Teresa Pepe, *Blogging from Egypt: Digital Literature, 2005-2016*, Edinburgh University Press, 2019; pp. 248.

Teresa Pepe's recently published book, *Blogging from Egypt: Digital Literature, 2005-2016*, is a study of the online literary narratives occupying an emerging critical location at the intersection of literary studies and digital technologies. It offers a groundbreaking exploration of digital literature in Arabic, in the period that immediately followed the introduction of web technologies in Egypt. The author selects a specific genre of blog writing, namely 'personal blogs', created and developed by individuals, and established as an online space for personal expression. In this sense, a 'personal blog' is broadly classified as a form of autobiographical writing; it is, however, not limited to factual accounts but includes other narrative genres such as short fiction, essays, book and art reviews, as well as various audiovisual material. In its survey of forty blogs, and focus on six of them as case studies, the book offers a pioneering contribution to scholarship on the emergence of Arabic digital literature as well as on autobiographical/autofictional theorizing; thus establishing a new direction in Arabic literary studies.

Teresa Pepe divides her book into six chapters, in addition to the Introduction and Conclusion. Her introduction "Egyptian Blogs Between Fiction and Autobiography", gives an overview of the history of blogging in Egypt since the introduction of the Internet in Egypt and the emergence of blogging in 2005. Among the key issues raised in the introduction and developed throughout the book is the question of genre, as the author tries to situate the Egyptian 'personal blog' within the framework of Arabic literature and literary studies in general. In doing so, Pepe argues for the 'personal blog' as an example of 'autofiction' – a recently revived term in life-writing and autobiography theory that refers to fictionalised personal narratives. The author, hence, locates her study within the emerging blogosphere in Egypt, and in relation to autobiographical writing in the history of Arabic literature. The introduction also discusses the methodology used in the study, as the author explains her selection method and criteria, as well as the challenges she faced.

The author concludes her introduction with an outline of the book, from which we can derive what can be considered the main issues and research questions around which the chapters are organized, and which can be understood in the following terms: How did digital technologies lead to the emergence of new literary forms in Egypt? How does a paratextual approach shed light on the

autofictional features of the blogs? What are the linguistic and stylistic features of Egyptian blogs that support their position as 'minor literature' and an innovative direction in Arabic literature? How does the blog transform self-writing in Arabic literature, in terms of form, through interactivity, the use of multimedia and visual elements? What are the main themes and ideas conveyed and discussed in the blogs? What is the role of the body, and how is it represented and politicised in Arabic digital literature? How have blogging practices changed in Egypt and the Arab World since 2011? How has blogging been affected by the spread of social media? And how did blogging impact contemporary Arabic literary publishing – both print and digital?

Chapter One, "Arabic Literature Goes Digital", historically contextualizes the emerging blogs in Egypt, explaining how the introduction of Internet tools in the Arab World in 2003 led to the emergence of various literary online platforms. The focus of this chapter is on the history and development of blogging and its impact on the Egyptian literary scene, described in terms of "a literary revolution enhanced by the digital medium" (28). The chapter also describes some literary websites that gave rise to Arabic digital literature through textual analysis and interviews with a number of writers, critics and journalists. The author suggests that the introduction of Web 2.0 technologies, and hence blogging, together with the implementation in 2004 of writing tools in Arabic, led to the emergence of what she describes as 'Arabic Literature 1.0' that mainly appeared on the blogging platforms Blogspot and WordPress. Pepe further argues that instead of undermining print publications, the introduction of digital technologies added new dimensions to literature marketing strategies, through blogosphere and social media advertising, and consequently encouraged the publication of blogs as printed books.

Chapter Two is entitled "The Paratext of Egyptian Blogs", and it offers a detailed discussion of the selected blogs as autofictional texts through their paratexts. The chapter investigates the Egyptian blogosphere in terms of both genre and technique, using two main concepts: 'autofiction' and 'paratext'. 'Autofiction' is a recently revived term in literary theory – and particularly in life-writing and autobiography theory. It refers to the technique used in writing fictionalized autobiography texts, where the autobiographical merges with the fictional leading to the emergence of a new genre, which is neither autobiography nor fiction per se, but an intentional combination of both. Paratexts, on the other hand, include all the aspects surrounding a book (such as book-covers, back-cover blurbs, prefaces and introductions, published interviews and reviews, among many other metatextual materials) that enrich

textual interpretation. Within the framework of autobiography/autofiction theory, and using a paratextual approach to the selected blogs, Teresa Pepe offers a detailed analysis of the connections between blogging and autofiction, arguing that the Egyptian literary blogs under study are autofictional in both form and content. The detailed analysis of the representative selected blogs shows how Egyptian blog literature is both personal and political.

Chapter Three looks at "Mixed Arabic as a Subversive Literary Style", focusing on the bloggers' linguistic and stylistic choices, in the light of the notion of 'deterritorialized language' borrowed from sociolinguistics. The author shows how the Egyptian blogs use a 'mixed language' which combines standard Arabic with the Egyptian vernacular, together with teen slang and youth lingo, in addition to code-switching between Arabic and mostly English language. This leads to the propagation of Arabic as an example of diglossia, and its influence on blog literature which becomes a manifestation of polyglossia. Teresa Pepe thus argues that the blogs have led to the emergence of "a new written language that mixes FU [Arabic fuṣḥa] and AM [Egyptian 'ammiyya] and includes expressions borrowed from English and from youth language, as well as slang" (116). The sociolinguistic approach used in this chapter identifies blog-language as a 'minority language' reflecting their writers' socio-cultural alienation, and asserting a generational rupture while at the same time seeking a global connection.

Chapter Four has the title "When Writers Activate Readers", and investigates the influence of the autofictional blog on writing in Arabic, arguing for the emergence of 'Interactive Adab' (interactive Arabic literature). The author connects the autofictional genre to digital technologies, showing their shared interactive features. She shows how autofiction interactively involves its readers through various narrative strategies, such as alternating method of narration, disrupting chronological order and manipulating conventional referentiality to the real world, as well as various ways of fictionalising their identities through the use of pseudonyms, hoaxes, fabricated pictures and images, etc. Digital technologies enable further interaction between blog readers and writers through comments and online conversations that can even influence the style and progress of the blog narrative itself.

Chapter Five is entitled "Bytes of Freedom: Fictionalised Bodies in the Egyptian Blogosphere", and sheds light on the main themes prevalent in the blogs, with particular emphasis on the representations of the body. The author pays attention to how the body reflects simultaneous process of constructing and reimagining identity, hence revealing the blogger's "double tendency of

revealing one's true self, while inventing different versions of oneself" (151). The chapter highlights the main ideas and personal experiences shared by the bloggers, which include for example sexual harassment, bodily defects, love and sexuality. Teresa Pepe suggests that digital technologies have provided Egyptian young men and women with a space to write about their experiences, moving them beyond the personal into the political. She further maintains that the Egyptian blogosphere has been transformed into "a site of resistance" (183) not only against the regime, but also rebellious towards parental authority, as well as conservative and religious practices. Hence the reliance on sophisticated forms of self-censorship and the use of fictional devices to disrupt references to the factual world.

The last chapter, Chapter Six, is about "Blogging a Revolution: From Utopia to Dystopia", focusing on the developments in the Egyptian blogosphere since the beginning of the Egyptian Revolution in 2011. The author argues that blogging remained an important online space, though slightly influenced by the widespread of Facebook, Twitter and other social networks. This chapter traces the representation of the bloggers experiences from 2011-2016 whereby the author describes the narratives as utopian in their depiction of the early days of the Revolution, which gradually turned into dystopian accounts due to frustration, disappointment and the failure of the revolution. Teresa Pepe points out that this change coincided with a worldwide demise of blogging, reflected in the Egyptian blogosphere, as out of the corpus of forty blogs that the study identified and traced along the years, only fifteen were present online in April 2018.

In her Conclusion "A New Literary Genre and a Social Uprising", Teresa Pepe connects the rise of blogs in Egypt to the development of Arab autofictional digital writing in a particular socio-political moment enhanced by online technologies. Further technological developments together with the limitations imposed on freedom of speech in the past few years have caused "the shift from computer tools to mobile tools" (220). Thus, as computers and laptops are increasingly replaced by tablets and smartphones, blogging is giving way to new forms and fora of micro-blogging. The author ends her study by pointing out to potential research directions in digital, cultural and literary studies, calling for further research in Arabic digital literature.

Blogging from Egypt offers an exemplary model of interdisciplinary scholarship across the humanities and social sciences. In its study of the Egyptian blogosphere, it uses an innovative and insightful methodology, combining literary studies with digital studies, implementing analytical tools derived from

sociolinguistics, and using a paratextual approach. The book presents a general overview of Egyptian blogs since their emergence in 2005 till 2016, marking a period of the proliferation and prominence of blog-writing in Egypt and the world at large. The author argues that Egyptian bloggers led to the emergence and development of Arabic digital literature, leading to the rise of a new literary genre out of the digital world. She identifies this new genre in terms of the 'autofictional blog' which lies at the intersection of personal writing with online tools – merging literary technique with digital technology.

The research is informed by Autobiography Theory, and the author argues that the recently revived 'autofiction' is the term that best describes the emerging digital form of writing known as the 'personal blog'. In addition to explaining the development of the blog as a digital technology, Teresa Pepe gives an elaborate explanation of 'autofiction' as a term introduced in the 1970s by Serge Doubrovsky, then developed within life-writing, autobiography and fiction theorizing. Her reading of the Egyptian blogs leads her to the conviction that personal blogs are autofictional in the sense of their intentional fictionalization of the self in writing about personal experiences.

Another key term in this study is that of 'paratexts', introduced by Gerard Genette in France in the 1970s (before it was translated into English in the 1990s), as an approach to interpreting literary texts by moving beyond the text itself. Pepe applies Genette's paradigm to the blogs, reading the texts within their wider contexts, looking at all the elements that surround the text (such as the blog design, title, writer's name, pseudonym, as well as the online readers' contributions to the blog, in addition to interviews conducted with the blog-writer). Attention is also given to the content of the blogs, their themes, and particular linguistic and stylistic features. This in turn is analysed within the wider framework of Arabic language and literature, as well as the more general socio-political context, without losing the autofictional lens. Based on forty blogs, and focusing on six blogs as case studies, the author reaches the conclusion that the Egyptian blogs, that emerged in 2005 and developed before and after the Revolution of 2011, have introduced a new form of literary expression and are a contribution to Arabic personal writing as well as World digital literature.

Teresa Pepe is Associate Professor in Arabic Studies in the Department of Cultural Studies and Oriental Languages at the University of Oslo in Norway. She is also a member of the Digital Humanities Research Network at the University of Oslo. Her research and publications are mostly in the areas of Arabic literature, life-writing and digital cultures. Coming from an academic

background grounded in Arabic literature and culture, the author is well-equipped to analyse the blogs from a literary and linguistic perspective, as well as to consider them within a generic framework. Although the study gives a detailed explanation of 'autofiction' as a term, it does not engage with the current debates about whether autofiction can be considered a literary genre, a sub-genre of autobiographical writing and life narratives, or merely a literary technique that has the potential of developing into a sub-genre. Consequently, the argument for the selected blogs as 'autofictional blogs' – as insightful as it is – is not fully developed; and the question remains for the readers to consider whether the 'autofictional' in Egyptian blogs can be seen as generic or technical, or both. Similarly, the study makes good use of the paratextual paradigm in the analysis of the blogs, but instead of expanding the definition of paratexts to encompass the online tools of the blogosphere, the author applies the established paratextual aspects of literary texts to the personal blogs.

In this sense, the book does not offer a contribution to the theorizing on autofiction and paratexts, as much as it presents an elaborate application of the concepts to the blogs. Another minor drawback can be found in the author's insistence that she has used "an almost equal number of male and female authors (25/15)" (17), while out of the thirty bloggers whom she interviewed "twenty-one are men and nine women" (19). Although these hardly offer an 'almost equal number of male and female authors', Pepe compensates for that by using an equal number of men and women in her case-studies: Ahmed Naji, Amr Ezzat, Bilal Husni, Mona Seif, Abeer Soliman and Emraamethlya. Still, we cannot detect a theoretically informed gender approach in the analysis of these blogs.

The main contribution, however, can be found in the overview of the history and development of the Egyptian blogosphere, especially personal blogs, over a decade of time, during the tumultuous years from 2005 to 2016. The study also brings in the most prominent theorizing and research in the areas of literary studies and digital humanities. The discussion on 'autofiction' draws on both Francophone and Anglophone scholarship in the area, presenting the contributions of Serge Doubrovky, Vincent Colonna and Philippe Gasparini, as well as Arab interventions by Mohamed Berrada and Muhammad Dahi. It not only situates the blogs in relation to 'autofiction', but also within the history of modern and contemporary Arab autobiographical writing. Moreover, the book builds on the groundbreaking studies by the established academics and literary critics Marie-Therese Abdel-Messih and Hoda Elsadda, who saw, in bloggers, a new generation of writers; and in blogs, an alternative literary genre (as early as 2009 and 2010 respectively).

The book's forte, thus, lies in its attempt and success to situate Egyptian blogging within frameworks of digital technologies, literary writing and autobiographical expression, as well as pointing at future directions of research in digital humanities and social sciences in the Arab world.

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