



## Reimagining Jewish Egyptian Experience: A Study of Moatz Fteha's *The Last Jews of Alexandria*

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### Abstract:

This article examines the treatment of Jewish Egyptian experience in *The Last Jews of Alexandria* (2008), a novel written by Moatz Fteha, a contemporary Egyptian author. Fteha is one of the few Egyptian writers who shamelessly throws off the chains of the past in an effort to present his own version of the Jewish experience in Egypt, hence making a notable contribution to an understanding of that experience. The novel contributes to our understanding of the Jewish Egyptian experience from 1941 to 1954. It focuses on the uniqueness of that experience that describes the unity of people and place. The Haddad family members, like the ancient trees on the street they live on, are deeply rooted in the soil of the Egyptian land where people are not judged by their skin color or by the religion they embrace. Only after the Arab-Israeli conflict did the boughs of this Jewish tree start to crack, and the whole Egyptian experience start to deteriorate.

\*All English translations from Fteha's Arabic text and Bakathir's play are my own.

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“I am Jewish because I am Egyptian.  
I am Egyptian because I am Jewish.”  
Jacques Hassoun

## Introduction:

Prior to the Arab-Israeli conflict that started with the creation of the Jewish state in 1948, Arab Jews established themselves not only as an integral part of Arab society but also as a vital and sparkling part of its culture and lifestyle. Jewish Egyptians, for instance, lived in harmony and peace with the rest of the population, identifying themselves as native Egyptians. Israel-Pelletier asserts that "Egyptian Jews are connected to Egypt by ties as ancient and enduring as Judaism itself" (Israel-Pelletier 4). A similar but more exciting experience develops in Iraq, given the diversity of ethnic and religious groups such as "Arabs, Kurds and Turcomans, Assyrian and Aramean Christians, and Yazidis" (Beinin xi). According to the prominent Jewish Iraqi figure Sassoon Heskell, "Jews regard themselves as Iraqis and do not claim any minority rights" (qtd. in Schlaepfer 225). It could persuasively be argued that Arab Jews enjoyed a sort of freedom and independence that their Western counterparts lacked. In the West, Jews were profoundly prejudiced against and excluded simply as "Other." Clearly, the Jewish Western experience represents a history of suffering, marginality, humiliation, and loss. As Muriel Rukeyser succinctly puts it: "To be a Jew in the twentieth century/ Is to be offered a gift. If you refuse/ Wishing to be invisible, you choose/ Death of the spirit, the stone insanity" (Rukeyser 65).

However, the idealized image emphasizing the harmonious relationships between the Jews and Arabs was profoundly affected by the Arab-Israeli conflict that started with the Zionist movement that openly declared its wish to secure a homeland for the Jews in Palestine, and reached its apex with the establishment of the Jewish state in Palestine in 1948. As for Egyptians, the Six Day War of 1967 in which Israel took control of the Sinai Peninsula was a major turning point in the relationship between Egyptians and their fellow Egyptian Jews who came to be widely viewed as enemies. This study examines the treatment of the Jewish Egyptian experience in *The Last Jews of Alexandria* (2008), a novel written by Moatz Fteha, a contemporary Egyptian author. Fteha is one of the few Egyptian writers who shamelessly throws off the chains of the past in an effort to present his own version of the Jewish experience in Egypt, hence making a notable contribution to an understanding of that experience.

## Historical Context:

### 1. Stereotypical Representations of the Jews

From the beginning of the Arab-Israeli conflict, Egyptian writers showed interest in and sympathy for the plight of their innocent Palestinian brothers. These writers can be generally divided into two identifiable groups: the earlier writers who, following in the footsteps of the sixteenth-century English playwrights like Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare, presented stereotypical and offensive portraits of the Jews, and the younger generation of contemporary Egyptian writers, such as Moatz Fteha, who called for a modern evaluation and analysis of Jewish Egyptian experience as a whole. Among the texts dedicated to the stereotypical representations of the Jews are Ali Ahmad Bakathir's play *The New Shylock* (1944); Naguib al-Kilani's novel *The Jewish Quarter: The Blood of Zion's Unleavened Bread* (1971); Ihsan Abdel Quddous' novel *Don't Leave Me Here Alone* (1979); and Fathi Ghanem's novel *Ahmad and David* (1989); Indeed, these textbooks relentlessly portray the Jews as monstrous, villainous, manipulative, greedy, and cunning people who are willing to sacrifice everything for the sake of personal gain.

Although these negative views continue to shape Egyptians' contemporary understanding of the Jews, it is fair to say that early writings, such as Ali Ahmad Bakathir's *the New Shylock* (titled *Shylock Aljadeed* in Arabic), were not intended to distort the image of the entire Jewish people. Rather, they

focused almost exclusively on Machiavellian or opportunist Zionists who practiced unspeakable cruelty against Palestinians in order to establish a Jewish state in their country. For Bakathir's Shylock, an active Zionist in Palestine, the Jews are determined "to take a pound of flesh (Palestine) from the Arabs' body" (Bakathir 155).

Shylock's position, however, was frowned upon by many anti-Zionist Jews who insist that Shylock and his passionate supporters "will not be able to take a pound of flesh from the Arab body until they shed too much blood in the process" (Bakathir 151). For Abraham, Shylock lies to his people "because the wisest of the Jews disagree with the ideas and actions of Zionism and see them as a threat to the future of the Jewish people" (Bakathir 153). Besides, Mikhail, a Palestinian nationalist, cannot understand what has brought Jewish Palestinians like Shylock to that point, wondering what Shakespeare would have done if he had seen or known those new Jews. In Mikhail's view, while Shylock's enmity toward Antonio is justifiable because it is fueled by an ideological or religious conflict over the morality of usury, the new Shylocks' deep-seated hatred for the Arabs is not justifiable. As Mikhail explains,

As for us Arabs, we did not prevent the Jews from reaching their commercial and usurious gains by any means possible; we did not persecute them, and we did not spit upon them. Instead, we sheltered them when the entire world was oppressing and chasing them. Furthermore, we opened both our hearts as well as our countries to them. Like us, they were getting their fair share of the profits, occupying leadership positions in government and industry: some of them served as government ministers and members of Parliament; history is the real witness in this regard. Yet, Zionism came into being, and it did not hesitate to demand a pound of flesh from the body of this noble people. (Bakathir 157)

Not surprisingly, the Jews per se are not the enemies of Arabs; rather, the enemies are the Jews that sympathize with the Zionist tradition. For this reason, Egyptian authors who belong to the first group have created characters that reflect the experiences of the non-Arab Jews who arrived in Palestine in the early twentieth century.

## **2. Positive Portrayal of Egyptian Jews:**

In the wake of the peace treaty with Israel in 1979, the political and intellectual climate in Egypt has changed, making it possible for a new generation of young authors to offer a reinterpretation of the Jewish Experience in Egypt. From the 1980's onward, Egyptian literature witnessed the emergence of a group of promising young writers, particularly the Alexandrian novelists Amr Afia, Moatz Fteha and Mustafa Nasr, who, inspired by the cosmopolitan history of Alexandria, adopt a multicultural, cosmopolitan orientation. For the first time in Egyptian literature, we see a deliberate reversal of the dominant image of the Jew as a fanatic Zionist.

### ***The Last Jews of Alexandria: Exploring the Jewish Egyptian Experience***

Moatz Fteha's *The Last Jews of Alexandria* (2008) represents this particular shift that goes beyond the common perception of the Jewish character. Fteha was born in Alexandria in 1987. He attended Canadian International College to study engineering, and then he began his multifaceted creative career as a scriptwriter, film director, and fiction writer. In 2008, he published his first novel, *The Last Jews of Alexandria* (titled *Akhir Yahud Al-Iskandariyya* in Arabic). The setting Fteha uses for his novel is Alexandria, a locale that emphasizes the cosmopolitan way of life associated with Alexandria's history. In his novel Fteha reimagines the Alexandrian tradition to explore and investigate the Jewish Egyptian experience, seeking to capture the unique flavor of Jewish life in Alexandria from 1941 to 1954. In an attempt to dramatize this unique experience, Fteha seems to oppose the idea of Du Bois' "double consciousness" which describes a fragmented sense of self in a racist African-American society. As Du Bois argues: "One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two

thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (Du Bois 8). This tragic split between the "two souls" does not apply to Yusuf, the novel's protagonist, simply because he is, after all, Egyptian by birth, love, and loyalty. Moreover, he lives in a city where there are no manifestations of discrimination, racism, or exclusion that can eventually force him to live with "two souls": one rooted in ancestral Jewish tradition, and the other struggling to settle comfortably in an adopted homeland. Grumberg emphasizes that "the fragmentation of self...results from the inability to conform to the unifying ethos of the state" (Grumberg 6). This was certainly not the case with the Egyptian Jews.

*The Last Jews of Alexandria* opens with the seventy-year-old protagonist, Yusuf Haddad, coming back to Alexandria in 1999, a cyclical return that lasted for 57 years. When he arrives at Cecil Hotel, he realizes that the Alexandria he had left in 1954 is totally different from the Alexandria that he is now seeing. In a series of flashbacks that cover the years 1941 to 1999, the second section opens in 1941 on a Sunday morning with fifty-year-old Hakim Beh Haddad, Yusuf's father, on his way to his jewelry store. Observant of Jewish religious tradition, Haddad is reluctant to go to work on Saturdays being a Jewish holiday. As the narrator observes, Although Sunday is a regular holiday and all the shops on Saad Zaghloul Street adjacent to Muhammad Ali Square in downtown Alexandria are locked, Mr. Hakim Bey Haddad is on his way to his jewelry store because his Judaism prevents him from working on the Holy Saturday. (Fteha 8) Significantly, Haddad maintains a sense of belonging to a culture that allows him to practice Jewish rituals freely and without reservation.

If almost all of the Jewish characters in classic Egyptian fiction are defined by their Jewishness or faith and ghettoized by it, the main characters in Fteha's novel are defined by both birth and faith; they are real Egyptians living the eventful Egyptian life socially, economically, and intellectually. Haddad's "dark complexion," common to almost all Egyptians, serves as a reminder that he has deep roots in the soil of Egypt. Haddad is a widower with three children—Isaac, Irina, and Yusuf. His forty-year-old wife, Mada, died after giving birth to her third child, Yusuf. As is typical of the lives of many Egyptian widowers, Haddad spends his life mourning the loss of his dutiful wife, and even doing penance as if responsible for her death. It is interesting to note that he helps Yusuf, an orphan, establish an emotional bond with his dead mother. As the narrator explains: "Hakim was accustomed to taking his youngest son, Yusuf, to a weekly visit to the grave of the deceased mother at Ashatby Jewish cemetery" (Fteha 10).

Because religion plays a major role in mainstream Egyptian life, Haddad arranges for his children to attend "Saturday School affiliated with Eliahu Hanavi Synagogue located in Nabi Daniel Street" (Fteha 10). It is at this Jewish day school that Haddad's children are exposed to Judaism. Meanwhile, Jewish teaching whose goal is to create a successful Jewish community does not replace public schooling that instills in the children a sense of national identity and connection to the whole society. In other words, the public school becomes the natural meeting place for all the residents of the highly diverse Alexandria, thus strengthening the common bonds between different cultures. According to the narrator, "Alexandria may have been one of the few places in the world that embraced people from various nationalities, religions, and denominations" coexisting peacefully (Fteha 86). Not surprisingly, the narrator's stance echoes the words of the Egyptian-born Jewish writer Yitzhak Gormezano Goren's description of Alexandria in *Alexandrian Summer* when he underscores that in Alexandria one can hear a name that "could be Greek or Turkish or Italian or Maltese or Armenian, or French or British or even American. Alexandria is the center of the world, a cosmopolitan city" (Goren 2).

In his portrayal of Jewish characters, Fteha enriches Egyptian literature with an unprecedented array of realistic Jewish characters sharply distinct from the stereotypical characters modeled after Shylock, a quality that characterized classic Egyptian fiction. As the novel opens, Isaac is in his early

twenties, Irina is eighteen years old, and Yusuf is twelve years old, belonging comfortably to a society that thrives on diversity. Like their father, they have all the qualities characteristic of Egyptians—language, religion, skin color, art, music, food, social customs, way of life, etc. Crucially, they are native Egyptians in full control of the Arabic language, growing up with the sound of English, French, Greek, and Italian in their ears. At the same time, they neither deny nor hide their Jewishness or lock themselves into their own faith to the extent of becoming incapable of getting along well with mainstream Egyptian culture. In other words, they are not caught up in the tension between assimilation into mainstream culture and retention of Jewish tradition, a conflict that used to characterize Jewish life in the West and "has continued to erode the traces of Jewish mores and ethics" (qtd. in Pinsker 766).

Significant in this respect is that Fteha's characters are not second-class citizens or immigrants who are relegated to the role of the Other; rather, they are typical Egyptian citizens having a role to play in their society. Jacques Hassoun, a French psychoanalyst of Egyptian Jewish origin, asserts that "Egyptian Jews, regardless of their political status when they lived in their native country, were Egyptians" (qtd. in Israel-Pelletier 31). This perspective could easily be considered an exaggeration or a mere nostalgia of an exile for the land of his childhood; however, this idea permeates the work of Jewish Egyptian writers who moved to Israel, and who have been defining themselves as Egyptians. Maurice Shammass, for instance, in his Arabic-written memoir, *Azza: Nefertiti's Granddaughter* (2003), recalls the story of his drowning and being saved by his Muslim classmate Abdeurrahman who asserts that Egyptianism is the bond that binds them together:

Don't you go thinking for a single moment, by God, that I would have abandoned you or let you drown before my eyes! Shammass, we are classmates, whatever happened between us. We are both Egyptians, and we both drink the same Nile water that I just pulled you from. (qtd. in Starr 147)

This experience teaches Shammass that Egyptianism serves as an identity marker for all Egyptians, creating a sense of belonging and solidarity.

Indeed, *The Last Jews of Alexandria* best reflects the values of this cosmopolitan society. Haddad's family lived in one of "the affluent areas of Alexandria," where the buildings were "elegant," having "European archaeological symbols" (Fteha 13). When Haddad's children walk up the street they live on, they view "deep-rooted, tall trees on both sides of the road," whose branches are "heavy and interlocking" (Fteha 13). The narrator believes that "those trees have been there for several decades" (Fteha 13). Interestingly, the ancient trees can be symbolic of Alexandria's history as well as of the hard-to-root-out Jewish heritage. Moreover, the interlocking branches of the trees may refer to the depth and complexity of the long-term relationships between the residents of Alexandria. This point is effectively conveyed by the fact that Haddad's family members see eye to eye with their fellow Egyptian citizens and live in harmony with the cosmopolitan population which, like the branches of the tree, firmly interlocks.

Yusuf is the main character through whom this Jewish Egyptian experience is explored. The harmony and peace that seem to be characteristic of Alexandria are reflected in Yusuf's life. In other words, he does not see his life in dichotomous or binary terms: a Jew or an Egyptian. He is a native Egyptian, feeling fully comfortable with his sense of Jewishness. For a sense of harmony between internal and external reality, one has to come to terms with himself and his society. This is indeed the case with Yusuf whose society adopts a cosmopolitan perspective that embraces all. Apparently, Yusuf's feeling of Jewishness does not forbid him to establish a close lifelong friendship with his Muslim neighbor and classmate Jamal Ahmad Abu-Alhassan, nicknamed Jimmy, who supports Yusuf during his fights with his hostile peers. Both Yusuf and Jimmy are fully aware of their differences, but they are also conscious that their Egyptianism is the common thread that binds them together and harmonizes their differences.

Much of the thematic depth of Fteha's novel comes from Yusuf's love relationship with Sara, the Egyptian Muslim girl, whose stunning beauty is analogous to the beauty of Alexandria. Fteha presents this juxtaposition between Sara and Alexandria first when Jimmy tells Yusuf that she "looks like a foreigner, maybe French" (Fteha 14), echoing Fteha's initial description of Alexandria and its architecture as European. Again Sara's "pure indescribable beauty" (Fteha 14) evokes Alexandria's startling beauty that defies description. It comes as no surprise that Fteha incorporates the story of Alexandria itself into the narrative thread, thus alternating between the story of the Jews and that of Alexandria. There is a good reason for drawing a parallel between the historical transformation of Alexandria and the personal transformation of the characters.

It is not until Yusuf risks his life to save Sara's "favorite kitten that was stuck on top of a tree" and is injured in the attempt that she starts showing interest in him (Fteha 14).

He saw a call for aid in her eyes ... Thus, he dropped his bag on the ground, took off his dark jacket... gathered his strength... and climbed the tree, carrying with him the hopes and dreams that he might be able to talk to her after bringing the cat back to her safely. (Fteha 14-5)

As Yusuf hands over the cat to Sara, the tree's branch breaks and he unexpectedly falls off losing consciousness. He was immediately admitted to "the Israeli Hospital" (Fteha 19). The incident of climbing the tree refers to Yusuf's wish to achieve a seemingly unreachable goal. The way he falls and hits the ground foreshadows the highly probable downfall of the Jewish Egyptian experience as well as the erosion of Alexandrian cosmopolitan society.

The relationship between Yusuf and Sara is central to the novel, and we see the Jewish experience in Alexandria through their own experience. Soon after the relationship between them is established, the author explores the relationship of the Jews (symbolized by Yusuf) with Alexandria (symbolized by Sara). The narrative shows that "the relationship between the Jews and Egypt is mythical to a large extent...ranging from antagonism to friendship" (Fteha 25). The narrator traces the origins of these feelings back to "the Jews' celebration of the Roman conquest of Egypt," a colonial rule "that was rejected by Alexandrians" (Fteha 25). As one might expect, the Alexandrians and the Jews go into "bloody military conflicts in the first century AD" (Fteha 25). In the wake of the Islamic conquest, the Jews "enjoyed the freedom of worship, and they became part of the very fabric of Egyptian society" (Fteha 26). As a matter of fact, all Alexandrians—including Jews, Christians, Muslims, and others—were Alexandrians or Egyptians through collective experience and shared culture or history.

It is in this diverse society that a meaningful relationship between Yusuf and Sara develops. The closer Yusuf gets to Sara, the more he begins to realize that she is "the most beautiful part of his life" (Fteha 52). Sara is also attracted to him because she feels "he is the only one who takes care of her and makes her happy" (Fteha 52). Sara's relationship with Yusuf is based on the contrast she makes between him and Assem, her cousin who is so cold, rude, and aggressive that he "deliberately annoys her and terrifies her innocent kitten" (Fteha 53). In fact, Assem is a dominating sadist who takes pleasure from seeing the panic in the eyes of others, showing a desire to prove himself. Unlike Assem, Yusuf is usually friendly, courteous, and genuinely caring for Sara.

The tension between Sara and Assem is central to understanding Jewish Egyptian experience, showing that human relations are not subservient to ties of blood; both Sara and Yusuf are not connected by blood. Rather, they are bound together by the power of love based on mutual understanding and respect. Sara becomes so close to Yusuf that she feels that he understands her even better than she understands herself. Sara's unconditional love for Yusuf sharply contrasts with Assem's excessive sadism and brutality. Despite the fact that Sara is actually related to Assem by blood, she has a problematic relationship with him. An aggressive person, Assem does not respect her or treat her as a human being; worse, he never fully understands her needs or "her femininity" (Fteha 176). Yusuf's

behavior is precisely the opposite. The more she gets to know him better, the more she genuinely loves him.

If love in Yusuf's case is a personal experience, human compassion is a crucial and defining feature of Jewish experience in Alexandria. Indeed, love and compassion govern the relationship between Egyptian citizens, regardless of religion or race. It is through love and compassion that Sara, her mother, and Yusuf survive the German bombing of Alexandria. As the narrator explains:

While they [Sara and Yusuf] were playing the piano, the whole house started to shake due to a devastating bomb explosion. The alarms are sounded everywhere. They then started to hear a sound familiar to them: It is the sound of German planes that took over the sky of Alexandria a while ago. Immediately after the explosion, a sudden cry came from Sara who, out of fear, holds Yusuf's right hand with hers. Frightened too by the effect of the explosion, Yusuf grabs hold of her hands....Mrs. Manal [Sara's mother] holds Yusuf and Sara tightly in her hands while murmuring some verses from the Quran. (Fteha 55)

This is an important scene because it shows how the relationship between Muslims and Jews is based on a sense of love and responsibility for one another, no matter how different their religious backgrounds are. Although the characters are of different religions, they are united by a shared national identity, culture, and history. The story makes clear that Egyptian Jews are very much part of the diverse makeup of Egypt.

In the bombing scene, the author seems to dispute the assumption that religion is exclusionary, marginalizing, or excluding others. The scene emphasizes the importance of religion and its role in shaping the Egyptian psyche. If Sara and her mother spontaneously recite some Quranic verses asking for deliverance, Yusuf recites Jewish prayer "having a feeling that his salvation might be possible only through prayer, a prayer he is quite familiar with" (Fteha 55). Sara, her mother, and Yusuf worship Allah or God each in his/her own way. The author incorporates excerpts from both the Quran and the Torah to assert that real religion represents the common bond that unites all human beings rather than divide them. Interestingly, the Egyptian motto of the 1919 national movement, "Religion belongs to God, and the country belongs to everyone" has been made real. Drawing upon his own experience as an Israeli novelist of Egyptian origins, André Aciman argues that "Alexandria was a city where all the religions and nationalities of the world were represented, and where each religion lived side by side with the others in perfect harmony" (Aciman 81). What is surprising, though, is that Fteha reiterates the same belief using words similar to Aciman's: "Here [in Alexandria], she is not afraid to be publicly identified as a Jew. In addition, no one is interested in asking about one's nationality or religion; people have been living together in harmony" (Aciman 88).

The 1942 Italo-German military campaign against Egypt shattered the tranquility of Alexandria as well as that of the two lovers. Only when Yusuf receives the news that his family is preparing to leave Alexandria because of the impending war does he undergo the biggest change in his life. The boy is stunned and distraught when he finds himself suddenly forced into leaving his hometown because of the war. A new perception of the world emerges as he faces the danger of losing Sara as well as his hometown. Instead of obeying the injunction of his father "to get ready soon to leave," Yusuf feels a desperate need to go to Sara's house to open up and share his psychological struggle with her. Though Sara's mother is sympathetic to his plight, she refuses to allow him to stay in Alexandria away from his family:

Mrs. Manal knew immediately that the family of Hakim Bey Haddad, like most of the Alexandrian Jews, was about to flee Alexandria. And she rejects the idea that a thirteen-year-old boy should not be left alone in a place that might not welcome the Jews anymore. (Fteha 115)

When Sara and her mother accompany Yusuf back home, Sara "is quite sure that she will never see him again" (Fteha 115).

The narrative then jumps to fifty-seven years in the future as Yusuf gets back to Alexandria in 1999. His childhood Muslim friend, Jimmy is waiting for him at the lobby of Cecil Hotel. While waiting, Jimmy reflects upon that moment when "he was surely among the few who have witnessed the stages of Alexandria's transformation from being a pluralistic city into a homogeneous society in which foreigners no longer fit" (Fteha 118). In addition, Jimmy resurrects the memory of "the Six-Day War of 1967 during which Israel occupied the Sinai Peninsula," wondering whether "Yusuf was part of the Israeli occupation forces" and whether "he forged another identity for himself that is conceptualized in terms of fighting his homeland, Egypt" (Fteha 118). Finding it impossible to believe that "his best friend might hold the citizenship of the enemy," Jimmy almost convinces himself that "Israel might not have been his destination" (Fteha 119).

Fteha seizes the opportunity to instruct his readers that the Arab-Israeli conflict and the concomitant establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 put at risk the whole Jewish experience in Egypt. In the wake of the foundation of the Jewish state, some Egyptian Jews wholeheartedly supported Zionist ideology, and hence were unable to resolve the conflict between loyalty to their homeland and loyalty to Israel, a failure that ultimately led them to get actively involved in multiple violent acts against their own country. This eventually precipitated their departure or expulsion from Egypt in 1956, leaving Egyptians like Jimmy perplexed about their relationships with their Jewish counterparts. Unable to keep an emotional distance from the national news and songs that speak of the Israeli war crimes committed against Palestinians, Jimmy is psychologically torn between his love of his homeland and his attachment to his friend. Jimmy becomes so confused and uncertain about his relationship with Yusuf that "he is not psychologically apt to see him face to face" (Fteha 119). Meeting Yusuf for the first time in approximately 57 years, Jimmy finds him as old and worn as Alexandria itself.

As the narrative shifts backward in time to Alexandria in 1947, the narrator takes the reader back to Alexandria, five years after the Haddad family's departure. In flashback, this section opens with the revelation that when Haddad Bey prepares for their departure, his daughter Irene disappears without a trace. When it turns out that Irene runs away with her Spanish Christian lover Agustin, the family members have to leave her behind and move to Cairo. Here, Fteha sees an opportunity to touch on the most controversial topic of the novel: the question of intermarriage between people of different religions. Through his exploration of Yusuf's relationship with Sara and Irene's relationship with Agustin, Fteha emphasizes that Alexandrian society, albeit open-minded and pluralistic, does not tolerate intermarriage. The novelist sees no reason why Irene and Sara should be denied access to one of their basic human rights. As the omniscient narrator wonders, "Is it a fault to fall in love with someone whom she is not permitted to marry because of his religion?" (Fteha 122). It is implied here that Fteha tolerates intermarriage handling it with sympathy and understanding. This tolerance and encouragement of intermarriage is considered by many Muslim readers to be a violation of a taboo and a great offense to Muslims. In 2008, it was publicly announced that the novel be made into a movie, an attempt that is still unfinished. Ostensibly, the controversial debate over intermarriage may be the reason for not adapting the novel to a movie.

Haddad Bey's attachment to Alexandria is so deep that he is reluctant to leave it. Torn between his ties to Alexandria and his unwavering commitment to protect his children and provide them with safety and comfort, he chooses to temporarily leave his own birthplace and stay in Cairo. As a matter of fact, the journey to Cairo marks a crucial turning point in the life of the family. Cairo for Yusuf embodies a sense of loss that culminates in the loss of his hometown, his true love, his innocence, and his sister. Moreover, he loses his father who soon dies of a mysterious fatal illness. Worse, he loses his brother who undergoes a radical transformation during his stay in Cairo; Isaac joins a Zionist group that seeks to arouse hostility and violence everywhere. When Isaac goes back to Alexandria, he



coaches the militant underground Zionist organization that is responsible for the bombings of banks, cinemas, and railroad buildings.

A true believer in Zionism, Isaac plans to uproot himself from his own land and move permanently to Israel which he thinks is his ancestral homeland before the destruction of the Temple. According to Troy, Zionists "defined themselves by their homeland, not their temporary homes" (xxxiv). It is this same vision that drives Isaac to detach himself from his birthplace, considering it a temporary home. Observing it in this way, Isaac develops a hostile attitude toward his own country. Unfortunately, he commits unjustified acts of violence against governmental institutions, something that forces him to lead a life "on the run from Egyptian police" (Fteha 150). Finally, he is arrested and put in jail for six months. When a member of his Zionist organization is arrested shortly before the bombing of Metro Royal cinema, Isaac is arrested for the second time. After being released from custody, he decides to emigrate secretly from Egypt to Israel. This might be seen as a total rejection of his own "descent" or ancestry, to use Sollors' terminology (6). However, as a Zionist, Isaac boasts of his Jewish "descent" which goes back to his ancestral Jewish homeland, not to his Egyptian heritage. Significantly, so many characters in Fteha's novel (especially the French, the English, the Spanish, the Italians, etc.) are not defined by the criterion of descent or biology because they are not born Egyptian. However, they live in harmony with their fellow Egyptians.

Fteha's novel examines the effects of Zionism on the Jewish experience in Egypt. The narrator argues that, to begin with, Egyptians were not in conflict with Zionist ideology. Only after thousands of Jews started to immigrate to Palestine to establish a Jewish state did Egyptians oppose Zionism. For Egyptians, nothing is worse than "dividing Palestine into an Arab state and a Jewish one" (Fteha 125), expelling the Palestinians from their homeland and forcing them to live in refugee camps. Significantly, Egyptian Muslims and Christians have considered the division to be a betrayal of the Palestinians. However, many Jews including Isaac were "so thrilled to hear about the division" (Fteha 125). Indeed, Isaac's "happiness with the creation of the Jewish state was an attempt to escape or divert attention away from the pains that he and his family confronted" (Fteha 126).

Presumably, this escapism is comprehensible to both the author and the readers, particularly in the light of the dictatorial measures that the 1952 Revolution has taken against the Egyptian Jews. The Free Officers of the 1952 Revolution illegally confiscated all Haddads' property, a practice that makes their life an unending struggle. In his introduction to the English edition of Goren's novel *Alexandrian Summer*, André Aciman dramatically describes a similar experience with what he calls "the 1952 military coup":

I still remember our last year in Alexandria. By then, our assets had been frozen and my father's factory nationalized, and even our cars were no longer ours, though we were allowed to drive them. Our days were numbered, and we knew it. (xi)

Of course, such actions can arouse readers' sympathy toward the Haddads and their likes and limit any effort to judge them. However, many readers may find Isaac's hostile impulses toward his own country unjustifiable at best, if not outrageously distorting the image of other Egyptian Jews.

What truly enlivens this novel is the new and daring portrayal of Jewish characters, something that might put off many conservative Arab readers. Certainly, Isaac's irresponsible actions are harmful not only to the Egyptian Jews but also to the whole Egyptian nation. For Fteha, however, such misguided actions should be regarded as an inescapable human vulnerability that represents the human condition, something that should harshly be denounced or even punished, but individually not collectively. Although Fteha depicts Isaac as an uncompromising bigot who can only love those who share his deep-seated prejudices and firm Zionist beliefs, he does indeed seem reluctant to judge him, introducing him as an example of humanity motivated by religious fanaticism. The novel seems to imply that what happened to Isaac could also happen to any Egyptian regardless of race or ethnicity. For this reason, Fteha bitterly blames Nasser, the leader of the Free Officers of the 1952 Revolution,

for taking advantage of actions such as those of Isaac to crack down on the Jews and force them to leave their native land by inviting "the Arab street to throw the Jews into the sea" (Troy 157). In effect, the choice the Egyptian Jews face is a simple one: either to remain submissive to oppression, humiliation, and repression or to seek their fortune elsewhere.

Obviously, the rhetoric of the radical nationalists of the military regime was angry and polemic. This malevolent atmosphere is reflected in the novels of the time, particularly Naguib al-Kilani's novel *The Jewish Quarter: The Blood of Zion's Unleavened Bread* (1971). In an interview with journalist Dina Abdel-Alim for *Al-Yawm al-Sabia* in 2009, Fteha unabashedly reveals a strong objection to the Egyptian literary "unrealistic representation" of the Jews "as spies, traitors, and a fifth column." Instead of these easy literary generalizations about the Jews, the author "sheds light on pluralism" that characterizes the larger Jewish Egyptian experience that, "prior to the 1952 Revolution, "did not distinguish between Egyptian citizens regardless of religion." As a result of the Revolution, "the long-lasting bonds among all the members of the society are broken, giving way to dividing the nation into Jews, Christians, and Muslims."

It is interesting to note that Fteha intends to capture as many dimensions of the Jewish Egyptian self as possible. It is through the characters of Isaac and Yusuf that Fteha could explore the full dimensions of the Jewish Egyptian experience. In spite of the fact that both Isaac and Yusuf share a similar past, they end up having a contrasting vision of future life. As a perfect foil for Isaac, Yusuf is not preoccupied with the Arab-Israeli conflict; he clearly prefers men of learning who share his love of engineering and cinema. Inspired by his sixty-year-old Italian friend, Alviso Marcos who is obsessed with the cinema, Yusuf is able to satisfy his appetite for the cinema which allows him to explore and understand human behavior. When Alviso asks him about the ultimate goal of his life, Yusuf surprises him by saying: "My greatest pleasure is to explore human behavior" (Fteha 129). It is then that Alviso realizes that Yusuf reaches a level of maturity beyond his age: "He is far from being a pampered rich young boy who is after the allure of fame" (Fteha 129).

An ambitious young man, Yusuf is able to fulfill his dream of studying cinema engineering. However, he fails to achieve his long-cherished dream of marrying Sara. To his shock and disappointment, Doody, Sara's friend who is jealous of his love for Sara suddenly confronts him: "Yusuf, I'm here to tell you that you'll no longer be able to see Sara.... She'll get engaged to Assem, her cousin in the next few days" (Fteha 145). Furthermore, Doody enviously delivers him a serious blow that ultimately determines his sense of reality: "Be realistic. After all, she's a Muslim and you're a Jew" (Fteha 145). This remark has devastating effects on Yusuf, leading him to understand that he is confronted with a harsh reality beyond his control. As the narrator reflects:

Why were he and Sara doomed to embrace different religions? And why does the One God express Himself in different varieties of religions? God's message to the world may be one, just as beauty is one. But the different human understanding of the absolute rightness justified human conflicts that would precipitate one ending: the impending death. (Fteha 159).

The thorny issue of intermarriage is treated here not only as a religious problem but also as a universal human one. In *Alexandrian Summer*, Yitzhak Gornezano Goren addresses the same issue when he surveys the ways in which Jewish characters disingenuously deplore the marriage of Emilie, a Jewish young girl, to a Turkish Muslim: "They say he converted to Judaism just for Emilie, because her father, Davidson, wouldn't let her marry a Muslim!" (Fteha 129).

Public disapproval of the practice of intermarriage shocks Yusuf and reminds him once more of the overwhelming sense of loss beyond his capacity to endure. All his experience during and after the 1952 Revolution tells him that incidents of irreparable losses govern his life: the loss of his father, his sister, his brother, and his love. What adds to his distraction and restlessness is the loss of his precious individual freedom. Although he seems never to have been a part of the Zionist group, he, like all the Egyptian Jews at that time, is viewed with suspicion by the Egyptian authorities who eventually

imprison him, taking away his personal freedom. The loss of his freedom causes him to endure extreme pain and suffering. The ten days Yusuf spends in solitary confinement ultimately leads him to reexamine his Jewish experience, developing a sense of being an outsider in his own beloved country, someone who is no longer welcome in Egypt. Before his release from prison, Yusuf is advised by a police officer to leave Egypt within two weeks, something that is hard for him to imagine.

Of all the great losses Yusuf has suffered, loss of homeland is perhaps the most devastating: "Perhaps he did not feel that kind of excruciating pain when he was separated from everyone he loved—his parents, his beloved sister, Irena, and Sara—finding himself alone in the world" (Fteha 153). Loss of homeland is a traumatic experience that is underscored through the loss of Sara since the loss of one parallels the loss of the other. This juxtaposition shows how Fteha expresses his fury at the practice of the Free Officers of the 1952 Revolution, who are responsible for dramatically changing Egypt forever. Fteha makes a comparison between Egypt or Alexandria which is taken over by the Free Officers of the 1952 Revolution and Sara whose parents sacrifice her by giving her up to the whims of the "miserable" and "foolish" military officer, Assem who covets her beauty and seeks to possess her. According to the author, Egyptians celebrated and advocated the 1952 Revolution and its goals, hoping to secure freedom, independence, and justice, but the hopes turn out to be illusory. Likewise, Sara is hopeful that Assem could be "a suitable husband" (Fteha 159), but he grows increasingly cruel and sadistic toward her causing her far more suffering than happiness.

Like the Free Officers who tried hard to mold Egypt into their possession, Assem, being so "foolish and reckless," treats Sara "as an object of ownership" (Fteha 160). Yusuf looks at him as a "miserable rapist" (Fteha 171) who has exploited Sara and reduced her to the status of an erotic object. The use of the word "rapist" is crucial because it symbolically refers to the victimization and vulnerability that both Sara and Alexandria suffered at the hands of the military officers. The picture that Fteha paints of Assem insinuatingly suggests that he deserves social condemnation. Even when Assem died in 1967 war defending his own country against Israel, Fteha left readers no opportunity to sympathize with him. If a large number of Egyptians looks at Assem as a national hero, Sara accuses him of being "unfaithful" "uncaring" and "unable to get along with her" (Fteha 176). Apparently, if Assem made Sara feel as if she were something other than her true self, the military regime was responsible for wiping out the Egyptian Jews from the demographic map of Egypt.

Indeed, Fteha comes to the conclusion that both Alexandria and Sara were irrevocably changed by the 1952 Revolution. The stunning natural beauty of both Alexandria and Sara began to fade away due to deliberate negligence. When Maryse looks deeply into Sara's eyes, she sees only sadness that speaks of Sara's failure to put up with her husband's increasing neglect and disregard for her (Fteha 161). At the same time, gloom and sterility permeate Alexandria whose "institutions, monuments, and buildings that reflected the colonial-cosmopolitan era were neglected" (Starr 32) Fteha touches a profound emotional chord in his Alexandrian readers, who were witness to the ceaseless transformation that irrevocably changed the face of Alexandria under the rule of the Free Officers. To keep themselves at a safe distance from the past, the Free Officers sought to mold and shape Alexandria's "public face...to conform to the new ideologies of the state" (Starr 32). The result is a distorted image of Alexandria whose streets are renamed, famous statues removed, and foreign dwellers compelled to leave. Thus, "Alexandria was transformed from cosmopolis to regional capital" (Starr 32). According to Israel-Pelletier, before the radical nationalists of the military regime "redefined Egypt and began to demonstrate hostility toward the Jewish community, Egyptian Jews, for the most part, perceived themselves as Egyptians" (Aimée 12). Immediately after the 1956 Suez War, "there is no mention of foreigners, or the establishments that bear their stamp" (Starr 41).

It was during this period that Yusuf was forced to leave Alexandria and start anew. When he goes to bid a final farewell to Sara, she collapses in tears. "It's like the first time I saw you," Yusuf comments "you were also crying" (Fteha 174). In her farewell to Yusuf, Sara gives him the necklace

that carries the initial letter of her name (S) in English to always remind him of her. Then she adds, "Keep it. It'll be a constant reminder of me" (Fteha 175). Upon his departure, he promises: "Sara, one day I'll come back and we'll be together again forever" (Fteha 175). The question that comes to mind is: Why didn't Sara run away with her lover? Obviously, Sara, adheres well to Alexandrian traditions and values. For her, running away from her family and marrying a man of her own choice is something unexpected of a Muslim girl at that time and could only be a social affront that would disgrace or dishonor her family. Indeed, she has been raised to be reliable and trustworthy. Yet every effort to stand against her community would seem an unwitting betrayal of her family and would echo the warning implied in Brabantio's suspicion of Desdemona's betrayal: "Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see: / She has deceived her father, and may thee" (292-3).

The novel both opens and closes with seventy-year-old Yusuf at Cecil Hotel, returning to the town of his birth, Alexandria where he felt a strong sense of who he was. The cyclical nature of Yusuf's experience emphasizes the famous Egyptian proverb: "Once you drink from the Nile, you are destined to return." After a fifty-seven-year stay in Australia, Yusuf eventually returns to his birthplace as one of the most prominent Australian dramatists of Egyptian origins. His Egyptian friend, Jimmy provides him with information about the conditions in Alexandria, and Yusuf is shocked to learn that the Alexandrian Jewish community has dwindled to "only ten elderly women who refused to leave their hometown and reside elsewhere" (Fteha 178). Jimmy arranges a meeting between Yusuf and Sara in the hope of bringing them together. Even though Yusuf has not been in touch with Sara for a long time, their love survives and eventually facilitates their reunion. It is through their love relationship that they acquire true self-realization. The novel ends with Yusuf and Sara smiling at each other with Sara feeling more than ever that "she desperately needs to be with him." Yusuf's final message "I came back for you" (Fteha 179) emphasizes the profound influence Sara has on him. Sara is the real home where he belongs.

### **Conclusion:**

In the final analysis, Fteha's *The Last Jews of Alexandria* contributes to our understanding of the Jewish Egyptian experience from 1941 to 1954. The novel's unprecedented achievement is that it renews interest in this human experience that the impassioned propagandistic works of earlier Egyptian literature struggled to completely hide, distort, or even obliterate from the memory of Egyptians. The novel focuses on the uniqueness of the Jewish Egyptian experience that describes the unity of people and place. Alexandria was a city of freedom and equal opportunity for all Egyptians, including the Jews, as well as immigrants from all over the world. Indeed, the Jewishness of Egyptian Jews was not a threatening obstacle to social mobility. Hakim Beh Haddad was able to push his way toward the highest rung on the socioeconomic ladder because he was given the opportunity to claim that right. The Haddads, like the ancient trees on the street they live on, are deeply rooted in the soil of the Egyptian land where people are not judged by their skin color or by the religion they embrace. It was a land in which tolerance, "true love, and coexistence" dominated. Only after the Arab-Israeli conflict did the boughs of this Jewish tree start to crack, and the whole Egyptian experience start to deteriorate. As Fteha asserts, "I believe that the emergence of the State of Israel and the Zionist movement is the cause of hostility toward the Jews" (Abdel-Alim).

## المستخلص

إعادة تصور لتجربة اليهود المصريين: دراسة لرواية "آخر يهود الإسكندرية" لمعتز فتيحه

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يتناول هذا البحث معالجة تجربة اليهود المصريين في رواية "آخر يهود الإسكندرية" لمعتز فتيحه (2008) الذي عكف مثل عدد من أبناء جيله على إعادة صياغة تلك التجربة من منظور كاتب لم يشارك في الأحداث فيؤثر فيها ويتأثر بها بل مراقب يقيم ويفرز ليميز الغث من السمين، وعليه فرواية فتيحه تساهم في فهمنا لتجربة اليهود المصريين من عام 1941 إلى 1954، إذ تركز على خصوصية تلك التجربة التي تصف وحدة الشعب والمكان. فأفراد عائلة حداد اليهودية متجذرين بعمق في تربة الأرض المصرية مثل الأشجار القديمة في الشارع الذي يعيشون فيه، حيث لا يتم تقييم الناس بناءً على لون بشرتهم أو الديانة التي يعتنقونها، ويرى الكاتب أن أرض مصر كعادتها دائماً كان يُخيم عليها التسامح والتعايش، إلا أن هذه التجربة انتكست وتم تشويهها بل محوها من ذاكرة المصريين بعد اندلاع الصراع العربي الإسرائيلي، وتؤكد الرواية في أماكن متفرقة أنه لولا ظهور الحركة الصهيونية وما تبعها من تأسيس دولة إسرائيل لما لحق ما لحق بتلك التجربة الفريدة التي تدل على عظمة الأرض المصرية التي شكلت وعي الجميع وصهرت الجميع على مر الزمان في بوتقة من التسامح والتعايش

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