aside everything: your bitterness, sadness, anger, frustrations and all bad thoughts. This recipe requires patience, and a great deal of sudden smiles. Take your time with each step. There is no quick way for making rice pudding... Pour five cups of milk into a transparent glass bowl. Sit down, relaxed, holding the bowl between your palms. This hand-embrace will warm the milk. With much tenderness, pat the bowl. Think happy thoughts. Hum a dreamy song. (Bassam 2008: 12)

The story is full of sensuous details, the smell of cinnamon and vanilla, the songs of Fayruz (the Lebanese singer), the taste of sugar, and the color of the pink bowl, transforming the story into a vivid sensual experience. Again, consistent with the other stories in the collection, it is the small details, the little things in life that define happiness and life.

Ama hathihi fa raqsati ana [This one is my dance] by Ghada Mohamed Mahmoud is the third collection of stories taken from the author’s blog called *Ma’a nafsi* [On my Own].¹⁴ In a short biography, Mahmoud chooses to tell us that she loves chocolate and Fayruz and hates hypocrisy and white beans. Her very short stories explore her ‘self’ by paying attention to small details that constitute what matters in the larger picture. There is an underlying question that runs through most of the stories, namely, what is happiness. In a story entitled *Bahib al-dunya lamma* [I love the world when...] she lists examples of incidents that make her love the world, such as when she is given flowers as a present, or when her mother tickles her, or when she writes unexpectedly well (Mahmoud 2008: 33–35).¹⁵ The point is confirmed in another story, *Bal hiya al-ashya’ al-saghira* [It is the little things (that matter)]. She remembers the precious moments she spent with her father as a child, to visit a bookshop or to buy ice cream, not ‘the big events, *al-abdath al-kabira*, which might have seemed important at the time, but I do not recall any of them no matter how hard I tried’ (Mahmoud 2008: 48). In *Ruba’iyyat al-sabah* [Morning quartets]

¹⁴ <http://ma3nafsi.blogspot.com/>. Accessed 28 September 2008, translations are mine.

¹⁵ All quotations are taken from this edition and translations are mine.

she realizes that the only reason she wakes up early to go to work is the thought of her cup of tea with milk in her office:

the only image that comes to her mind first thing in the morning is that of her red and pink mug, with the steam dancing happily... I rub my hands unconsciously and push away the blanket. My mind does not rest until I have hugged the mug with my cold fingers'. (Mahmoud 2008: 56)

In another story, *Min al-ashya' al-saghira* [Among the little things], the protagonist celebrates the publication of one her short stories in a renowned magazine. In order to make room for her happiness, she makes a decision to forget the larger miserable picture: 'I take off my feet the news bulletins and Arab grief, like a pair of dirty and wet socks' (Mahmoud 2008: 41). She is still visited with a sense of guilt that she is not entitled to the joy she yearns for 'in the midst of this destruction and waste (*kharab*)', but then makes a decision to hold on to happiness and embrace it, because 'who wants to go back to a dirty, wet pair of socks anyway?'. Like Bassam, cooking for her, too, is an act of love (*fi'l hub*) (Mahmoud 2008: 65–66). It is how her mother, her grandmother and other members of her family expressed love and connectedness. It is also one way of relating to her lover. Her search for happiness and understanding of herself is succinctly expressed in the story, *Bayni wa bayni* [Between me and myself] written in the colloquial:

Between me and myself I stand in front of the mirror with my hair straight. I imagine myself holding an electric guitar, striking the wrong cords and humming in harmony...

Between me and myself, I have two green wings...

Between me and myself, I am very tall, taller than the Cairo tower. I see everything clearly, and I laugh silently at the people running underneath.

Between me and myself, I become a little child, waiting for someone to ruffle my hair, give me a large piece of candy, and say don't be scared.

Between you, I am wearing a scarf, have no wings, do not look like a little child, and am not as tall as the tower. (Mahmoud 2008: 62)

The three collections of stories situate the personal center stage. Women's experiences are foregrounded and their perspectives validated in these narratives. There is no opposition between the personal and the political; women's experiences are also integrated in a larger community of selves. The protagonist in Mahmoud's story who is overjoyed at the publication of one of her stories is aware of 'Arab grief', but decides to enjoy her moment of happiness anyway. Bassam's narrator carries a *hatta* as part of her treasured personal items, in *A'maq a'maqi* [The inner depth of my soul], while in *'Alam saghir* [A small world], she identifies the events of 11 September 2001 as the reason for her marriage, and the fall of Baghdad in 2003 as the cause for losing her

job. As the story unfolds, we realize that the ruins of the towers resemble her disintegrating marriage, and her wasted job is similar to the waste of Baghdad (Bassam 2008: 111–115). ‘Abd al-‘Aal’s caricatures of disastrous suitors, while focusing on the eccentric and the idiosyncratic, are also often laden with political satire (such as her derisory remark about the new political elite in the policy committee of the Egyptian National Democratic Party).

Concluding Remarks

Literary blogs are many things at the same time. They are forums for consciousness raising, social transformation and political mobilization. They are diaries, narratives of the self that are no longer locked up in drawers but made available to an audience. They probe the intimate secrets of the self, which is on display, even if under a false name. They are also messages or letters sent out to an imagined virtual audience. In actual fact, literary blogs defy generic classification: they are invariably a *mélange* of diaries, memoirs, autobiographical stories, to-do shopping lists, political manifestos, reflections, epistolary narratives, short stories and novels. Bloggers are no longer concerned about generic distinctions or about abiding by publishing classifications, again in unprecedented ways. The Dar al-Shorouq series, like most of the other series of published blogs, uses the word *mudawwana* (blog) as a form of generic classification, marking the emergence of a new genre in writing.

Conventional distinctions between private and public spaces are blurred, in fact transgressed in virtual spaces. For Arab women, these possibilities have significant implications. Talking about Iranian women bloggers, Amir-Ebrahimi points out that ‘web log writing is absolutely contrary to... traditional cultural attitudes’ (Amir-Ebrahimi 2008: 239) which discourage the disclosure of the self, especially of women’s selves. The same can be said of Arab culture in varying degrees. However, she adds, ‘we live in an era in which “self-advertisement” on the internet via blogging and YouTube is one of the most important aims of internet users’ (ibid).¹⁶ This tension between exposing oneself to public scrutiny, yet enjoying the privacy of one’s room is enabling young Arab women bloggers who belong to this new global era and are breaking cultural taboos by putting themselves out there on a day-to-day basis.

A particularly relevant example of an Arab literary work that is the outcome of the tension of virtual self-advertisement in private spaces is the best-selling

¹⁶ Also see Gholam Khiabany and Annabelle Sreberny, The Politics of/in Blogging in Iran, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27, no. 3 (2007b): 263–279.

novel, *Banat al-Riyadh* [Girls of Riyadh] by the Saudi Raja' al-Sani'. All the chapters in the novel were initially written in the form of email messages that were sent every Friday to internet users in Saudi Arabia. The emails revealed the secret lives of four young upper class Saudi women, shedding light on their dreams of love, their professional aspirations, and the various restrictions of their lives in a highly conservative society. The famous/infamous emails buzzed through Saudi society, instigating extreme reactions: fury and indignation, but also admiration. The novel was published in 2005 and brought al-Sani' immediate fame: it was a best seller in the Arab world, and the English translation,¹⁷ which appeared shortly afterward in 2007, was a resounding success. Despite the endorsement of Ghazi al-Qusaibi (a prominent Saudi writer and diplomat) whose words on the back cover of the Arabic edition describe al-Sani' as an upcoming and talented novelist, the primary attraction of the novel, certainly its marketing punch line, has been its daring exposure of the hidden world of Saudi women.¹⁸ Its place in the Arabic literary tradition remains contentious, even when the novel's shock effect is acknowledged.¹⁹

Cyberspace has certainly encouraged more and more women to write and express themselves. 'Ala' Sayf al-Islam, one of the first political bloggers, whose website is also a blog aggregator, www.manalaaa.net, carried out statistical research on the blogosphere and argued that women are more active bloggers than men: 'At the start, some 70 percent of bloggers were women. Now, they are probably just over 50 percent. The men are catching up' (cited in Otterman 2007: 1). In a television interview, Ghada 'Abd al-'Aal said that the anonymity provided by the internet gave her the courage to write.²⁰ Following the publication of her blog, and the resultant popularity that accompanied it, she now writes a humorous social weekly column in colloquial Egyptian in the newly-established daily newspaper *al-Shorouq*.

The breakdown of the boundaries between private and public in writing is significant if we bear in mind the history of Arab women's access to the literary

¹⁷ Rajaa Alsanea, *Girls of Riyadh*, trans. Marilyn Booth (New York: Penguin Press 2007; London, Penguin Books 2008).

¹⁸ The back cover of the Arabic edition, written by Ghazi al-Qusaibi, emphasizes that the novel exposes the secrets of Saudi women from a particular class that is hidden from view. The back cover of the English edition promises readers 'an unprecedented glimpse into a society often veiled from view'.

¹⁹ Muhsin al-Musawi has maintained that 'informationalization is the contribution that Riyadh Chicks makes to modern Arabic writing, even as it slips below the common in Arabic writing'. He argues that the exposure of conservative ethics is not a novelty in Arabic fiction, that the newness of the novel lies in 'the use of a medium capable of reaching a large public' (2007: 327).

²⁰ Interview with Mona al-Shazli, *al-Ashira masa'an*, Dream TV 2, 11 February 2008.

field, particularly the widespread assumption in literary circles that all women's creative writing is necessarily autobiographical. The pseudo logic behind the assumption reflects social prejudice against women: first, that women's experiences and worldviews were too restricted and hence they are incapable of understanding the wider public sphere; and second, that women's creative imagination is not as developed as men's imagination. Women writers have long contested these claims and have produced work that totally negates them, but the idea was particularly inhibitive for many who found themselves judged on moral grounds if their work touched on taboo topics. In cyberspace, the private/public dichotomy is blurred, making room for creative transgression of old taboos. Blogs, as personal diaries that are made public instantly rather than being stashed away in a drawer, have cracked the protective shell of a somewhat inhibitive obsession with privacy and have enabled many women to take their first steps to the outside world.

The new virtual literary spaces are also attracting new participants and readers. In addition, the relationship between writer and reader, the distance between them, the assumed shared spaces and the mutual expectations are not identical to the relationship between a writer and the reader through the medium of a published literary text. This relationship needs further exploration and must take into account the following factors: in cyberspace the distinction between close friends, acquaintances, and a wider public is blurred. Virtual space allows you to form intimate relationships with people you have never laid eyes on, who may live in another continent, as well as communicate with friends who live down the road. Also, the accessibility and sheer reach of the internet allows for the formation of numerous forums—public spaces that are mushrooming again in unprecedented ways. Several questions arise: what are the consequences of these new relationships for the canons of national literature? What are the implications of the rise of new audiences, hence new literary tastes? To what extent will new cyberspaces lead to the proliferation of more writing on the margin?

I have argued that new literary public spheres necessarily entail the emergence of new voices, new styles and new audiences. The multiplicity of these spaces will potentially disrupt the dominance of mainstream literary circles and is bound to have repercussions on the formation of canons of literature and on conceptions of the 'literary'. Already, the publication of three literary blogs by an established publishing house has triggered widespread controversy. Critic Mohamed 'Abd al-Mutillib described the publication of literary blogs as a 'forgery of the genuine creative process' (quoted in 'Ibada 2008). Miral al-Tahawy argues that these publications respond to a need by the public for 'easy writing' and expressed concern that this type of writing might become a

surrogate for literary production. Sahar al-Mougy, on the other hand, expressed her enthusiasm for this form of writing, and warned against treating all three collections as equal in literary value. She had already written a favorable review of Rihab Bassam's collection, arguing that the stories revealed a mature literary talent (al-Mougy 2008: 13).²¹ The editors of the 'Egyptian Pocket Blogs' maintain that the goal in publishing blogs was to enable the voices of the people to reach different audiences without the mediation of state-run establishments or private businesses. The fact that the blogs were published and appeared in print format raised their profile as powerful cultural products that can compete with traditional literary works, hence attracting critical attention and debate. The collections have certainly been noticed in mainstream literary circles and have heralded the emergence of new literary public spheres.

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²¹ It is worth noting that while Bassam's collection was acknowledged by many literary critics as a valuable contribution to literary production, 'Abd al-'Aal's *Ayza atgawiz*, is the most popular by far, and has been turned into a TV series.

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