

Transcultural Journal of Humanities & Social Sciences

Print ISSN 4239-2636 Online ISSN 4247-2636



An Online Academic Journal of
Interdisciplinary & transcultural topics in Humanities
& social sciences

TJHSS

BUC Press House



Volume 4 Issue (2)

April 2023

Transcultural Journal for Humanities and Social Sciences (TJHSS) is a journal committed to disseminate a new range of interdisciplinary and transcultural topics in Humanities and social sciences. It is an open access, peer reviewed and refereed journal, published by Badr University in Cairo, BUC, to provide original and updated knowledge platform of international scholars interested in multi-inter disciplinary researches in all languages and from the widest range of world cultures. It's an online academic journal that offers print on demand services.

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▣ **Print ISSN**

2636-4239

▣ **Online ISSN**

2636-4247

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Amina El Halawani	Inventing Geographies: The Global South and Brian Friel's "Ballybeg"	8
Samar Sayed Mohamed	The Representation of Trauma in Amy Tan's <i>The Joy Luck Club</i> (1989)	17
Doaa Ibrahim	Cultural Castration and Contra-modernity in "The Lamp of Umm Hashim" by Yehya Haqqi	29
Saudat Salah Abdulbaqi, Sanusi Shehu Janyau, Bashir Amada Ajijola and Sule Musa-Ohiare	Literary, Cultural and Moral Contexts of Arewa24 Television Programmes on Selected Registered Youth Organisations in Nigeria	42
Diaa Elnaggar	Wer hat den ersten emblematischen Stein zum Rollen gebracht? Eine quellengeschichtliche Untersuchung zur Entstehung der literarischen Emblematik	58
Zaki Mohamed zaki abdelrasol	汉语借代、比喻修辞格与阿语相关的辞巧学借代、比喻的对比研究 A comparative study between metonymy and metaphor in Chinese and Arabic	70
Samah Elsaied Ahmed	توظيف العصف الذهني وتدريب الارتفاع لتطوير الأداء التمثيلي للطفل	83

Cultural Castration and Contra-modernity in “The Lamp of Umm Hashim” by Yehya Haqqi

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Abstract: “Cultural Castration and Contra-modernity in ‘The Lamp of Umm Hashim’ (1944) by Yehya Haqqi” attempts to read modernity as portrayed in the above-mentioned classic Egyptian novella. The character development of Isma’il, the protagonist, follows three stages where he starts as a simple villager who knows nothing beyond his neighbourhood. However, when he sets foot in England to study Ophthalmology he violently changes and renounces his old Egyptianess in favour of the modern English model. During this stage his deep-rooted Egyptianess is ‘castrated’. The final stage takes place when he returns to his homeland and fails to apply his exclusively English ways in Egypt. He realizes he has to own the local (Egyptian) and the English (international) methods to succeed in curing his patients. Illness and medicine are used, the paper argues, symbolically to refer to the ailments of the Egyptian culture and ways to cure them. Isma’il is able to devise his own peculiar methods that suit his patients’ local beliefs but run contrary to modern science. In so doing, he is able to create his own ‘modernity’. Or to use Homi K. Bhabha’s term, he is an example of “contra-modernity” where progress is not linear or exclusively western. As is clear from the above exposition, the novella is transcultural, therefore, the paper contextualizes “The Lamp” historically and examines the colonial, cultural and imperial state of Egypt. It concludes that Haqqi uses symbolism to discuss the dilemmas of modernization in Egypt and ways to address them.

Keywords: Modernity, modernization, Anglo-Arab, symbolism

This paper attempts to study the portrayal of modernity and its complexities in the Egyptian colonial context through the novella "قنديل أم هاشم" (1944) by the Egyptian novelist and critic Yahya Haqqi (1905-1992).¹ In his text, the East-West cultural encounter takes center stage and is crystallized in a love relationship between an Egyptian male who is infatuated by the beauty and the promise of the Western female who eventually walks away after leaving a life-long impact on the male partner. The love relationship parallels the power dynamics of the then colonial relationship between Egypt and the Allies. The central themes of love and illness in “The Lamp”, the article argues, could only be read symbolically as manifestations of the intricacies and convolutions of east-west relations and the modernization/ westernization processes taking place in Egypt at the time. Homi K. Bhabha’s postulations on modernity and contra-modernity are employed in this paper as they are essential to the understanding of Haqqi’s representation of the topic in his timeless “The Lamp of Umm Hashim”. The paper considers “The Lamp” an example of hyphenated Anglo-Arab literature as it resides in the crossroads between the English and the Arab rather than in one camp only. As such, the text itself invites a cultural and a comparative reading. Therefore, an in-depth historicization and contextualization of the novella will ensue.

¹The text is translated as "The Lamp of Umm Hasim" by Denys Johnson-Davies and it is this translation that is used in this paper. For short, “The Lamp” will be used to refer to the novella.

Since Egypt was part of the British Empire on whose lands the sun never set from 1882 until 1922 when Egypt was conditionally declared an independent country.¹ It had already gone through the 1919 revolution and was on its way to another major socialist revolution which would take place in 1952 and would shake off all remnants of British intervention in Egypt. Therefore, the Egypt of "The Lamp of Umm Hashim" is an unstable country in the grips of major social and political upheavals. It is also a semi-colonial state in the sense that it has gained partial independence from foreign rule. In short, Egypt was rent with political, financial and cultural tensions and contradictions.

Although Egypt had started the modernization project as far back as Mohamed Ali in 1805, it had not really been modernized enough in all fields of life. In fact, Mohammed Ali came with a personal ambition of creating his own empire with Egypt at its centre, an empire that would be a match for England and France. Egypt started to develop a modern army, establish state schools and bureaucracy, reestablish villages and plan cities along modern lines, etc. The project, however, to use Habermas's phrase, was "incomplete" because concomitant with this modernizing project was a deeply-engrained feeling of alienation for two reasons. First, Egypt had a foreign Western model to emulate. As Klaus-Peter Müller argues, modernity is, in fact,

inseparable from the postcolonial context, because all of its characteristics apply to both the colonial and the postcolonial situations. This is most evident with industrialization, where the Western experience has been the model for the world. To become modern was to become something like Western industrial society, and the new technologies reveal that this process is being repeated. (Hawley 303).

John Esposito, Professor of Religion and International Affairs and of Islamic Studies at Georgetown University further, further explains that "post-enlightenment rationalism and the industrial revolution" were Western phenomena and the changes that came with them, among which was modernity, had occurred within the context of Western history and tradition. In Egypt, "[d]espite the century-long commitment of Egyptian leaders to modernization, reforms imposed from above did not guarantee their acceptance by the vast majority of the people" (Esposito 129). This is because the "institutions of a modern state had been transplanted from the West to a society whose historical experience and values were not the same". The end result was that "[m]odern elites constituted a small fraction of an otherwise tradition-oriented majority. Thus, if modernization is equated with the beliefs, values, and attitudes—with the total world view of a people—Egypt, like most Muslim countries, was not truly a modern (secular oriented) state" (Esposito 129).

Therefore, modernity, a manifestation of western rationalism and industrialization, was "transplanted" (Esposito 129) from the West, where it had naturally developed, to totally foreign lands and different setups. The result was undeveloped, and in many cases, deformed modernities. Unlike their Western counterparts, Arab countries had not gone through long processes and stages of industrialization and modernization.

The second reason for the "incomplete project" of modernization in Egypt goes back to its political status under Mohamed Ali's dynasty which was very complex to the extent that the natives were doubly removed from the ruling class and simultaneously felt

¹ Britain however retained the right to Egypt's foreign affairs and to army bases in Egypt. Needless to say, postcolonial Egypt was still under the cultural, economic and political hegemony of Britain.

an entitlement towards ruling the Sudan. In fact, Egypt was a multi-layered colonial state: it was colonized by the Ottoman Empire which itself fell under the colonization of the British Empire. Meanwhile, Egypt still retained its own imperial ambitions towards the Sudan. Therefore, at a time when Egypt was itself colonized, it wished to colonize. That is why Timothy Mitchell's title Colonizing Egypt could be understood as a pun where it is both colonized and colonizing.

One has to say, nonetheless, that although Egyptians were doubly colonized, and felt resentment against the English and the Ottomans, they felt less resentment against the latter. First, the regular Turkish Ottomans in Egypt settled down and intermarried with the local population so that by time there were no rigid barriers between the two. It is interesting to know that Yahya Haqqi himself was born to Turkish parents and so were Tawfiq Al-Hakim and Ihsan Abdel Quddous whose mothers were of Turkish descent¹. Over and above, the common denominator of religion made the Ottoman domination of Egypt more acceptable than the totally foreign British invasion of Egypt. Still, Egyptians felt resentment and a peculiarly Egyptian nationalist spirit would always surface and show itself in nationalist revolutions and uprisings.

To go back to the modernization project in Egypt and its relation to its slippery colonial state, the modernization project was still incomplete. Or perhaps the modernization project with its dependence on disciplinary power for control is colonial by nature (Mitchell 36) and this helps explain why modernity and colonialism especially are intertwined. Timothy Mitchell comments on the colonial nature of modernization and explains how under a "single Turkish ruling household, that of Muhammad Ali, which acquired authority over Egypt (and increasing independence from Istanbul) after the Napoleonic occupation of 1798–1801," disciplinary power— a modern form of power— made Egyptians feel that they were the "inmates of their villages" (35) since everything was put under surveillance, movements were counted and recorded. For instance, "The reconstruction of the villages of Egypt" (45) was a modernizing project that allowed Egypt to become "readable like a book," its people "enframed" and its wealth and "productive power" (46) calculable —a prerequisite for consolidating power, colonial or otherwise.

Homi K. Bhabha, however, deconstructs this linear understanding of modernity. Bhabha takes issue with the exclusive euro-centric understanding of modernity as purely Western. In his "Conclusion: Race, Time and the Revision of Modernity," he explains modernity's relation to the scramble for Africa. The premodern colonized countries were exploited and made use of through slavery and raw materials, for instance, to modernize and aggrandize the West. On an ideological level too, the premodern colonized society was essential for the self- definition of the Western nation. In fact, modernity will remain an "unfinished project" (244-250)— not because it has not fulfilled its goal of a rational and just society, as Habermas argues— as long as it does not fully acknowledge the role which the non-white man played in bringing about modernity.

Bhabha criticizes this exclusive euro-centric understanding of modernity on yet another ground. It is faultily understood across space and not time. For him the "time-lag" propounded by Franz Fanon is essential to the conceptualization of modernity; it "introduce[s] the question of subaltern agency, into the question of modernity" (244). Instead of a linear modernity, Bhabha postulates that rather than refuting this time-lag,

¹ The grandmother of the researcher herself was born to a Turkish mother.

postcolonial societies should use it creatively to project their own views. Bart Moore Gilbert rightly comments that such a post-colonial *contra-modernity*, proposed by Bhabha, keeps Western modernity "open by means of a disjunctive temporality through which new sites, 'times' and kinds of enunciation are possible for the formerly colonized in the contemporary period" (Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics 124).

In this regard, it is of great significance to note that Haqqi wrote his novella in response to the then popular revolution undertaken by Mustafa Kamel Atatürk in 1924 to modernize and secularize Turkey by a stroke of the hand, forcefully and completely. Haqqi witnessed the effects of this revolution first-hand during his stay in Turkey from 1930 to 1934. Atatürk's policy attempted to efface any Arab-Islamic influence to the extent that he substituted Arabic for Latin alphabets and minimized the influence of Arabic words in the Turkish language. This 1928 reform "ostensibly designed to facilitate the acquisition of literacy (and it is true that Ottoman is very difficult to learn) . . . also had the effect of cutting the new generation off from most of its literary past. (Walter F. Weiker 2). He took to even more radical nationalist and secularist reforms when he mandated the call to prayer be made in Turkish, not the traditional Arabic: "although resistance to these measures was sternly suppressed, traditional religious feelings remained strong among much of the populace" (2). Atatürk who abolished the Caliphate became the President of the Republic and he "set out to turn Turkey's face toward the modern West. New civil, commercial, and penal codes based on European models were adopted. The Western calendar, style of dress, and other such symbols were introduced" (2).

In his "introduction" to "The Lamp of Umm Hashim" (9-21), the well-known Egyptian critic and journalist Ragaa Al-Naqash (1934- 2008) describes how calls for modernization in Egypt and Lebanon believed that the same methods undertaken by Atatürk should be applied in the Arab world. On the other spectrum, there were those who totally refused and demonized Western culture. In this context, Yahya Haqqi wrote "The Lamp " where he explores whether it is possible, desirable, advisable and/ or natural to modernize along a strictly Western model and whether change and reform should be forced and effected overnight. The golden mean which Haqqi seems to believe in was not very popular, then, nor was Haqqi himself, as Al-Naqash makes clear. But his work was acclaimed by the intelligentsia, and this was how it found its way to popularity and into the film industry where it was made into a very successful film in 1968.

The historical and cultural contexts of the text under examination are, thus, those of friction, confrontation between western superpowers and a struggling nascent modern Egypt. It is very intriguing, therefore, to find that the overarching framework of the literary text in question is love between an Egyptian male and a European female and not confrontation between them. In "The Lamp", the male is deferential before his English lady. However, this love encounter is fraught with tension where the western woman is hegemonic over the "culturally castrated" Egyptian man. I call it 'cultural castration' because the Egyptian protagonist, Isma'il, experiences severe distrust and hatred of native beliefs and practices so much so that he renounces his older self and culture and even his family while abroad. His old world falls apart. This renunciation is so violent and disabling that, metaphorically speaking, it resembles castration— a cutting away of an essential part of male testicles—to fit in the new society which might make them function better under the new pressures of the western community but invariably causes them existential pain. This castration is not enough. In addition to this renunciation of the older self, our Egyptian protagonist attempts to become a replica of 'western' and 'modern'

teachings and values of his love-interest—Mary. Similar to another biological process, Isma'il, like a snake, sheds his skin in pain and torment and drapes himself in western logic and modern philosophy.

However, the story of Isma'il does not stop here. When he returns to Egypt once more, he feels himself at a tumultuous sea and the world falls apart another time. In fact, it takes Isma'il a trip back to Egypt and a conflict with family, society and tradition as well as depression to retrieve faith in his 'pre-modern' indigenous self and culture and hence, the formulation, at the end of the novella, of a personal paradigm, which is a mixture of modern and premodern, East and West, native and European.

In "The Lamp of Umm Hashim," Isma'il leads two opposite lives in Egypt and in England. In Egypt, he is the centre of his family's attention and all hopes are placed on him: if only he could become a respected doctor, he would snatch his whole family from poverty and ignorance. Consequently, "while still a lad he came to be called Mr. Ismail or Ismail Effendi, and was ... given the best of food and fruits" (47) and his every wish was granted; if he "sat down to study, the father ... would lower his voice to a whisper ... while his mother walked about on tip-toe, and even his orphan cousin Fatima al-Nabawiya learned how to stop her chattering and to sit silently in front of him like a slave-girl before her master" (47).

In stark contrast, in England Isma'il is evidently not an "effendi", or a socially superior person. In fact, Mary takes the lead even "when she had given herself to him, it was she who had deprived him of his virginal innocence" (65). Contrary to the traditional portrayal of male virility smashing feminine purity; Isma'il in England is the weaker, receptive side.¹

Not only sexually, but also intellectually Isma'il is subservient to the English Mary. She becomes his teacher and she introduces him to life in England where he would "sit before her like a disciple before his master" (67). But her teachings stand in stark contrast to his native beliefs so much so that his "soul would moan and cringe under the blows of her axe" (66). But he has no other choice as she is his way to adaptation to the widely different English culture. He lives off Mary's modern, western and materialist philosophies until he is finally weaned by her. In her presence, the couple enjoys each other's company and paralleling the hegemony of Britain over Egypt, Mary is hegemonic over Ismail who, unlike Egypt however, is willingly submissive to her teachings. This submissiveness "castrates" him culturally to the point that he consciously renounces everything Arab, Egyptian or Islamic along with his own native Egyptian self and supplants them with a reinvented *Dr Isma'il* who after *seven* years in England comes back with, not merely a doctorate degree and testimonials from English universities to his "singular distinction and rare brilliance" (62), but more importantly, with a different mindset reflected in a changed upright posture and confident comportment. Number seven, traditionally and universally, has a supernatural and magical aura around it and the seven years in the West have undeniably done their magic on Isma'il.

¹ This exchange of roles is crucial in 'Anglo-Arab' literature spanning both geographical areas because in later literary narratives the Arab male will reassume his masculine role and, in many cases, will take it to extremes. A case in point is al-Tayeb Saleh's *Season of Migration to The North* where Mostafa writes back to the English colonial self in his own manner through sexually 'conquering' English females.

In fact, it is interesting to draw a contrast between Ismail when he first leaves Egypt and when he comes back seven years later. On board the ship that would take him to England, Ismail is a paunchy “young man but with the gravity of a Sheikh, slow-moving, staid, a little naive” who feels one with the people around him where he is “like a drop of rain that is swallowed up by the ocean” (52) of the crowds around him. However, after seven years spanned by just one single page in the novella, he becomes a visibly taller person than he was before setting foot in England; now he has a taut body, a head lifted, a “radiant face” going “down the gangway in leaps and bounds” (62). The ocean of people he felt at peace among are now perceived by him as “hordes of people” that are more like “dead limbs weighing down on his chest, stifling him, tearing at his nerves” (77).

His seven years of travel away from Egypt have blinded him to the beauty of his homeland and have built a psychological barrier between him, his people and even his family. Ismail, who experiences a cultural shock on coming back home, is repulsed by the dirt, illiteracy, ignorance and superstition rife in the Egyptian society. Undeniably, the modernization project in Egypt is ‘incomplete’. Now, he looks down upon his countrymen and sees them, just as a typical orientalist would do, an “uncouth, garrulous race, scurfy and sore-eyed, naked and barefoot, with blood in its urine and worms in its excrement” (76). Egyptians, he says, are “not living creatures existing in an age when even inanimate objects moved” (75). He cannot accept his motherland, not even his mother at that. He is so engrossed in his English world that he cannot help himself from “thoughts of comparison and disparagement” (72). As Eurocentric as any local English individual would be, his benchmark is now the West. Mary renounces spirituality and kindness, so does he. Mary prizes practicality and expediency, so is the case with him. Mary is the new woman with an unstoppable free spirit, a truly individualistic, self-dependent English citizen and so should all women be. Even his mother falls under his screening eyes and is seen by him as only a “mass of passive goodness,” “stripped of all personality” (71). In comparison to Mary, his illiterate stay-at-home and superstitious mother must be lacking and good for nothing; she cannot match up with her western counterparts. Although a few pages back, the narrator praises this “naïve goodness” which raises her to the level of angels and exclaims “how hateful and ugly the world would be were it to be devoid of such submission, such faith” (49). In the same manner, Isma’il’s cousin, with her “two plaits of hair, her cheap glass bracelets, her movements, and everything about her proclaimed that she was a peasant girl from the depths of the countryside. Was this the girl he was going to marry” (72)? Needless to say, the balance is tipped in favour of the English side.

In fact, this renunciation of the older culture and identity and the consequent reinvention of a new westernized self were policies of adaptation followed by many Egyptian students who went to pursue their studies in the developed West; they were held captive to the illumination they received in the enlightened modern West and came back to their homes dissatisfied with the old and worn-out traditions and myths that held Egypt back from modernizing itself. In the same vein, our protagonist is full of rage, and rightly so, at his people’s superstitions and ignorance which make of each possible good trait a curse. Thus, “acceptance” in them is “mere incompetence”, their “goodness stupidity” their “patience cowardice” their “gaiety degeneracy” (76). To top it all off, he, the acclaimed eye doctor back from England, “the foreign parts (57),” witnesses an ugly superstition practiced by his *own* mother in his *own* house on *his* cousin Fatma to ‘cure’ her from an eye-illness she suffers from the very day he returns. His mother applies oil from the saint’s lamp to the eyes of Fatma! He raves like a mad man at his mother and breaks the glass of oil. He is driven mad by this swamp of ‘medieval’ superstition and

ignorance and spends his anger on the Saint's Lamp itself breaking it into pieces in the mosque in front of its disciples reiterating "I" "I". Is this a solipsistic "I" incapable of relating to its world? He, then, assiduously practices modern medicine on Fatma, certain of success. The anti-climax comes when he fails and is shocked to have failed in curing this eye disease in Egypt, though he has cured many similar cases in England. Even medicine seems to be mutable and local.

The fact that Dr. Isma'il is an ophthalmologist is quite suggestive. As his English professor tells him: "your country needs you as it is the country of the blind (49)," a clear resonance with H. G. Wells "The Country of the Blind" (1904). However, who exactly is blind here? Is it Ismail who is blinded by the splendor of western civilization? Or is it Fatma and, by extension, all Egyptian rustic people who are blinded by ignorance?

As his professor suggests, Isma'il is on a national mission. He has studied in the developed West and has sipped from its sciences and illumination to go back to snatch his illiterate people from drowning into oceans of ignorance. In this light, J. G. Bell reads Ismail's destiny as an "modern Egyptian myth" (Bell 67) where the protagonist follows Joseph Campbell's monomyth of initial separation from his everyday people and life, sets out on a life-changing adventure (full of hard-won contests and battles) and back to his old town to rescue through yet other struggles.

Thus, the erudite doctor is a messenger from the English west (the colonizer at the time) to the Oriental Egypt (the colonized) to illumine their way which is quite paradoxical since the English themselves were there in Egypt and could have effected this change had they wished. To complicate matters more, his professor insists that his rare excellence has been handed down to him by his great ancestors, the Pharaohs. He insists: "I bet the spirit of some pharaonic doctor priest has materialized in you" (62). Does this mean, then, that Ismail's outstanding distinction springs from within *his* very distinctly Egyptian self which he so erroneously tries to efface? Is it a gift peculiarly engraved in *his* history and lineage, running in *his* blood and veins which just needs some brushing to reshine? The professor sees

knowledge in [Isma'il] as though instinctual, and a clarity of vision that [is] descended from the maturity of long generations, and a nimbleness in his fingers that [has] been inherited from the same hands that [have] carved from solid stone effigies that [are] almost alive" (62).

Are his attempts to wipe off his nativity, therefore, futile and counter-productive? If so, then, Haqqi consciously points to the cracks in western modernity and understands modern progress not as linear nor as exclusively western. Rather, in a Bhabha-like fashion, he invests in the time-lag between modern and pre-modern societies and uses the resulting "disjunctive temporality" to enunciate the local version of history and achievement (Gilbert 124).

In fact, there is a sub-text that reinforces the idea that material progress and scientific data is not all there is. There are unseen forces that rest behind the material world and they are of much greater purport than the actual presence of things, people or even dry scientific knowledge. This subtext runs contrary to the well-established scientific and materialist tradition portrayed in Isma'il's encounter with the West. There are other factors that are not so material. The instinctual knowledge which makes Isma'il excel over his non-Egyptian colleagues is a case in point. That is why the language in this part of the novella on his excellence as an eye doctor is impersonal. The voice that

narrates this part assumes the role of destiny and carries the weight of some supernatural force— be it the soul of history, geography or destiny. This voice calls upon Isma'il to “come along for we are looking forward to having you back. For seven years that have passed like centuries we have not seen you” (62). And the magical ‘seven’ reappears here. Another example for the immaterial subtext of this novella is the ‘soul’ of the quarter of Sayyeda Zeinab. The attempts at modernizing the quarter has led the “heavy axe of the town-planning department” (46) to demolish the Alley of the Ablution Lane along with other Cairo landmarks. Nonetheless, “while the axe wrought its will, the soul of the square escaped unscathed, for the axe was able to wipe out and destroy only those things that were of brick and stone” (46). The soul of the quarter with its native traditions, even if these are distorted and ignorant, is timeless and ever-present.

In contrast to the benign spirits of the knowing Pharaohs and the protecting souls of the quarter of Sayyeda Zeinab, there is another diametrically opposed evil spirit deemed devilish by the simple rustic people of Isma'il. When his father decides to send him off to learn in Europe— the phrase “foreign parts” (57)— “ [creeps] its way, like a cryptic spirit, into the house” (57) and later when Ismae'l returns home after seven years in Europe, it is a “strange spirit that [has] come to [the house] from across the seas” (74). This subtext of unseen but powerful forces of history and beliefs sheds light on the binary oppositions drawn between Egypt and England which are so central to this novella. If contemporary Egypt is stagnant and its people are “empty relics like the stumps of pedestals of ruined columns”, England is the present and the future. If contemporary Egypt stands for ignorance and superstition where people “live in a world of fables and believe in idols and make pilgrimages to graves and seek refuge with the dead” (77), England prizes thought and intellect and makes “prayers to science and logic” (69). If contemporary Egyptians lack individualism and are mere “multitudes of people (75),” in England the individual is encouraged to “detach [himself] from crowds and from confronting them; to immerse oneself in them is a weakness spelling disaster” (67). However, there is another side to the story, Egyptians prize family bonds, human relations, traditions and the needs of the soul to connect to a higher power. By contrast, England tramples over the soul and prizes self-interest. Mary, who is employed by Haqqi to summarize Ismail's cultural encounter with England, argues him into leaving behind “these oriental sentiments” (66) of charity which are “despicable and disgusting, because they are not practical or productive. If divested of usefulness, they can be labeled only as weak and contemptible” (66).

If the novella stopped at drawing these contrasts or even went one step further showing the beauty and ugliness in each, then it would not have differed greatly from any orientalist text written by the hand of a privileged male (just back) from the West enchanted by its splendor or an Egyptian defending his country. It would have failed to depict the rich and multi-faceted essence of such cultural encounters. What Haqqi does is explore the fissures within these overarching and generalized binary oppositions. Therefore, if Egypt is of the past and stands in stark contrast to the modern west, its undead pharaonic spirit steals its way through lineage and heredity to the modern Egyptian Isma'il as can be seen in the nimbleness of his fingers inherited from the ancient Pharaohs. If ignorance is rife, there is knowledge of another kind even in the most impoverished parts of Egypt. Perhaps this knowledge is not mental or scientific as in Europe but is instinctual and inherited. When science stands “feeble and dumb” (83) in front of Fatima's case, this signals a turning point in the narrative and isma'il begins to realize that modern medical progress might not be able to solve all ailments, it “[has] no answer to *his* question” (my italics 83). He, then, stops viewing Egypt from an ivory

tower with a judging eye, comparing it to a fixed England that could not go wrong. Instead, he starts to appreciate Egyptians for who they are, for the fact that they have “retained their distinctive character and temperament despite the vicissitudes of the times and the change of rulers” (83) and despite their “misery” and the “shackles of servility and oppression” (75)¹, meekly referring to the political and colonial abuse of power in Egypt at the time. Instead of lack of individuality, now he sees Egyptians as a “whole people united together by a common bond, a sort of faith, the fruit of a close association with time and a long process of maturity (84). The oneness and wholeness he finds among Egyptians have a positive impact on him and instead of the angst he felt in England, he now feels “solid ground under his feet” (83). What Isma’il is capable of doing here is to sift through and devise a new outlook for himself. He is neither an outsider who can distance himself from his people and his land, nor is he a rural Egyptian who knows nothing but the quarter of Sayyeda Zeinab.

Isma’il is a rich amalgam of Egyptianness; he is an Egyptian rural man of science who has lived and studied abroad and, therefore, expresses his individuality in a totally new way. He realizes that perhaps he should take individualism to new heights and rebel even against the uniformity of Western science. His individuality as an Egyptian doctor allows him to break the rules of science so much so that the methods he invents

would have left a European doctor aghast. He held closely to the spirit and basic principles of the science of medicine and abandoned all extremes of treatment and instruments. He relied first and foremost upon God, then on his knowledge and the skill of his hands—and God blessed his learning and his skill (87).

Thus, surprisingly, things do not turn out the way Ismail’s English professor prophesizes. Ismail with his doctorate degree and years of medical and practical experience in England cannot not save himself or help the Egyptians in any meaningful manner. Rather, in the fashion of Nunez—Well’s protagonist in “The Country of the Blind”—Ismail’s ‘foreign’ knowledge is unappreciated by the Egyptians as much as Nunez sight is unappreciated by the blind of the valley. And just as Nunez has full faith in his eyesight, Ismail has ‘blind’ faith in modern western science so much so that he tries to force it on his people to the extent that he smashes the Saint’s lamp, what in the story stands for native tradition and local values, in front of its disciples.

In fact, Western lore alone destroys Isma’il and his family. Unaided by faith and by native practices, Isma’il fails to cure his cousin and wife-to-be. Paradoxically, the science he has learnt in England blinds Fatma completely. After days of shock and self-denial, he is suddenly enlightened at the cause of his failure: “there is no knowledge without faith” (84). Ismail comes to this epiphany when he realizes that Egypt has its own historical and cultural specificity where Western science and lore are not the only valid truths. He cannot blindly apply the western model delineated by Mary elsewhere. Egypt, though in a world where borders are beginning to dissolve, still retains its uniqueness. Henceforth, he becomes a peculiar synthesis between Egyptian local culture and faith and English science. It is only when he fuses modern science with premodern practices and western ideas with native beliefs that he successfully cures Fatma and all his other Egyptian patients, and hence, his positive impact on his “sphere of influence”.

¹ Haqqi’s language is highly influenced by the Qura’n and the phrase "ضربت عليهم المسكنة" is taken verbatim from the Qura’n.

More importantly, Ismail finally realizes that western science, one of the basic foundations of modern western civilization, is not an unerring, immutable god— self-sufficient and complete. Local lore and native traditions could and should complement it. In fact, it is best to read the novella symbolically and not literally since the oil Haqqi allows Ismail to use in curing his patients cannot be used to cure eyes. In fact, Haqqi from the first page makes it clear that calling upon Zeinab, the Saint, who is now dead is idolatrous and irreligious and is only a cultural rite and a traditional ritual practiced by the poor and the ignorant. On the first page, the narrator writes:

If their action was witnessed by one of the self-righteous men of religion, he would turn his face away in indignation at the times and would invoke God's aid against idolatory, ignorance, and such heresies. As for most people, they would simply smile at the naivety of these country folk, with the smell of milk, mud and fnugreek emanating from their clothes; they would understand in their hearts the warmth of these people's longing and veneration for the place they were visiting 46

That is why the Egyptian movie based on the novella twists the plot to appeal to the common sense of the general viewer. Thus, instead of the concoction of medicine and oil Isma'il of the novella devises to cure Fatma, Ismail— in the movie— only tricks Fatma into believing that he is using the oil to put her mind at rest and win her trust back. The oil of the Saint's Lamp, therefore, is used only in its capacity as a symbol for native values and local traditions.

That being so, the employment of the Saint's 'blessed' oil in this capacity should be read symbolically. Otherwise, the novella's consistency and homogeneity could be easily questioned and the beauty of the narrative could go unappreciated. When the significance of the 'blessed' oil is read symbolically as a reference to native traditions and their role in the East-West encounter, the novella's ending becomes predictable and logical and, therefore, accessible to the 'modern' reader.¹ Instead of Hutchinson's belief in the inevitable clash of civilizations, Haqqi, through the employment of the oil, proposes another maxim: a space of re-negotiation, a "third space," to use Homi k. Bhabha's term, which is neither totally nativistic, nor completely westernized and modernized. In Bell's words, Ismail succeeds in effecting a "reconciliation of the "elixirs" of the two worlds" (Bell 82).

Ismail has finally developed his own 'contra-modernity' in a postmodern fashion which deconstructs even science and scientific methods and makes them subject to fluidity. Indeed, the conclusion of the novella might be deemed sudden, impractical or

¹ In fact, what has inspired the author to undertake such research was her experience teaching "The Lamp of Umm Hashim" along other texts to students of Comparative literature at Alexandria University where she always found students very disappointed with their first readings of the text due to a deep dissatisfaction with the ending which is intricately related to the theme of illness. The portrayal of blindness in "The Lamp" carries a heavy symbolic meaning and profoundly influences the main character even if it does not afflict him personally. If disease is read away from its symbolic significance, the ending is read, at best, as anti-climactic or worse, as a failure on the part of the author to give a coherent conclusion to the development of the narrative. In fact, physical illness seems to be a manifestation of the grueling and psychologically traumatic east-west encounters portrayed in the text. That is why this paper attempts to place the illness and love themes of the text in light of the bigger narrative of East-West colonial encounters.

unrealistic— for example, this oil could not be used medically¹. But it seems that Haqqi, on purpose, does not make a neat marriage between both cultures. It is rather a synthesis that juxtaposes dissonances and irreconcilable contrasts. He marries Fatma whom he has once felt unequal to the English women he knew but he is adamant on, in a “Pygmalian relationship” (Bell 83) fashion, to teach her refinement and good taste. He becomes a successful doctor by a strange combination between the "spirit of modern medicine" (Bell 83) and the way of local instruments. He, contrary to Mary's advice, lives to help the needy and the poor and instead of pulling him down, as Mary thought they would in England,² they help him live a satisfying life.

Ismail ends up a citizen of this modern globalized world with its hybrid cultures. In the last scene, he is neither the faultless westernized hero who is body and mind infallible, nor is he a defeated or frustrated good-for-nothing anti-hero. Ismail, in the final scene takes us back from the symbolism of the novella to the realities of our lived world. He is “fully human, fallible and entirely believable” (Bell 86).

¹ This is a common objection I hear from many students reading the text. In fact, the inclusion of this superstition in medicine by Isma'il prevents them from connecting to the text and comprehending its purport. Only when read symbolically does it start to make sense.

² When he was in England, Mary noticed that he preferred to cure the poor and sympathize with them. She advised him against this saying that "you are not the Messiah, the son of Mary. He who seeks the disposition of angels is overwhelmed by the disposition of beasts" (66)

The protagonist of “The Lamp” strikes a balance, to the best of his abilities, between his two possible worlds: England and Egypt. He is no longer the "lonesome villager in the city" (61) whom we have met at the beginning of the story, unscathed by modernity, nor is he the Anglicized Ismail we see in England. He is simply an Egyptian who has lived in an antithetically different culture from his own which has influenced him so much that he decides to channel this influence in a way that could harbour the native and foreign worlds he has been exposed to. His character development could be understood along the lines of a contra-modernity which would debate, negotiate, be discontinuous with but also contingent on the modernity of Western Europe. Likewise, Egypt is a country in constant relation to, friction with and dependence on the global modernized world of today. It cannot live in isolation, nor can it be fully assimilated into a hegemonic culture; it will retain its cultural specificity in this increasingly dynamic and open world. Therefore, Haqqi’s text refuses to portray modernization as a linear progression from backwardness to prosperity and well-being. History is not progressive nor is the world neatly divided into a backward East and a developed West. Instead, Egypt is both backward and progressive and so is England. The wise fusion of both worlds is the key

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