

## Subversive Writing: Mona Prince's 'Laughing Revolution' from pre- to post-2011 Egypt\*

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### Abstract

Although it may seem absurd, it is no exaggeration to say that humour is a very serious matter in Egypt, where dozens of intellectuals have analysed this phenomenon, often linking it to their national identity. This article presents various opinions on Egyptian satire to introduce a 2015 novel by Mona Prince, one of the Egyptian writers of the 1990s generation. In 2012, the author published a memoir of the January 25 Revolution. This study tries to explain the relationship between her political activism and her literary career; the role of humour in her *œuvre*; and how she deals with gender and religious issues in her 2015 work, which is also autobiographic. Moreover, since the novelist wrote the text between 2008 and 2014, this article offers some notes on satiric literature in pre- and post-2011 Egypt.

*Key words:* Egyptian writers, fiction, non-fiction, memoirs, humour, satire, subversion, revolution.

A person laughs after or in the midst of an oppressive moment? That's because laughter is a strange, magical weapon that protects without causing bloodshed, while it also subverts the power balance between the oppressor and the oppressed.

Raḍwā 'ĀSHŪR 1999: 233

### Introduction: The author and her "lost generation"

Born in Cairo in 1970, Mona Prince (Munà Birins) is a writer, an academic and a translator, as well as an activist. The author's socio-political commitment emerges in *Ḥayāt wa-mughāmarāt al-Duktūra M* (The life and adventures of Professor M., 2015), an autobiographical work, which the novelist defines as satirical literature (*adab sākhir*) as well as a *mutatāliyya riwā'iyya*, a term that could be translated as 'story sequence'. Yet, the interconnectedness among the seven stories forming this text makes it classifiable as a

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\* This paper was first prepared for the twelfth EURAMAL (European Association for Modern Arabic Literature) conference on "Upholding Humanity in a Post-Human World? Arabic Literature after the 'Arab Spring'", University of Oslo, Norway, 30 May-04 June 2016.

*composite novel*, i.e., a single text composed of shorter autonomous texts that have been coherently grouped becoming the text-pieces of the single whole text itself (DUNN & MORRIS 1995: 1, 9).

Prince is one of the Egyptian writers of the 1990s generation, known to be reluctant to refer to ideology in their narratives where, as Sabry Hafez notes, they convey a sense of disillusionment with collective political performances, while they question the meaning of life without suggesting solutions to reform reality, which was the goal of modernist literature (HAFEZ 2010: 55-57). Yet, these authors subvert established notions emanating from state policies and mainstream social mores. This individual political act also implies what Marie-Thérèse Abdel-Messih describes as “a total break with viewing language as ‘sacred’” (ABDEL-MESSIH 2006: 22). Samia Mehrez notes that the literary output of the 1990s generation displays gender equality, in both quantitative and qualitative terms, a fact occurring “for the first time in modern Egyptian letters” (MEHREZ 2010: 126). Besides Mona Prince, Sumayya Ramaḍān (b. 1951), Mayy al-Tilmisānī (b. 1965), Mīrāl al-Ṭaḥāwī (b. 1968), Nūrā Amīn (b. 1970) and Maṣūra ‘Izz al-Dīn (b. 1976) are all successful female authors who started to publish their works in the 1990s. Some celebrated authors of this generation are Aḥmad Zaḡhlūl al-Shiṭī<sup>1</sup> (b. 1961), Muṣṭafā Dhikrī (b. 1966), Ibrāhīm Farghalī (b. 1967) and Yūsuf Rakhā (b. 1976). The works of these writers mirror the ideological crisis caused by both the end of the Cold War and the first disastrous event of the “new world order”: the 1990-1991 Gulf War, which gave the fatal blow to moribund Pan-Arabism that had been weakening ever since the 1967 defeat, i.e., the *Naksa*.

The (hi)story of this crisis unfolds in Prince’s first novel, *Thalāth ḥaqa’ib li’l-safar* (Three Suitcases for the Departure, Cairo, 1998). The protagonist of the story is Munīra, a young woman who decides to leave Egypt feeling that she is slowly suffocating in her country, which has nothing to offer her so that she can fulfil herself. Upon looking at an old picture she is planning to put into a suitcase, she remembers that her friends have either emigrated or given up their ambitions or resorted to religion or drugs to flee from a depressing reality. Another picture induces her to recall the deaths of half of her relatives that occurred in dramatic moments of Egypt’s history; and the key event is precisely the 1990-1991 Gulf war. Munīra undertakes political action for the first time in her life, participating in a demonstration against the bombing of Iraq; but due to this, university authorities issue a temporary suspension of her studies. Her parents therefore tell her to let aside politics, an advice then backed by the leftist intellectual she loves hoping that he will substitute her father who is either absent or too busy with his job. Her following sense of defeat is due to the failure of the protests as well as to the opposition to her political activism on the part of her family and her should be saviour. Hence, her world collapses on the private and on the collective level at the same time. A fact that makes her feel equally disaffected from her family and her nation. As Mehrez suggests, within this novel, Munīra’s alienation from both the familial icon and the interrelated national imagery is emphasized “through the constant shift of the narrative point of view from the first-person narrator in the past to the third-person narrator in the present”. Moreover, Egypt’s present

1 Dina Heshmat has analysed al-Shiṭī’s narrative of the January 25 Revolution, *Mī’at khaṭwa min al-thawra: yawmiyyāt min Maydān al-Tahrīr* (A Hundred Steps from the Revolution: Diary from Midan al-Tahrir, Cairo: Dār Mīrīt, 2011). See HESHMAT 2015: 67-73.

“disgrace” is highlighted through intertextual references to *al-Bāb al-maftūh* (*The Open Door*, Cairo: AUC Press, 2000) by Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt (1923-1996) depicting the experience of a young Egyptian woman during nationalism’s vital 1946-1956 phase (MEHREZ 2010: 128-29).

Prince herself describes *Thalāth ḥaqāʾib li'l-safar* as a narrative about her generation, which she defines as “a lost generation”. “Lost” because being young in the midst of the ideological emptiness of the post-cold war order meant living with no utopian vision of the future and no points of reference outside of the self. This entailed self-isolation in writing.

### From subversive fiction to revolutionary activism

In 2008, Prince published her second novel, *Innī uḥaddithu-ka li-tarā* (English tr. *So You May See*, Cairo: AUC Press, 2011), where crucial events take place in closed spaces in Cairo. Yet, they seem to be in a ‘nowhere land’. The Egyptian protagonist, ‘Ayn, is also the narrator of the story, in which she recalls her difficult love affair with ‘Alī, a Moroccan journalist working in Cairo, who appears to be an anti-conformist, but in the end, returns to Morocco to marry a woman that his family chose for him, according to the traditional custom of arranged marriages. Ibrāhīm Farghalī compared Prince’s novel to an extremely hazardous “gambling game”, classifying it as a typical text of the 1990s and of post-modern fiction—characterized by the tendency to subjectivity and the avoidance of absolutes—, as well as a sample of body literature. The author presents the “model of a woman who deals with her body without complications”, being aware of the fact that “she owns it and not vice versa” (*al-Nahār*, May 31, 2008). Intertextuality, fragmentation, gender blending—mainly poetry inserted in the narrative prose—, mixed techniques and code-switching are all formal features of *So You May See* that mirror ‘Ayn’s search for freedom, her anti-conformism and transgressive actions. Storytelling is a central theme of the novel that *seems* as a real memoir. In the “Prologue”, in fact, ‘Ayn is planning to write about her love affair. She is searching for both new ideas and an innovative form. Knowing that generally a novel gathers praise only if it deals with big issues and is loaded with ideology, she decides to include her love story within a travel narrative, adding to it “a fair amount of politics, sociology, psychology and erotica, all of which are exciting features: a tried and tested recipe for fame and translation”. Yet, she eventually changes her mind.

The 9/11 terroristic attacks and the 2003 bombing of Iraq are the only political events briefly mentioned in *So You May See*, which is almost totally set in Egypt, where ‘Ayn seems to be completely detached from her society, given that all of the other significant characters in the novel are foreigners (*Egypt Independent*, July 31, 2011). The key psychological feature characterizing the protagonist as an Egyptian is her sense of humour. In fact, her charm is a blend of wittiness and physical attractiveness, highlighted through the description of the way she is dressed. One scene is particularly interesting in this respect: ‘Ayn meets ‘Alī the night before his departure.

He’s surprised by a pharaonic queen, as he described me.

I go and see him in a long, white, low-cut dress, faience jewellery, and my hair in plaits down my back. (PRINCE, AUC Press, 2011: 98)

Hence, 'Ayn's national identity is also defined through references to Egypt's Pharaonic past that embodies the cultural distance between the protagonist and her country's present. When the English translation of the novel came out in spring 2011, Prince was writing a memoir of the January 25 Revolution, a crucial event that she decided to record, deeming that official history would falsify it (*Mideast Posts*, July 11, 2014). Yet, the novelist garnered national attention and the media spotlight as an activist mostly starting from March 2012, when Suez University suspended her from teaching for six months without pay, precisely due to her involvement in the eighteen-day Tahrir protests. During the suspension, the author self-published *Ismī Thawra (Revolution Is My Name)*, Cairo: AUC Press, 2014); and then nominated herself to run in Egypt's first democratic presidential race. Prince did this only as a symbolic act aimed at encouraging Egyptian youth "to work and use their imagination" to complete the revolutionary process they had started (*Egypt Independent*, March 06, 2012). As expected, in fact, she did not even manage to take part in the elections scheduled in May 2012. Under Mursi's Islamist regime, Suez University suspended Prince on April 16, 2013, for allegedly insulting Islam during a class discussion on 'Racism and sectarianism in Egypt'. The author received grants to teach and study abroad thanks to the support of the Committee on Academic Freedom (MESA); and she left her country, in 2014, shortly after Sisi's victory in the presidential competition.

Besides offering a picture of Mona Prince's life in post-Mubarak Egypt, the aforementioned events also reveal the prophetic significance of *Hayāt wa-mughāmarāt*. In fact, although published in 2015, this composite novel is formed by six text-pieces written before the 2011 uprising and only one composed afterwards. Moreover, in the latter story, the novelist recalls her vain attempt to run in the 2012 presidential race, also hinting at the electoral result and at the 2014 elections. Therefore, *Hayāt wa-mughāmarāt* symbolizes a sort of bridge between pre- and post-2011 Egypt; while it also represents a turning point in Prince's literary career. The author had never dealt with socio-political issues as overtly as she does in this novel. Prince chose to write about these themes in 2008, when she sensed change in her society; and the shift to satire just came natural, as the use of Egyptian Colloquial Arabic (*'āmmiyya*), i.e., Cairene dialect, does in this kind of writing, which requires witty expressions. Moreover, Prince perceives humour as an essential trait of her national identity. Thus, it "comes out naturally" in her art, since it is a part of her as an Egyptian.<sup>2</sup>

*Hayāt wa-mughāmarāt* is not only marked by humour, but also by other elements characterising satiric literature. Hodgart suggests that a satirist "aims at simplification", whereas "a novelist aims at understanding the complexities of life". The length of a novel itself prevents it from being suitable for satire, which becomes unbearable unless it is coupled with an element of wit, embodied by "a light closed form which helps to make a simple point effectively" (HODGART 1969: 11, 213-14). A "light closed form" brings to mind the *maqāma*, from which contemporary Egyptian satirical writers draw inspiration, although they depict reality, thus abandoning the fictionality of the medieval archtext. Frye mentions Pharaonic Egypt, recalling the ancient roots of satirical literature. He defines satire as "militant irony", i.e., a clear statement of moral norms implicit in the writer's selection of the absurdities to display in a work; it requires "at least a token of fantasy, a

2 My interview with Prince in Venice, Nov. 24, 2015.

content which the reader recognizes as grotesque". Pure irony, instead, "is consistent with both complete realism of content and with the suppression of attitude on the part of the author" (FRYE 1957: 223-24).

These definitions of satire show the enormous difference between *So You May See* and *Ḥayāt wa-mughāmarāt*, which Prince started to write ten years after she published her first novel, where she conveyed her generation's lack of hope in political activism. Significantly, in 2008, Egypt witnessed the birth of the April 6 Youth Movement linked to the Egyptian Movement for Change, founded in 2004, in the wake of the first authorized demonstration of the Mubarak era: the 2003 protest in Taḥrīr Square against the war on Iraq. The political slogan launched by the latter movement became its popular moniker: *Kifāya!*, 'Enough is enough!', meaning that people could no longer bear the regime of a president ruling the country since 1981.

### Satire in Egypt: Folk versus elite

Prince's perception of humour as an essential trait of her national identity clearly echoes the concept of *Egyptianity* arising from Egypt's early Twentieth century territorial nationalism—strongly expressed by Pharaonism<sup>3</sup>—and still quite common in the country. It is therefore of no surprise that dozens of Egyptian intellectuals have tried to explain the importance of this phenomenon in their society.<sup>4</sup> Nasserist journalist and writer 'Ādil Ḥammūda presents various views on the role of humour in Egypt in a 1990 study (republished in 1999 with a new chapter on the Mubarak era) focused on political jokes, which he sees as the most popular form of dissent in his country. The author suggests geo-deterministic and Egyptological theories as the basis of his analysis of Egyptian satire, tracing its origins in the age of the Pharaohs. He quotes a Pharaonic myth attributing the creation of the world to divine laughter; and then describes satirical drawings dating to the Hyksos domination of Egypt (1640-1540 BC) to show that, in his country, people have always tended to laugh even in dramatic moments. A tendency he also links to religion, suggesting that the favourable environment of the Nile valley brought ancient Egyptians to love life to such an extent as to have tried to overcome their fear of death, by conceiving the idea of the *afterlife*. Ḥammūda relates this concept, which permeated the funerary cult of the Pharaonic era, to a paradox he detects in his own society: upon facing a tragedy, Egyptians cry and laugh at the same time, resorting to laughter even in the face of death to defeat the fear of death itself. A contradiction the author noticed for the first time precisely in the aftermath of the *Naksa*. Moreover, commenting a passage of Herodotus' account of Egypt, Ḥammūda describes ancient Egyptian religious feasts as "boisterous satirical mass celebrations", which he compares to "what in the current language are defined as festivals or carnivals" (119). A comparison that reminds of Bakhtin's study of the origins and development of the *carnavalesque* style marking the grotesque realism in Rabelais' novel: a soothing satire reflecting the medieval "folk image game of the upside-down world" where "the fool or clown is the king" (BAKHTIN 1965/1984: 425-26). Ḥammūda equates the

3 On the Pharaonist Movement, see COLLA 2007.

4 See ZANELLI 2011a: 103-111.

combination of devotion and mockery within sacred feasts of the Pharaonic age to the blend of veneration and derision towards the Power (*al-sulṭa*) in modern Egypt. Thus, in the 1990s, most Egyptians still tended to adore their ruler and, on the other hand, to ridicule the ruler himself to shatter the fear he aroused as a dictator (ḤAMMŪDA: 117-19). The author insists on the limits of this satire by opposing precisely *al-nukta* (joke or anecdote) to *al-thawra* (revolution or uprising):

Although *al-nukta* “might” lead to *al-thawra* or “might” stimulate the eruption of one, *al-nukta* disappears during *al-thawra*, since the tension of the event hinders mockery. Moreover, *al-nukta* is the means of those who cannot cause change, whereas *al-thawra* is the means of those who can. [...] And if *al-thawra* fails, *al-nukta* advances. In fact, depression, oppression and defeat are its [battle] fields: dead bodies to stand on. Populations are like slaughtered birds, they laugh because of the intensity of the pain. (Ibid.: 163-64).

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Ḥammūda’s observation is fallacious regarding Egypt’s 2011 uprising, since *laughtivism*, i.e., the strategic use of humour in nonviolent activism, characterized the eighteen-day protests of the so-called ‘Laughing Revolution’. Yet, it is true as to the Egyptian pre- and post-revolutionary situations, which Prince depicts in *Ḥayāt wa-mughāmarāt*. The author’s move to *adab sākhir*, in 2008, actually revealed a new trend that had been escalating in her country at that time, although satire was not at all a novelty in modern Egyptian letters, where it appeared ever since the Nineteenth century *Nahḍa*. Hence, various press reports suggesting a rise of Egyptian satirical literature in the pre-2011 years, may seem inconsistent, unless one realizes that, in Egypt, *adab sākhir* has always been very popular, but critics have generally marginalized it, according to unspecified appraisal criteria. Richard Jacquemond explains this contradiction by noting that laughter is a value in Egypt’s mass culture that exists next to “an elite culture that is unremittingly serious” (JACQUEMOND 2008: 155). In other words, the marginalization of satire in Egypt is mainly due to a cultural bias. Moreover, Egyptian critics tend to exclude non-fiction writings, including certain memoirs, from the field of canonical literature; and for most of the twentieth century they also rejected the use of *‘āmmiyya* in literary works. A considerable amount of *adab sākhir* is marked by both realism of content and the colloquial. An author may write a text entirely in *‘āmmiyya* or, as occurs more often, alternating the latter with Standard Arabic. Yet, dialect is not an exclusive characteristic of satirical writing. The presence of mixed language styles in literary texts started to grow in the 1970s, as one of the signs of the experimentalism shaping postmodern Egyptian fiction; and the use of *‘āmmiyya* has increased since the mid-1990s, when critics began to accept works written entirely in the colloquial (ROSENBAUM 2011: 334-35); but they continued to marginalize *adab sākhir*.

Interestingly, the afore-mentioned traits of satiric literature also appear in *Khulwat al-ghalbān* (A poor man’s hermitage, Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 2003) by Ibrāhīm Aṣlān (1935-2012) who, as is well known, was not a satirist. The famous writer of the 1960s generation recalls his encounters with other Egyptian authors in most of the non-fictional short texts of this collection, which he described as “real stories about renowned personalities in a new artistic form” consisting in “various techniques ranging across those of storytelling, biography, autobiography and reportage” (*al-Sharq al-Awsaṭ*, 2002). Explaining his move

to non-fiction, Aşlān hints at the dominant poetic function of verbal art; and describing his new narrative “form”, he suggests the architextuality of his non-fictional texts. Architextual relationships are inherent in the study of the different positioning and perception of a text in different historical and cultural contexts, according to the development and assessment of the literary genres. The marginalization of *adab sākhir* in modern Egypt depends exactly on the way Egyptian critics tend to perceive it, i.e., non-artistic. In this respect, it is useful to note that *Khulwat al-ghalbān* features satire without being avowedly satirical; and the non-ascription to the genre is mainly why similar works are accepted by Egyptian criticism (JACQUEMOND 2008: 154). Aşlān’s non-fiction actually has the same appeal as his fiction. He relentlessly investigated new expressive forms during his career, trying to rupture the rhetoric of “illusory official narratives”. In fact, he deemed that “writing is a *scandalizer* and its value stems from the spiritual energy with which it was written” (*al-Sharq al-Awsaṭ*, 2003). Significantly, in *The Heron* (Cairo: AUC Press, 2005), Aşlān denounces Sadat’s neoliberal policies, i.e., the so-called *Infitāh* (‘opening’ to free market economy), conveying the sense of guilt and frustration of a young intellectual, Yūsuf, who cannot write about his ghetto-neighbourhood, Imbaba, nor about the 1977 bread riots that he observed with detachment while he was in Taḥrīr; but he eventually does.<sup>5</sup>

Among the texts comprised in *Khulwat al-gharbān*, the most relevant one to this discussion is “Tawāṭu” (Collusion), where Aşlān presents the silence-outcry dichotomy recalling his conversation with a taxi driver during a ride in downtown Cairo; more or less the same theme and setting of Nagīb Maḥfūz’s “Waṣiyyat sawwāq tāksī” (Recommendation of a taxi driver, 1989). In each of these stories, the narrator is an intellectual who minimizes problems an average citizen denounces. In Maḥfūz’s work, the cab driver is a victim of both press self-censorship and the *Infitāh*. In “Tawāṭu”, instead, the driver does not know that security forces have forbidden vehicles to stop in the streets surrounding the US embassy in the aftermath of 9/11. Although he is aware of this prohibition, Aşlān stops the taxi in that area. Therefore, the driver receives a fine; and during the ride, he expresses his feeling of being the victim of a police officer’s mistake or abuse in a country where people cannot claim their own rights. Both stories suggest that a writer must always tell the truth, denouncing problems affecting ordinary citizens; thus, they are somewhat forerunners of Khālīd al-Khamīsī’s 2006 *Tāksī: ḥawādīt al-mashāwīr* (*Taxi*, Bloomsbury, 2011). The tide wave of satirical writing emerging in pre-2011 years was strongly due to the outstanding success of this book that Tarek El-Ariss defines as “fiction of scandal” and Christian Junge as “*kifāya* literature”.<sup>6</sup>

Commenters admired the rise of *adab sākhir* viewing it as a form of resistance fuelled by not only political repression and increasing wealth disparities, but also by precisely growing gaps between intellectuals and ordinary citizens, as well as by obscurantist Islamism perceived by many sectors of Egyptian youth as an alien form of Islam deriving from rich Gulf states (*Reuters*, Oct. 13, 2010). Yet, most young writers were denouncing problems, without suggesting solutions, according to various critics who stressed on the weakness and superficiality of new satirical writings, assessing them as mere commercial products full of kitsch humour. Sayyid Maḥmūd highlighted the low level of recent texts, in

5 For a recent analysis of this novel, see ZIADA 2016.

6 See EL-ARISS 2012: 15-20, and JUNGE 2015: 258-260.

contrast to those by satirists of the older generation, such as Aḥmad Ragab (1920-2014) and Maḥmūd al-Sa'danī (1927-2010), who employed “a simple and insightful writing style accessible to mainstream readers” (*Egypt Independent*, Nov. 1, 2009). This positive assessment indicates the emergence of a new attitude, given that criticism had always marginalized these established satirists. A novelty proved by a fact that Jacquemond notes in his recent study of *adab sākhir*: in July 2011, Aḥmad Ragab received the highest state award in literature. Commentators stressed that this recognition of satiric literature on the part of the literary establishment was long overdue (JACQUEMOND 2016: 357, fn. 13). Thus, the eighteen days in Taḥrīr shattered the folk/elite dichotomy in Egyptian culture.

Yet, the fear aroused by totalitarianism was soon restored in Egypt. For example, the young esteemed satirist, Bilāl Faḍl (b. 1974), is one of the few libertarian intellectuals who condemned the August 2013 Rābi'a al-ʿAdawiyya massacre. He then continued to criticize Egypt's interim authorities in his articles and, therefore, underwent various forms of censorship until he left his country.

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In his essay, Jacquemond focuses on the tension between reformism and subversion in recent satirical writing, analysing works by three writers. Adopting Stephan Guth's theory, he argues that the carnivalesque style marks subversive texts that, unlike optimistic modernist works, do not have a moralizing, reforming function, but only a soothing one, i.e., allowing to 'let off steam'. Moreover, the two different kinds of satire mirror the age differences between the satirists. Īhāb Mu'awwad (b. 1969) is the author of *al-Rijāl min Būlāq wa'l-nisā' min Awwal Fayṣal* (Men are from Būlāq, women are from the beginning of Fayṣal Street, Cairo: Dār al-Riwāq, 2012), a pastiche of *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* (John GRAY, 1992). Focusing on Egyptian middle-class married couples, the book reflects the fact that the writer is a marriage counsellor and provides advice in the daily *al-Yawm al-sābi'*. Jacquemond classifies his satire as “reformist”. Muṣṭafā Shuhayyib (b. 1988), instead, does not try to offer any sort of advice to his readers. This young subversive satirist's most successful book is *Riḥlatī min il-shakk li'l-shakk barḍuh* (My Journey from Doubt to Doubt Again, Cairo: Dār al-Riwāq, 2015), a pastiche of Muṣṭafā Maḥmūd's *Riḥlatī min al-shakk ilā 'l-īmān* (My Journey from Doubt to Faith, 1970). In his short texts, Shuhayyib deals with most problems faced by Egyptian youth, except for those relating to politics, sexuality and religion. The absence of these three “taboo” topics seems ascribable to self-censorship. In fact, the book is very amusing, but it also transmits a sense of helplessness echoing the mood of youth in post-2013 Egypt. Wagīh Ṣabrī is the most pessimist and subversive young satirist. In his first book, *Hikāyāt sīkūbātiyya* (Psychopathic stories, Cairo: Dār al-Karma, 2015), he tackles the three afore-mentioned taboo themes in the odd manner of “black humour”, a novelty in *adab sākhir* (JACQUEMOND 2016: 361-365).

Prince is almost as old as Mu'awwad and, in *Ḥayāt wa-mughāmarāt*, she uses satire with a reforming function as he does; but she confirms her subversiveness. In Egypt, she is definitely an anti-conformist. Mu'awwad wants to correct faults according to the traditional moral norms of Egyptian society. He does not criticize marriage *per se*, but “its debasement” in Egypt's current social situation (JACQUEMOND 2016: 363). Prince, instead, mainly applies her own non-traditional moral principles, in *Ḥayāt wa-mughāmarāt*, where she optimistically uses satire to promote real change.

## Getting out of the shell, drawing upon the imagination

*Ḥayāt wa-mughāmarāt* is based on some of Prince's personal experiences, but the author categorically rejects the term *non-fictional* as a description of her autobiographical works, including *Ismī thawra*, which she wrote between March 2011 and February 2012, i.e., after the eighteen-day protests that she depicts. While she was composing the text, she temporarily titled it "Everyday events and scenes from the Lotus Revolution" and separately published each part of it on Facebook. The provisional title attests the author's intention to make the novel *seem* as a real diary; and to show the relationship between Egypt's January 25 Revolution and Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution. In the introduction, in fact, Prince quotes the comment she wrote on Facebook on January 14, 2011, to express her admiration for the Tunisians who "really love life" and, therefore, "got rid of their President" on that day, when she was in Tunis, an Egyptian village in the Faiyum oasis. However, she also conveys her scepticism regarding the outbreak of a similar uprising in Egypt, where most people only "worry about the afterlife" (PRINCE 2012: 6-7). Then she cites dozens of Egyptian political jokes inspired by the Tunisian Revolution. Intertextuality strongly marks the text that moreover includes newspaper excerpts, poems, songs, posts on Facebook and oral accounts of the events by various people. This polyphony is one of the traits that make *Revolution is My Name* comparable to *The Open Door*, also based on Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt's political activism (ZANELLI 2011b: 21-22). This milestone of Arabic feminist literature has inspired Prince who, as already said, quotes it in *Thalāth ḥaqā'ib li'l-safar*. In *Revolution is My Name*, the novelist shows how she re-established the relationship between herself and her society, overcoming an almost twenty-year-old sense of alienation. She actually defines this work as a polyphonic novel, in which she mainly wrote about "the reunion of the self with the collective other".<sup>7</sup> In her analysis of the text, Dina Heshmat notes that, in the beginning of the narrative of the January 25 events, Prince depicts herself while she walks next to the crowds, maintaining the position of an outsider until admiration for the youth involved in the protest encourages her to join them. A repositioning echoed by "a change in the use of the personal pronouns": the third-person plural (they) is abandoned through the shift to the first-person plural (we). Prince shows that the protests were mainly peaceful, but she also includes accounts of sporadic violence against security forces and of sexual harassment (HESHMAT 2015: 69-70). Moreover, in *Revolution is My Name*, the author highlights Egyptian women's activism during the uprising. Yet, Prince does not see herself as a feminist, but as a human rights activist. She considers feminism too limited in scope: her priority is to promote a mentality change, involving her entire society. Nonetheless, she deems that women are the most active continuators of the January 25 Revolution.<sup>8</sup>

Prince offers a very different image of Egyptian women in *Ḥayāt wa-mughāmarāt*, which she mostly wrote before 2011, as already noted. In the novel, she still expresses a sense of alienation from her society. Prince describes the adventures of her alter ego while taking public transportation or dealing with institutions of the state or the private sector and encountering various sorts of people. Professor M. immerses in her society, but she is

7 My interview with Mona Prince via Skype, May 18, 2016.

8 Ibid.

relentlessly an outsider who always discovers new absurdities and contradictions. She is jovial and sociable, but people often upset her; thus, she uses sarcasm and sometimes “earplugs” as a defence. M. is almost forty years old in the first text-piece. She has a boyfriend who does not live in Egypt: he is from another Arab country, which remains unmentioned as he remains anonymous throughout the novel. Prince states that *Ḥayāt wa-mughāmarāt* is not exactly a memoir: she only uses herself as a character to write fiction. She lends fictionality to the novel also by conveying the narrative in the third-person, a technique that moreover adds a touch of irony to an autobiographical work, as Roger Allen argues in his analysis of Tāhā Ḥusayn’s *al-Ayyām* (The Days) (ALLEN 1994: 38).

As already explained, *Ḥayāt wa-mughāmarāt* is a composite novel. There are three primary interconnective elements within the whole text:<sup>9</sup> all of the seven text-pieces have the same protagonist; all of them also include the same motif-pattern consisting in one or more icons of libertarian secularism versus those of ostentatious piety; six are set in Cairo (and one in Suez). Moreover, the novel describes life in pre- and post-2011 Egypt, i.e., in a specific time;<sup>10</sup> and is coherent both thematically and stylistically. To show the unifying factors within the whole-text, it is useful to pause on the first and most representative text-piece, “I’m gonna spoil myself today”.

The story takes place on the day when Professor M. finishes her work at Suez University earlier than expected. She is happy upon taking a bus to go home in Cairo; but during the trip, the driver deliberately offends her by playing the cassette tape of a preacher who curses unveiled women. M. is, in fact, the only unveiled woman on the bus; moreover, she is wearing a short skirt and a sleeveless blouse. She reacts to the driver’s attack, by using the earplugs she always keeps in her bag to protect herself from disturbing sounds while traveling on public transportation. Shortly after, she decides to go to her house in the Faiyum to enjoy the sight of the full moon, drinking whiskey and talking on the mobile with her boyfriend. During the stop in Cairo, M. has lunch in a restaurant, where she hears all sorts of noise coming from outside: loud valueless music, rough voices of reciters of the Qur’an and rude utterances. She resorts to her earplugs again and observes the “depressing” features of passers-by: dull colours, hijabs, beards. She suddenly realizes that Egypt’s Muslim men are the only ones in the world who have a visible callus—ironically called *zibība*, ‘raisin’—on their foreheads, “as if they prayed on stones instead of on velvet carpets made in China” (9). Then she remembers that “Copts are the only Christians who engrave a cross on their wrists”; thus, she concludes that Egyptians “have a mania for displaying the extent of their religiousness, which in most cases does not go beyond the head covering, the *zibība* and the engraved cross” (ibid.). Once she leaves the restaurant, M takes the subway to go downtown. She gets on a Ladies wagon where the other women—Muslims and Christians alike—“cast astonished and disapproving glances her way”. In the inner monologue, she says: “This generation never saw a pair of legs and arms before”. Then she

<sup>9</sup> See DUNN & MORRIS: 15-16, 30-99.

<sup>10</sup> Likewise, Guth notes that Gamāl al-Ghitānī’s *Risālat al-baṣā’ir fī ‘l-maṣā’ir* (The Epistle of Insights into the Destinies, 1989) may seem “as a short story collection rather than a novel”. The narrative is divided in episodes united by two factors: each one offers a sample of Egyptian life in a specific time; and each one is a variant of a main theme, i.e., “the vicissitudes and changes typical of this time”. GUTH 2010: 150-51.

nostalgically recalls the time when she was studying at university twenty years earlier, i.e., in the late 1980s, and how “girls used to show their legs. Anyone who put a scarf on her head was described as a farmer [...]. What a shame, Cairo has unfortunately gone rural-like” (10-11). This sarcasm becomes sharper in the following scene, where a girl wearing the *isdāl*, i.e., tent-like clothing, asks the other women to repeat a prayer she is about to recite. It is the so-called ‘supplication for riding or traveling’, formed by two verses of the Qur’an (XXIII, 13, 14). M. notices that the recitation of that prayer has become widespread, for “one could hear it on any means of transportation, starting from elevators, bicycles, motorbikes, cars and so on up to EgyptAir jets”. She even wonders if married couples recite it, when they begin “sexual intercourse, which is also a ride after all” (11). These hilarious thoughts are not enough to help M. bear the suffocating sensation of being sieged in the midst of the other women’s hostile attitude and the veiling of the Muslim majority of them. Hence, as soon as the train stops, she flees from the Ladies wagon and gets on a promiscuous one, where she finds a bearded man who preaches and urges the other passengers to pray, trying to receive alms from them. At that point, M. loses control. She rebukes the man, accusing him of exploiting religion to obtain money; and he reacts by cursing her because she is unveiled.

Aggressive denunciation vanishes in the rest of the story through M’s shift to a sympathetic attitude towards others. As Junge argues in his analysis of al-Khamīsi’s *Taxi*, “sympathy is a socializing emotion” that arises from “shared vulnerabilities” and enables the development of a “new—or renewed—common ground between ‘simple people’ and intellectuals” (JUNGE 2015: 259). In Prince’s text, this emerges, once M. gets out of the subway in downtown, where she buys a bottle of whiskey and a pastry. She enjoys eating it while walking down to Taḥrīr to take a taxi to go to a bus station; but she is running out of money. The conversation between her and the driver is hilarious from the moment they start bargaining over the price of the ride until they reach the final destination. The most comical scene occurs when M. gets on a microbus to the Faiyum. While the driver resorts to incredible expedients to tie some boxes to the vehicle’s roof rack, the passengers complain about his time-losing actions, by teasing him in a friendly manner. They share his sense of fatigue and value his efforts. This shows two typical features of Egyptian society: the so-called ‘art of getting by’; and the use of humour to bear any hardship and generate human solidarity through laughter. In spite of the aforementioned setbacks, M. eventually reaches her house in the Faiyum, just in time to see the moonrise and spoil herself as planned.

This is the happy conclusion of a story full of adverse events occurring in a single day, a density emphasizing the difficulties that an unveiled Muslim woman faces daily in a conservative country. Prince denounces ostentatious piety as a hypocritical behaviour that threatens not only secularist Egyptians, but also Egypt’s national unity, since it fuels interreligious tensions. Moreover, she expresses a sense of alienation from most Egyptian women, with whom she cannot sympathize, feeling that she is a victim of their choice to conform to social mores dictated by patriarchal authoritarianism, which they should oppose because it discriminates them. Besides the exposed parts of M.’s body (her head, arms and legs), whiskey is another recurrent motive in *Ḥayāt wa-mughāmarāt*, where Prince often juxtaposes the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane’; and links religious obscurantism to sadness. She uses satire partly to allow ‘letting off steam’, but mainly to promote a libertarian change

that would also restore typical Egyptian cheerfulness. Prince does not depict the body in itself: she only attests its presence to claim a person's right to exist; and mentions bodily pleasure as a celebration of human existence and a reminder of the holistic meaning thereof.

Religious conservatism is actually the main theme of the novel; but it takes a different nuance in each story. Its presence is fairly reduced in "140 directory assistance, hello", which shows the habit of state employees—who are mostly women—to leave their office to go to the prayer room, thus neglecting their job. Moreover, praying contradicts the harsh way telephone operators usually treat service users.

Jihadist ideology, instead, appears in "Take it easy and you'll win", where M. decides to resign from her job, since she is required to teach too many hours a week due to the lack of teaching staff in Egyptian universities caused by the high emigration rate of teachers. She takes this decision realizing that prolonged work is exhausting and therefore undermines her performance as a teacher. A scene recalling the first text-piece of the novel follows this introductory segment of the story. In fact, M. takes a collective taxi to go from Cairo to Suez. Soon after the departure, the driver plays the cassette tape of a jihadist preacher who urges believers to fight against infidels. His roaring voice does not disturb any of the passengers except for M. Being "a teacher deep inside", she decides to talk to the driver using the most suitable "approach" for dealing with an Egyptian. She smiles at him, upon starting the conversation that quickly turns into a sort of joke. Thus, M. uses humour to convince the driver to stop the cassette tape; and she will act likewise to persuade the dean to reduce her weekly working hours. Her request seems strange, since other professors are willing to accept prolonged work to increase their income. As Stephan Guth notes, workers' readiness to turn into slaves to fulfil this economic need is one of the major changes witnessed by Egyptian society due to labour migration from Egypt to rich Gulf States. The phenomenon started after 1974, when Sadat launched the *Infitāh*, sparking the impoverishment of Egypt's middle class and the deterioration of the living conditions of poorer sectors of the population, thus forcing huge numbers of citizens to emigrate. Concurrently, expatriates' remittances pouring into the country transformed local life standards and social values (GUTH 2010: 150-51). Pressed by global capitalism, Mubarak strengthened neo-liberalist policies from the 1990s onwards, thus leavening their negative impact on the majority of the population. Moreover, the 1990-1991 Gulf crisis compelled more than one million Egyptians working in the area to return to Egypt, where many of them introduced social mores they had adopted during their stay in ultraconservative states. Merging with expanding Egyptian radical Islamism—encouraged by Sadat's anti-Marxist policies of the 1970s and then refuelled by both domestic and international factors—this alien form of Islam flowed into Egypt through return migrants from the Gulf, Arab satellite networks and the Internet, producing the situation that Prince describes in the novel. In "Take it easy and you'll win", the author presents a bearded character in a white galabia: he is an Egyptian professor who has just returned from Saudi Arabia.

Prince recalls the disastrous Middle Eastern reality, in "Let them attack so that we can laugh", a story taking place in January 2009 during the three-week Gaza War. M. does not know what to do at home to avoid watching television channels broadcasting the scenes of the conflict. She cannot bear to see the devastated lives of so many innocent Palestinians. Thus, to overcome the feeling of distress, she decides to have a glass of whiskey. In that moment, her boyfriend calls her to find out if she is following the news. During their phone

conversation, both of them drink whiskey while they ridicule Arab political leaders and Islamist constituencies. The story ends with a famous Arabic proverb, 'the most tragic disaster is the one that causes laughter'.

Interreligious tensions feature again, in "For sale so that you'll be relieved", where M's father buys a car for her as a gift: it is a Niva 4x4 model 2009. This date defines the time coordinate of the story, the only one in the whole-text that presents named characters: names indicate their religious identities. The plot revolves around the fact that M. has not driven a car for years; thus, she needs to take driving lessons again. Her instructor is a young Coptic man who thinks that she is Christian as well, since she is unveiled. This tempts him to make offensive comments about Muslims, including his colleague. When M. reveals her religious identity, Hanna apologizes for the things he said. Yet, during the following driving lesson, he makes advances to her, obviously believing that unveiled Muslim women are morally loose. M. then discovers that usually Hanna works with women wearing huge crosses and Muṣṭafā with veiled women. This shows how ostentatious piety reflects and strengthens interreligious tensions affecting everyday social practices in Egypt.

A new topic emerges in the last episode of the story: M. has a car accident in Cairo causing minor damage only to her Niva; but a police officer threatens to punish her for damaging public property, forcing her to bribe him and to violate her ethical principles. Corruption becomes the main theme of the sixth text-piece, "Deviance is the solution", where interreligious tensions are mentioned only through an indirect thought, in which M. remembers that during mid-day Friday prayers Muslim preachers sometimes use their sermons to spread "hatred" towards Christians (99). The key episode of the story occurs when M. goes to the traffic department to renew her vehicle's registration licence, finding out that she has to pay a sum amounting to almost all of her monthly salary. When she complains about this, the employees tell her that they earn less than a fourth of what she does. This information shocks M. who automatically sympathizes with them. Then a man standing in the queue behind M. advises her to bribe an employee to solve her problem. Everyone around her admits that corruption is the system in use in Egypt. M. refuses to resort to bribery this time, but once she pays the sum she owes to the traffic department she feels as poor as the employees. This brings her to conclude that Egypt's unfair economic system encourages corruption.

Prince wrote "Deviance is the solution" shortly before the 2011 Revolution; and she composed the last text-piece, "So at least I have a souvenir of the Presidency", in autumn 2014, i.e., almost two years and a half after her attempt to run in the presidential race and four years after the uprising. Yet, the time distance between these historical events and the narrative instance seems much longer in the story's introduction. In the incipit, in fact, the narrator describes M. while she inspects the bookshelves in her room and suddenly notices a folder covered by "a thick layer of dust". She thinks that it might contain old lectures "dating back to the late last century" (111). Then the time distance between the historical events and the narrative instance seems shorter, when M. realizes that the folder regards her "latest and biggest escapade" (112). The large cardboard envelope, bearing the footer "2012 Presidential Elections Committee", triggers a long flashback:

At that time Professor M. decided to get out of her shell,—which she used to get into and out of depending on the circumstances —, to participate in public action. [...] She

adjusted her backpack on her shoulders and walked down to the [presidential] palace. She saw the camera of a satellite television channel and a broadcaster interviewing a man in a white galabia. His thick beard was dangling on his chest while he was holding a huge Qur'an and a big envelope with the Egyptian flag on it, displaying both objects in front of the camera. Meanwhile, the bearded man's relatives were standing behind him. They were also smiling at the camera. Professor M. observed the scene in total silence and then turned towards the open door gate. (112-13)

The description of the "smiling" Islamists clearly hints at Mursi's forthcoming victory in the elections. In the flashback, M. has just returned from the Faiyum. Moving inside the presidential palace, she feels surprised by the fact that officers and employees address her using the term of respect *afandim*, 'sir' or 'madam', that she views as being outdated. Her perception conveys the idea that radical change is still far from taking place in Egypt. Waiting for the application form, M. sits on a luxurious armchair, "which she could never have sat on with such an air of self-importance before the Revolution" (116). Yet, in the inner monologue, she repeats the word 'revolution' and hums expressing scepticism. Then she remembers how she took part in the successful eighteen-day Tahrir protests. "Anyway she does not regret that great escapade. Were it not for the Revolution she wouldn't have ultimately dared to undertake the current adventure nominating herself to run for the presidency" (ibid.). The constant shift from optimism to scepticism or sheer disappointment marks the story throughout. When M. tells her family that she wants to run for president, no one supports her considering her either too young and unexperienced or too worried about herself and her writing. However, she endures the greatest disillusionment once she announces her decision on Facebook. She invites her friends to change their attitude as she has. "The idea is that we should get out of our shells, stop being negative only criticizing others, and present ourselves to the people [...] Let's be positive" (120). In the inner monologue, M. repeats the latter sentence and then sighs. In fact, when she creates a Facebook page for her campaign, many of her long-term friends write sarcastic comments against her. She garners support only from people who do not know her personally. Recreating the collective spirit of the Revolution, she drafts her political programme with a group of followers and, accordingly, writes a press release:

On January 25, 2011, my imagination was not such as to bring me to think of a revolution. It happened only when we resisted until after midnight in spite of the tear gas bombs police forces had launched against us. [...] Drawing upon the imagination, which we have been lacking in the past years, I decided to nominate myself to run for the Egyptian Presidency. My major goal is to give competent young talents in all fields the possibility to design their own future, as well as the future of the coming generations, and to guide all ministries, institutions and governorates in a way that will allow the people to achieve their fundamental rights [...]. (PRINCE 2015: 121-123)

M.'s nomination arouses mostly negative reactions. Some of her students set up a Facebook page to oppose her running for the presidency, being against her as a person. One of their comments on a picture they stole from her personal page reads: "The alcoholised professor

who drinks whiskey wants to become a President". M. realizes that Egyptians "are still far from differentiating between public and private life" (126). Yet, she insists on presenting herself as she is: a young emancipated woman, a novelist and an academic. She wants to disrupt the stereotypical image of the President as "an aged all-knowing venerable god/idle" (127). M. feels that she does not gain support due to gender and age bias: in fact, only a few youth and women take an interest in her programme. Failing to collect the thirty thousand signatures required to run for the presidency, she announces her withdrawal from the race.

At this point, the flashback ends and the narrative leaps back almost to the beginning of the story, thus assuming a circular time structure. M. closes the folder and puts it back on the bookshelf. Then her mother tells her about the new regulations for the upcoming presidential elections. This allows the reader to infer that the events described in the beginning and in the last part of the narrative take place in March 2014, when the Egyptian interim government announced the new electoral law.

In this last text-piece, Prince conveys the idea that the change she was hoping for, when she started to write the novel, in 2008, did not happen, in spite of the Revolution. But she still is optimistic. She focuses on the 2012 presidential elections, often recalling the 2011 eighteen-day Tahrir protests. Expressing a general assessment of that collective experience in the square, she says that the "real achievement of the Revolution" was "the free dialogue cross-cutting different social classes and age groups" (133). This reminds of the "heterotopia" defined by Foucault as a site "capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (FOUCAULT 1967/1984: 6). May Telmissany cites this definition in an essay to explain the "heterotopian function" of Tahrir Square during those eighteen days. It was a home for the protesters, but it also gained a national and global dimension, invading the whole country and the world, as well as the cyberspace. Yet, the day after Mubarak's resignation, the Tahrir heterotopia began to dissolve in the midst of the clashes between two projects, both "bearing the seeds of their failure": "transcendent authoritarian anti-revolutionary utopias", i.e., the military, the Muslim Brothers and other Islamist constituencies, opposed "immanent secular libertarian revolutionary utopias". The latter suggested to change the name of the square to devote it to the young 'Martyrs' of the Revolution, neglecting history and the idea of 'Liberation', to commemorate "death and distress" instead of celebrating "joy and life". The military and the Islamists gradually dominated the square, distorting it and restoring Egypt's dystopian order. Hence, oppressive forces tried to turn the Revolution from a long-term project of rebirth for the future into an ephemeral historical event. They are actually trying to erase it from history altogether (TELMISSANY 2014: 43-44).

The eighteen-day Tahrir also recalls the "carnival square" defined by Bakhtin in his study of Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel as the "central arena" for the acts of the carnival that invaded streets and homes, evolving in a space with no clear limits. It was a site for "free familiar contacts" and "communal performances". As an idea, the carnival was "universal": it involved the "whole people" and an unlimited space. Yet, it was limited in time (BAKHTIN 1963/1984: 128). Though she expresses disappointment in the story of her presidential campaign, Prince offers an ideal image of the Tahrir protests, clearly wanting to extend the Revolution beyond those eighteen days. Her desire brings to mind Telmissany's suggestion that, in spite of Egypt's dystopian present and uncertain future, the

heterotopian representation of the square “will continue to inform both the politics of hope and the politics of dissidence. If the first can be disappointed, the latter is claimed with determination” (TELMISSANY 2014: 44). Thus, the two authors of the 1990s generation are positive, after all.

Mona Prince spiritually began her political activism through literature in 2008, when she wrote the first story of *Hayāt wa-mughāmarāt*, which I previously defined as a bridge between pre- and post- 2011 Egypt. In ‘between’, she participated in the Revolution and then recorded her experience in a polyphonic memoir of the Tahir heterotopia. Afterwards, she wrote the story about her 2012 “adventure”. In the final scene of the narrative, which takes place in 2014, Prince retrieves the folder from the bookshelf and then goes to the living room to hang it on the wall as a “souvenir of the presidency”. She does not want to forget that “escapade” interrelated with the January 25 Revolution. Thus, I suggest that her two historical-autobiographic novels represent only the first part of the bridge no matter how long it may be.

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