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Generational differences in three Egyptian women writers: Finding a common ground

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Postcolonial Egypt has witnessed significant cultural and political developments, and undoubtedly it has been a challenging era for writers attempting to negotiate a physical and ideological space within the public and private spheres. Ideologies of national self and national others have simultaneously been advocated and questioned by successive generations of contemporary women writers. In an era in which the conflict between a modern western-orientated narrative of the self is often pitted in direct opposition to an Islamic fundamentalist outlook on life, and used to polarize cultural differences in reductive ways, the modern Egyptian literary writer has an even greater challenge ahead of them. Three women writers, Latifa Zayyat, Ahdaf Soueif and Rehab Bassam, who have in different ways striven to restore the delicate balance between the personal and the public, represent three important modes of modernity. Where Zayyat focuses on the relationship of the whole to the self and the nation to the individual, Soueif focuses on the hybrid, the self and the other. Soueif's work seeks to occupy a ground common to Arab and western culture alike. Rehab Bassam, on the other hand, initially began her literary career on weblogs. This new medium is reshaping our understanding of the dynamics of public and private, and is one that inevitably will influence how current modes of modernity are being shaped in contemporary Egyptian writing. The three writers attempt to find a common ground of cultural interaction between modern secularism, globalization and indigenous literary forms that can be developed into a meaningful communal narrative: present and future.

Keywords: common ground; hybrid text; prison narrative; public and private sphere; generational differences; weblog

Postcolonial Egypt has witnessed significant cultural and political developments and undoubtedly it has been a challenging era for writers attempting to negotiate a physical and ideological space within its public and private sphere. In an era in which a modern western-orientated narrative of the self is often pitted against an Islamic fundamentalist outlook on life, contemporary Egyptian literary writers are regularly challenged to find a common ground for their literary output. This article will focus on how three Egyptian women writers from different generations attempt to find a common ground of cultural interaction between modern secularism, globalization and indigenous literary and cultural legacies to create a meaningful communal narrative. Latifa Zayyat, Ahdaf Soueif and Rehab Bassam, who in different ways have strived to restore the delicate balance between

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the personal and the public in their writing, may be said to represent three important modes of modernity.¹

Latifa Zayyat, a prominent political and literary writer from the 1960s, lived and wrote during a period that witnessed Egypt's first steps into the postcolonial era after its 1952 revolution. Her writing span two eras of national history, namely the period of resistance, followed by the formation of Egypt's first independent state, and the subsequent failings of the national agenda after independence, with finally the creation of the police state.

Zayyat's writing focuses on the relationship of the nation to the individual and the whole to the self in the conviction that the individual cannot stand alone and can only attain true potential through connecting to the whole. Zayyat's terrain invests heavily in the discourse of national unity and the political and social relationship of the individual to society. Zayyat's common ground is a melting pot where the self successfully dissolves into the whole; her style of writing reflects this desire to bring together the public and private spheres.

Ahdaf Soueif, on the other hand, seeks to occupy a common ground that lies beyond the national, to encompass an Arab and western culture alike (in addition to other cultures such as Russian, Indian and South American). Soueif, an important transnational writer who began publishing in the 1980s, focuses primarily on the hybrid, the self and the other. Unlike Zayyat's focus on a national meeting point, Soueif sees herself belonging to a generation that believed in the possibility of a coexistence between diverse cultures and a shared belief in ideals such as social justice, public services and equality. However, according to Soueif, in recent decades this common ground has systematically been eroded, and in the 1990s the political climate changed and this very generation found what Soueif calls its hospitable and open Mezzaterra under attack (Soueif, *Mezzaterra* 5–9). Mezzaterra is a term Soueif coins and uses in her non-fiction book *Mezzaterra: Fragments from the Common Ground*, a collection of political essays, articles and book reviews. Soueif defines Mezzaterra as "this territory, this ground, valued precisely for being a meeting-point for many cultures and traditions – let's call it 'Mezzaterra'. This common ground, after all, is the only home that I and those whom I love can inhabit" (6).

Soueif perceives how this all important meeting point of the 1960s shaped her generation's identity: "Muslim/Christian/Egyptian/Arab/African/Mediterranean/Non-aligned/Socialist but happy with small scale capitalism" (5–6). In fact, Soueif adds:

I never came across the Arabic word for identity *hawiyya* until long after I was no longer living in Egypt full time. Looking back I imagine our Sixties identity as a spacious meeting point, a common ground with avenues into rich hinter-lands of many traditions. (5–6)

Soueif points out that it is from the security and excitement of this territory that her first stories and first articles were written. This meeting point for many cultures and traditions, this Mezzaterra, is a space not invented by her generation, but nevertheless her generation was born into it (6).

As cultural plateaus transfer to cyberspace, Rehab Bassam focuses on overcoming the boundaries of public and private by initially publishing her work on the Internet. Attitudes towards the whole writing process are being reshaped by this "global" medium, a medium that inevitably has an effect on how current modes of modernity are being produced and received in contemporary Egyptian writing. Bassam's blog *Hawadeet* (a colloquial term for tales or stories used in Egypt) is an example of this continually

evolving space.² As the choice of title for her blog suggests, Bassam's writing is directed at a local Egyptian audience rather than a "global market". Unlike Soueif, Bassam's blog is not an attempt to cross the East–West divide, and it does not aspire to create a meeting point for many cultures and traditions. However, what Bassam does is to create a common ground based on locality, in everyday experiences that she shares with her readers. Her weblogs are designed for an immediate audience, and are intended as an interactive experience. The succinct stories have an immediacy about them that is both refreshing and of the moment.

In what could be described as "flash fiction", Bassam creates mostly very short but powerful stories about everyday living. In these flash portrayals of everyday life there is an unmistakable degree of intimacy as Bassam invites the reader into the house, the bedroom, the kitchen and the musings of her narrator. Having said this, it is important to consider whether, within the sphere of the Internet, weblogs have actually changed the way in which stories are written and received. Specifically, in the Middle East the question that needs to be asked is whether or not blogging has been able to create a platform for the democratization of ideas. Further, has it facilitated the overlapping of literature, politics and social intervention? In order to address such fundamental questions, I will first consider how writing in the 1960s developed as a means of cultural interaction between modern secularism, national consciousness and the individual.

National consciousness is a predominant focus in Latifa Zayyat's first novel *The Open Door* and manifests itself as an all-embracing crystallization of the innermost hopes of the whole nation. However, her later works mark a significant shift in this focus and demonstrate a move away from her earlier emphasis on national narrative. In her later works, in particular her novella *The Search: Personal Papers*, we can see the author's attempt to reconnect the individual to something outside the limits of the narrow ego of the self.

Significantly, this change in focus in her later works marks a departure from the publication of her first novel, after nearly two decades of silence. This lack of literary output during the 1970s and through to the 1980s paralleled a challenging period in Egypt's history which suffered its first national defeat in 1967, the dissemination of the state's pan-Arab propaganda and the rise of the police state. In 1967, the six-day war against Israel resulted in a complete crushing of the Egyptian army; more Palestinian land was occupied by Israel and so were large parts of Egypt and Syria. The pan-Arab dream came under question from its inhabitants, and the euphoria of the former years of independence came to an abrupt end. The whole of the Arab world fell into a deep sense of mourning and disbelief in the rhetoric of its leaders. This era is commonly referred to in the Arab world as *al naksa* or *al nakba* (which means "defeat" or "disaster", while the Israeli settlement of Palestine in 1948 is also known as *al nakba*). This *naksa* was so unexpected by the peoples of the region that it left Arab nations in a complete state of disarray. Zayyat was no exception and her silence through refraining from writing after the 1967 defeat was not exceptional. The loss of the dream caught everyone in its grip, and her subsequent writing changed in mood and approach. Zayyat's later works reflect this sense of loss and question the possibility of the individual to engage in public discourse truly and freely. This concern manifests itself both in her use of language and in the manner with which she conceptualizes and depicts space in these works. Zayyat herself comments on this as follows:

The margin tightens and things fall apart with the onslaught of 1967 and the facets of reality diversify and become complex: questions find no answers and reconciliation with the social

reality is no longer possible, not even to follow its development. In the collection of short stories *Al-Shaykhokha wa kisas okhra (Old Age and Other Stories, 1986)* the meanings of freedom are refined and confined to the dialectics of the self with itself to attain freedom, and the dialectics of the self with the other especially through an intense relationship. [...] [T]he narrative becomes unilateral encompassing parts of reality, as for a total reality ... there is no place for it in this collection. (Zayyat, "Al-katib wa al-hurriya" 238, my translation)

As the ideology of a unified nation crumbles after the 1967 defeat, Zayyat's epic narrative, as established in her first novel *The Open Door*, changes. Significantly, her novella *The Search: Personal Papers*, published in 1992, takes on an autobiographical form where there is only one protagonist: the author herself and her search for meanings of freedom. *The Search* is a collection of Zayyat's unpublished short stories and memoirs, including reflection on her experience as a political prisoner during the 1980s. In this work Zayyat's ideal of being a whole entity that parallels the national discourse is challenged and at times lost in the labyrinth of the self and the confines of the various homes and prisons the author finds herself entangled in. But *The Search* can also be read as Zayyat's attempt to bring order to this chaos and to bring together her dispersed letters and papers in order to reclaim a space that had been lost to her during both the national and personal defeat.

The writing in this novella takes on the form of a personal search and her piecing together of her papers is as an attempt to reconcile her private life with an altered, post-defeat, public narrative. This is especially true if we are to consider the form of autobiography as a form of writing characterized by the self being "the subject inquiring" as well as "the object being inquired into" (Spacks 112). That is, it can be argued that the very act of Zayyat writing her autobiography about her prison experience is an attempt to make the "private" "public"; enabling her, through the act of writing, to reunite her personal narrative with the collective public enterprise. Barbara Harlow's analysis of third world women's prison narratives, including autobiographies, suggests that these narratives help challenge the authoritarian structures, in which:

[T]he women themselves have provided textual accounts, narratives and autobiographies of their prison experiences. Their personal itineraries, which have taken them through struggle, interrogation, incarceration, and, in many cases, physical torture, are attested to in their own narratives as part of an historical agenda, a collective enterprise. These writings, taken collectively, suggest the emergence of a new literary corpus out of contemporary conditions in the Third-world of political and social repression. (Harlow 506–07)

As Harlow suggests, this corpus of literary work can and should be read as a collective enterprise which conveys how the private life of one person challenges "authoritarian structures" and in doing so "opens the door". *The Search* in this context can be seen as an attempt to form a part of this common statement and a reclaiming of history.

In *The Search* the process of reclaiming history starts within the private sphere; in a very short prologue the author, sitting by her brother's deathbed, pushes aside death, and sits writing what seems to be an autobiography (3). Here the very act of writing comes into being by pushing aside death, and through writing the author transforms herself from the surroundings of death and reaches out beyond the confines of mortality. The act of writing in *The Search* has this almost magical ability to transfer and transform its author. The power of writing manifests itself in the novella on several occasions, especially in the prison narratives, as the author recounts her experience of being a political prisoner twice in her life. The first time was in 1950 when she was a young activist and was

imprisoned under the colonial regime, the second time was in 1981 when she was nearly 60 years old and was imprisoned during the era of Egypt's then president, Anwar Sadat. In 1950, Zayyat the young activist manages to defy the cruelty of her ordeal by forging touching bonds of friendship. Since Zayyat was in solitary confinement, one of the main friendships she makes is with her guard. She rhetorically writes: "Can I forget you who were my guard, when it was you who turned my loneliness to companionship, transformed my exile to a home?" (60). Here, the common ground is forged through friendship, which was Zayyat's way of escaping the imprisonment imposed upon her. She relates:

You were a strong friend in times of distress, when things reached crisis point and I was cut off from my friends and loved ones. When I think about what you did for my sake – and what you did not do for my sake Sitt Aliyya? – I feel your kindness swathed around me and I save it up in my heart, unable to repay it and happy because I cannot. I want your kindness towards me to save me forever, whenever I am gripped by the bitterness of life, from losing faith in the human soul and all the love, nobility and beauty there is to be found there. (61)

Bonds of friendship are one way in which the writer manages to resist and subvert confinement and to reach out beyond the limitations of the self. This is significant since for Zayyat the individual cannot stand alone and can only fulfil his or her true potential through connecting to the whole.

Imprisonment therefore is especially challenging for Zayyat since its main aim is to break these connections and to prevent the individual from participating in the public space. Zayyat is very clear about the relationship of the one with the whole in terms of national identity and solidarity, as demonstrated in the following excerpt from *The Search*:

The main point again is that we do not attain our true selves unless the self first melts into something outside the limits of this narrow ego. (A hint of the main theme of the novel *The Open Door*, which I published in 1960).

We lose this true sense when we become limited, imprisoned in a cage, hovering over the ego, when we drown in the sea of vanities, caught in the external vicious circle which turns our destiny to our end. At this point we lose our selves, not in a metaphorical sense but actually. (57)

However, even though Zayyat continues to maintain her belief that the individual can only be fulfilled when unified with the whole on the national level, the former optimism of *The Open Door* in later works has waned.

Typically for Zayyat, public defeat manifests itself on the private level where the protagonist endures a long and humiliating divorce, which is narrated in parallel to the years of defeat. It is mainly at this point in the structure of the text that we notice a very different strategy of narration, the most obvious aspect of which is the erratic lengths of the subsequent chapters and a lack of any obvious sequence to them. The chapters are short and move back and forth in time with no apparent explanation. The reality can no longer be presented as a whole entity but becomes fragmented and piecemeal. As Zayyat notes: "the narrative becomes unilateral encompassing parts of reality, as for a total reality... there is no place for it" (Zayyat, "Al-katib wa al-hurriya" 238).

The erratic length of the text is mirrored by stories of subversion. Zayyat narrates how she and the other prisoners actively work together to flout the searches of their cells:

During the course of two and a half months, we grasped the dialectic of the struggle between warder and prisoner, so we enjoyed our ability to predict the search before it happened and hide everything that had to be hidden. (115)

Thus, subverting the prison regime was one way of personal resistance and forging a common goal with her fellow prisoners.

However, this particular “search” was to be different from previous ones. For as Zayyat describes the scene the escalation becomes apparent, as does the viciousness of the search. It reaches a crescendo when the warders and Commissioner violate the inner space of the prisoners by opening their bags and their personal belongings. Zayyat narrates:

I rise to the sound of short cries of terror coming from the lavatory. The sound of a brawl, a scuffle. I rise to find the Commissioner, planted in the ward since I don't know when, his head thrust into Amina's bag. Their hands plunge now into all the bags; they drop like hawks upon our underwear, our papers, our implements; they seize their quarry and let it fall, violated, on the floor. (123)

The short sentences reflect the frenzied atmosphere that Zayyat and the inmates endure. At this point Zayyat's calm and sense of reality leaves her as she plunges into what she describes as “a moment of madness”. This, Zayyat explains, reminds her of a story she heard in the prison about a woman, who in “a moment of madness”, takes off her clothes and stands naked as the day she was born (123). Zayyat notes that even though this story had slipped her mind, she now found herself reliving a similar situation, as she finds herself in a moment of irrational, almost out-of-body, experience:

[Her] sense of reality is upset as the screams from the lavatory join and gather in a single scream that envelops me and the whole ward. I scream at my nakedness for I have discovered that the only dress I own to leave this hole in has disappeared from where it was on the bunk of the bed. (123)

Zayyat in this excerpt creates a parallel between the woman who stood naked as the day she was born, and herself, as she perceives her own symbolic nakedness.

However, in these circumstances, Zayyat does not retreat in silence, as she had in the past. In a significant gesture, she cries out: “Where is my dress!” her “cries of terror” turn to “desperate cries of resistance”, and Zayyat is finally able to “stand face to face with the Commissioner”. In a gesture of defiance she faces up to him, as she feels that her whole existence depends on this moment of getting back what was stolen from her. Her dress comes to represent much more than a piece of clothing. Zayyat includes the reader in her thoughts: “Was it my dress? My humanity? What has been stolen from me? From us? Was it just at that moment, or in every decade past?” (124).

This episode is a turning point in the book as the prisoners' customary efforts of covert subversion are transformed into actual resistance. Zayyat here portrays the prison confinement as not only one of physical imprisonment but also a psychological one inflicted upon them, not by its concrete walls but formed of human beings who create what Zayyat describes as “this grey wall” of warders. The warders' and commissioner's actual role is to fulfil the main function of imprisonment, namely a structure of domination that the prisoners perceive as the ultimate form of punishment.³ One form of this dominance is when the Commissioner – a man – is forcing a group of young Islamist girls to appear in front of him without their veils, an act of intended humiliation and a violation of their beliefs.⁴ Zayyat uses her description here strategically as she describes the prisoners as

“captives”, “stripped of their cloaks” (124). Parallel to the girls’ “nakedness”, Zayyat herself has lost her dress and can see how her, and their, pieces of clothing, taken away, constitute a violation of their basic rights. The symbol of the dress (or veil) in this episode reminds us of a similar function that the flag plays in her earlier novel *The Open Door* (where on the Abbas Bridge during the students’ demonstrations of 1946 Zayyat recounts the scene of resistance where she endeavoured to cover up the nakedness of her people and herself both metaphorically and physically).⁵

Here in *The Search*, through her moment of madness, Zayyat has come to her senses: finally, in prison at the age of almost 60, her life and her struggle all come together in a moment of total and complete serenity. She experiences a true and unique moment of being which she summarizes in this simple phrase: “Now I know”. These simple but extremely evocative words are what Zayyat leaves the reader with towards the end of her book. Her quest is nearly complete. The main turning point is her self-realization, for now she knows who she really is:

I was the girl who, in the middle of the thirties, went down from the balcony of Sharia El-Abbasi in Mansoura and scuffled among the yellow buttons and the dull black rifles. I know that I was the young woman who, in the middle of the forties, sat on the edge of Abbas Bridge, her salt tears turning to stone as she waited for her companions, drowned one after the other, waited for the corpse of one companion after another, covered with the green flag, the victims of the Abbas Bridge massacre. (124)

Her moment of understanding, of being one with herself, has enabled her to stand up and regain what confidence she has lost over the years. As she had tended to the victims of Abbas Bridge before, she begins here to methodically and calmly cover up the girls’ lack of appropriate clothing:

I began to pick up the girls’ cloaks from the pile, their gloves, veils and scarves, while the battle raged. The girls kept seeking refuge in the lavatory, time after time, to veil themselves, and I kept going back and forth across the ward, coming and going to the lavatory. To each I gave something of her own – a cloak, a headscarf, a veil, gloves. (125)

Zayyat’s resistance here lies in the small but symbolic gestures in helping her fellow inmates to cover themselves up, and so reversing the wardens’ actions. She is giving the girls back the decorum that they had lost in the search.

Zayyat has managed to attain a state where she is one with herself: her undivided being has finally overcome the confines of the spirit and prison walls. Zayyat finally reaches the stage where she can declare that she felt that the search no longer concerned her at all; she adds: “nobody had the power to strip me or get under my skin”. As she covers the last of the girls, she links the past to the present:

My eyes weep as I finish what I am doing. I drape the last cloak over Sabah and hold her to my breast, the salt tears in my eyes that turned to stone are spent, the tears in the eyes of a young woman who sat on the bank of the Nile in 1946, watching one person after the other drown. (125)

Finally, for Zayyat the search is over and, in a symbolic gesture, Zayyat leaves the dark enclosure of the prison behind her, and passes through the corridors, going past “the heaps of things that littered the passage, the devastation and the darkness”, and she opens the door “as wide as it would go and slipped out into the courtyard and the sunlight” (125).

The final paragraph of *The Search* is indeed a moving one. Zayyat is sitting on the end of her bed in prison, and she can now organize her papers. Her reconciliation is complete. She is able to state unequivocally at this point that she can now put her papers “that were all mixed up where they lay in their secret hiding place, in order” (125). All her uncompleted and unpublished texts, her thoughts and her life can come together. She has defied her confinement and reclaimed her space by putting her papers in order, by writing *The Search: Personal Papers*. Neither the wardens nor the Commissioner could locate her papers. The forces of domination could probably never find her hiding place, while she gives her papers to her readers, symbolically retrieving both her freedom and the nation’s to create a meeting point that is able, at least on a symbolic level, to defy the confines of a totalitarian regime in a move towards a people-based democratic space, a common ground.

For Soueif, this establishment of a common ground started during the Arab *Nahda* (enlightenment) and was protected by its thinkers during the colonial period, leading to a belief in the possibility of a coexistence between diverse cultures and shared beliefs in ideals of social justice, public services and equality. Soueif writes: “in other words this Mezzaterra was universalist, democratic, and humane” (*Mezzaterra* 7). But like Zayyat, Soueif also feels that during the 1980s and 1990s the political climate changed and this generation “found this hospitable and open Mezzaterra was now under attack” (8). Soueif adds:

As components of my Mezzaterra have hardened, as some have sought to invade and grab territory and others have thrown up barricades, I have seen my space shrink and felt the ground beneath my feet tremble. Tectonic plates shift into new positions and what was once an open and level plain twists into a jagged, treacherous land. (9)

Mezzaterra significantly maps the terrain where the terminology used in the title and the extended metaphor used in the preface is noticeably territorial and geographic in its expression, with tectonic plates shifting and level plains twisting. In “What is Minor Literature?” Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari use similar territorial and geographic terms to define what constitutes a minor literature and argue that its focal point is defined in terms of its “cramped space” which forces its individuals into a dialectic of politics and place. Soueif negotiates a topological and textual space in both *Mezzaterra* and in her novel *The Map of Love*, both of which can be read as an attempt to cross the cultural divide, to reach out in order to explain the political and cultural other.

The Map of Love is two love stories intertwined, one that takes place at the end of the 20th century and one at its beginning; both love stories are between people of different cultures. In both the women are from the West (Anna and Isabel) and the men are from the Arab world (Sharif and Omar). In the historic story line, Sharif is from Egypt and Anna is from the UK; whereas in the contemporary story line Omar is Palestinian-American and Isabel is American. The novel tells the story of these two love affairs and in doing so traces Egypt’s history over a span of 100 years. It also explores the possibility of true cross-cultural relationships and the role that language plays in this encounter as to whether or not it impedes the possibility of such cross-cultural encounters.

Through strategies of dislocating time, place and language the author attempts to bring to the fore an interplay of cross-cultural relationships with politics and history. Soueif expresses this concern with the possibility of cross-cultural dialogue in her interview with Joseph Massad, when she states that:

There is a concern with interpreting between cultures, which is expressed in *The Map of Love* in the articles that Sharif writes and Anna translates for the world at large. Anna expresses the problem quite clearly when she says, in effect, I am not talking about being able simply to translate from one language to another, I am talking about being able to represent the feelings expressed in one language – to represent them in an idiom that is immediately comprehensible in another culture. (Massad 85)

Here, Soueif emphasizes that she is not only talking about simply translating from one language to another but about understanding in an idiom that is comprehensible in another culture. In *The Map of Love* the women protagonists play this role. Anna translates Sharif's writing, whereas Amal, Omar's sister, explains the etymological structure of Arabic language to Isabel, as is demonstrated in the following excerpt:

"Take the root q-l-b, qalb. You see, you can read this?"

"Yes."

"Qalb: the heart, the heart that beats, the heart at the heart of things. Yes?"

She nods, looking intently at the marks on the paper.

"Then there's a set number of forms – a template almost – that any root can take. So in the case of 'qalb' you get 'qalab': to overturn, overthrow, turn upside down, make into the opposite; hence 'maglab': a dirty trick, a turning of the tables and also a rubbish dump. 'Maqloub': upside down; 'mutaqallib': changeable; and 'inqilab': a coup ..."

[...] "Always look for the root: the three consonants. Or two." (82)

Amazingly Isabel, "the good westerner", understands this concept and towards the end of the novel, as she grasps the language, hands Amal a piece of paper with the following written on it:

Umm: mother (also the top of the head)

Ummah: nation, hence ammama: to nationalise [...]

A blank space, and then

Abb: father. (164)

Amal reads what is written and concedes that Isabel has been successful in finding all the derivatives for the words. Here the act of translation and explaining the language has succeeded, Isabel has understood. Soueif hopes that the rest of the world will follow suit.

In *The Map of Love*, Soueif relates an historic account of Egypt and by doing so is actively seeking to create roads for communication and understanding. She is trying to find a common ground, and hopes to open a window onto other cultures. Amal plays a crucial role as facilitator: she bridges past and present, befriends Isabel, brings the fragments together.

This process of bringing together different cultures is manifested in *The Map of Love* in various ways. The three-piece tapestry that Amal finds in a trunk that contains memoirs and letters that belonged to Anna, and which is sent back to Egypt by Omar, is one example. Together Amal and Isabel unravel the history, politics and love affairs of their ancestors. As the story unravels the reader lives through the fragmented episodes of the various protagonists' lives, and through Amal the story of the past is re-created in the present. The curious woven tapestry found in this trunk represents an amalgamation of Egypt's history, depicting both a Pharaonic image and an Arabic inscription. In some ways Amal's whole search is "to piece together the three panels of the tapestry that Anna wove in Egypt" (Luo 93). Anna describes this tapestry in her letters: "It shall depict the Goddess Isis, with her brother consort the God Osiris and between them the Infant

Horus” (Soueif, *Map of Love* 403). The story of Isis in Ancient Egyptian mythology in many ways parallels Amal’s: for just as Isis gathers the pieces of Osiris’ dismembered body scattered all over Egypt to give him eternal life, Amal too gathers the fragments of letters and memoirs to reunite past with present.⁶ Furthermore, one can read into it Soueif’s own attempt as an author to reunite Egypt’s history with its present, as well as bringing East to West. Is Soueif presenting herself as Egypt’s modern-day Isis? Luo argues that by moving across time and between cultures, Soueif attempts what Edward Said describes as: “the intertwined and interdependent, and above all overlapping streams of historical experience” (Said 312).⁷

The three-piece tapestry that Amal attempts to bring together in the novel succeeds on this level. However, on another, the cultural difference and time diversity lead the reader to question the possibility of bridging the gap between “us” and “the other”, suggesting that the cosmopolitan and geographic boundaries are yet to be entirely erased. We are reminded here of Soueif’s laments in her Preface to *Mezzaterra*:

But in today’s world a separatist option does not exist; a version of this common ground is where we all, finally, must live if we are to live at all. And yet the loudest voices are the ones that deny its very existence; that trumpet a “clash of civilizations”. My non-fiction, then, from the second half of the Eighties, through the Nineties, rather than celebrating Mezzaterra, became a defence of it, an attempt to demonstrate its existence. (9)

One way of confronting this challenge of finding a common ground through erasing boundaries is explored by the contemporary writer and blogger Rehab Bassam. Bassam, like many other young Egyptian writers, has found the Internet an ideal platform to overcome boundaries and reach out to her audience. The power of the web is in its ability to provide an avenue for writers to express themselves and connect with others without interference from a third party. Furthermore, weblogs have the power to “respatialize” and challenge the very notion of the public sphere central to our understanding of public and private space.

Bassam’s work, initially published entirely on the web, allows for an immediate and unhindered connection between the act of storytelling and the reader. This serves to challenge, among other things, previous conceptions of the dynamics in the relationship between reader and author. Diana Saco argues that if we consider spatiality as both physical and virtual, then we can better understand how cyberspace becomes a social space (xvii). Saco concludes that within this framework, space combines the physical, the mental and the social; which makes space a lived, social practice, that is also non-neutral (6–7). Finding a common ground depends on a public, an audience, so that reader and writer are able to co-habit this social space.

According to Oreoluwa Somolu:

Many women capitalise on the ability of blogs to be “a powerful conversational tool with the potential to reach a wide audience” and to “empower by giving a voice to the unheard”. Through “story sharing, encouragement, education, and words”, women “promote strong positive images”. (483)

This kind of story sharing is evoked in Bassam’s collection of her weblogs, *Orz Belaban L’shakhseen* [*Rice Pudding for Two*], published in book form in 2008. In the short story itself under the same title, Bassam shares the recipe of how to actually make rice pudding, with love. The recipe is addressed to a woman reader:

To make rice pudding for two you will need four cups of rice. First take the milk out of the fridge. Then put the rice on a wide white plate and pick out all the impurities. Put everything aside: your misery, sadness, anger, disappointment and any bad thoughts [...] this recipe needs a lot of patience and many sudden smiles. (12)⁸

One woman writing to another about how to create a dessert lovingly creates a certain amount of intimacy, a form of sisterhood, as the reader follows the author around the kitchen and house while she instructs them on the secrets of creating a food of love. The story actually contains a recipe for making rice pudding, without taking itself too seriously; it is both light-hearted and in some ways frivolous. The recipe is intermingled with the intermittent humming of Faryouz's song "Ana l'7abibi" [I am for my lover]. It concludes with special instructions on how to consume the rice pudding dish with this lover: "It should be served warm, on a pink glass plate. For garnish sprinkle with a pinch of cinnamon; with pursed lips plant your special print on his face. To be devoured slowly using fingers with a person you love" (13).

On her weblog, Bassam has a "good read" section; one of the books she mentions is *The Food of Love* by Anthony Capella, a choice that is not surprising given the number of food-related stories Bassam publishes. In fact Bassam carries on this theme of linking food consumption with food for thought on her blog when she announces that she has been invited to talk on television to discuss her work and bids her readers to "prepare [their] spoons".⁹ On the same theme Bassam quotes from Francis Bacon:

Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested: that is, some books are to be read only in parts, others to be read, but not curiously, and some few to be read wholly, and with diligence and attention. (Bassam, "Good Reads")

Sharing food is one of the recurrent themes in Bassam's work, and in another story "Tak 7anak" [Chatter], Bassam writes how her family nicknamed her "Rehab give me a bit [of food]" (Re7ab hat 7ita), as she explains, this is because when she goes to any restaurant she always wants to taste and share everybody else's food. In another story "Bil 2ams 7alimt bil Bati5" [Yesterday I dreamt of watermelon] Bassam tells her readers how in the heat of her room she is craving cold watermelon to help her combat the heat and her low blood pressure, and by some small miracle a knock is heard at the door and her partner tells her to eat with him cold watermelon which they share in front of the open fridge sitting on the cool tiles on the kitchen floor. Literary weblogs seem to allow for these small titbits of everyday existence to easily enter into their subject matter. Bassam's sharing of food is able to propagate food of love, literature and culture. The private sphere here enters the public domain almost seamlessly.

Weblogs thrive on finding a common ground, encouraged by the immediacy of interaction between author and reader. This intimate reader/writer interaction is best demonstrated by the following readers' comments on Bassam's blog: "I was praying and hoping please Rehab please, I cannot believe: a new post, why have you stopped writing frequently?" (9/10/09 3:06 PM, my translation). Another reader writes in broken English: "since you publish your book you ignore your blog calculate how many articles you wrote since you became popular, i don't acause you with any thing i just miss your words and i feel angry coz you ... can you hear" (10/3/10 2:29 PM).¹⁰

The sphere of literary writing in Bassam's work crosses over into other forms of writing in an attempt to "respatialize" and rethink these divides. Her eclectic stories reflect her many interests and incorporate both everyday minute living tales that include food,

reading and daydreaming and intricate and complex issues such as human relationships, growing up, the philology of language and the question of being.

In "A Note on the Author", Bassam writes that she believes that she was born "to catch dragons, to collect flowers, to tell stories and laugh ... born to babble and sway like a dreamy spring, and to walk barefooted across sunny days" (124). In other words Bassam lives in a dream world in as much as the real one in which she works in marketing, translation and children's book publishing. Bassam mentions that she spends her time between daydreaming and reading and has attempted drawing, piano and Spanish; but is good at knitting colourful scarves.

In her writing, her virtual friends seem just as real to her as her actual ones. In her "Acknowledgements" Bassam thanks her blog readers for all their wonderful suggestions without which she believes she could not have published her book and adds "all these [suggestions] were delicious food for my stories" (120). She then thanks her "imaginary" literary friends, amongst them Latifa Zayyat, Radwa Ashour and Ahdaf Soueif. Finally Bassam acknowledges her actual friends and family. At the top of her acknowledgements page she quotes the poet Fouad Hadad: "There is no life without others ... / you thrive in their prosperity and they thrive in yours" (120). This reminds us of Zayyat's own ideology of a meeting point, where the self successfully unites with the whole, in a common public space that is both democratic and collective.

However, the attempt of Bassam's generation to find a common ground is different from that of either Ahdaf Soueif or Latifa Zayyat. The world of cyberspace has opened a new dimension for them to connect with others. This has inevitably changed the way in which they interact with their audience and has further challenged the boundaries of literature and politics/virtual and actual/public and private. Such overlapping is evident in Bassam's latest weblog during the Egyptian revolution which started on 25 January 2011, where side by side with her usual stories there now is a list of "Political Demands from Tahrir Square". The reader is left free to read either or both.

As with Soueif and Zayyat before her, these three authors use literature, politics and social intervention at different points in their careers to forge both a spatial and a civic space. Their writing in its various forms is an act of restoring the balance between the public and private, in finding a common ground. In it we find the hope of freedom: ideological and physical. In a very moving statement that Zayyat made towards the end of her life, she asserts this very ideal of this everlasting quest for freedom:

No one now has the power to imprison me. I see this when I am fifty-eight years old, while I am on my way to prison. I catch a glimpse of my freedom complete at the end of the road and my reconciliation with myself after a long journey. But this freedom is not final nor lasting ... I have realised that to retain my freedom I have to assert it time after time either by action or through words.

And I lose this freedom every time I say to myself: the journey has been long and it is time for me to rest. (al-Bahrawi 239, my translation)

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Notes

1. The term “public sphere” encompasses a variety of meanings. It implies here a spatial concept, in which meanings are articulated, distributed, and negotiated within social sites and arenas; the collective body here is constituted by, and referred to, as “the public”. See Negt and Kluge.
2. Rehab Bassam, <hadouta.blogspot.com>, January 2009; all quotations from the stories refer to the published edition *Rice Pudding for Two*, and are my translations. I have chosen to use blogger’s transliteration in keeping with the spirit of the texts discussed. Hamza = 2; ayn = 3; ghayn = 3’; ha’ = 7; kha = 5’.
3. I have applied concepts developed by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, in particular his analysis of genealogy of the prison system as a structure of domination in the modern era.
4. It is important to note here that Zayyat was not a sympathizer of Islamic political movements, nor did she herself embrace the wearing of the veil. She points out earlier in the chapter that the warders presumed the two groups of liberal thinkers and Islamists would be fighting and that they would benefit from a lack of solidarity between the two groups which belonged to very different political backgrounds. (Zayyat, *The Search* 116). However, Zayyat sees this attack on the girls as an ideological and symbolic act of humiliation and violation, and acts accordingly.
5. Abbas Bridge is situated between Cairo University and Old Cairo and used to open for boats and barges to pass. The Abbas Bridge incident – 21 February 1946 – involved Egyptian students on their way to present a memo to the king demanding the cancellation of the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian treaty. They were ambushed by the security forces who blocked both ends of the bridge and then opened it, causing hundred of students to drown.
6. For further discussion on this topic see Houston.
7. See Luo 100.
8. I conclude that it is directed at a female audience because of the grammatical structure of the sentences, in which Bassam uses the feminine verb: sta7tagin, a5rigi, da3’i, qumi, etc.
9. 7 February 2008, <http://hadouta.blogspot.com/>, January 2009.
10. 10/3/10 2:29 PM, <http://hadouta.blogspot.com/>, February 2011. This response was written in English so I decided to leave it as it is without editing.

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