



USING FICTION AS A VEHICLE FOR POPULARIZING HISTORY JURJY ZAIDAN'S HISTORICAL NOVELS

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Abstract

Jurji Zaydan was born in Beirut, Lebanon on Dec. 14, 1861, into a Greek Orthodox family. Many of his works focused on the Arab Awakening. The journal that he founded, al-Hilal, is still published today. His writings have been translated from Arabic into Persian, Turkish and Urdu as well as English, French and German. By the time he died unexpectedly in Cairo on July 21, 1914, at the age of fifty three, he had already established himself, in a little over twenty years, as one of the most prolific and influential thinkers and writers of the Arab Nahda (Awakening), but also as an educator and intellectual innovator, whose education was not based on traditional or religious learning. Philip Thomas called Zaydan, "the archetypical member of the Arab Nahda at the end of nineteenth century." Zaydan transformed his society by helping build the Arab media, but he was also an important literary figure, a pioneer of the Arabic novel, and a historian of Islamic civilization. Zaydan was an intellectual who proposed new world view, a new social order, and new political power. Zaydan was the author of twenty-two historical novels covering the entirety of Arab/Islamic history. In these novels Zaydan did not attempt to deal with the history in chronological order, nor did he cover the whole of Islamic history; rather, his purpose was to popularize Islamic history through the medium of fiction. This paper will offer a brief analytical outline of Zaydan's historical novels and how his critics viewed them.

INTRODUCTION

Jurji Zaidan grew up in Beirut in very modest circumstances. He did not like the traditional school that he attended, where a Greek Orthodox priest taught the children reading and writing by making them read, write and memorize Psalms that none of them understood. His father was illiterate. He owned a small restaurant in Beirut, and because he was unable to read and write, he relied entirely on his son Jurji to keep the restaurant's accounts. The younger Zaydan did not like the restaurant business, in the main because his mind was always straying elsewhere, chasing after knowledge and hungering for reading. Samuel Smile's *self help* was one of the books that profoundly affected him. Zaydan describes in his autobiography how he would become so excited reading in this book "about the life of men who got to the top through their own efforts and struggle and reliance upon themselves alone." He then comments about how "he could never finish the book."¹

¹ J. Zaydan, P. Thomas, *The Autobiography of Jurji Zaydan*, Three Continents Press, Washington 1990, 44.



While managing the account of his father's restaurant Zaydan began to socialize with the students of the Syrian Protestant College (today's American University of Beirut) who would occasionally come to eat there. With their assistance he read systematically and succeeded in passing the entrance exams for the medical school at the Syrian Protestant College. However his study of medicine came to an end when Dr. Louis, who was a faculty member, was dismissed because of his lecture on Darwin and Darwinism. Students went on strike demanding freedom of speech, but the board of the University repressed the student's strike and locked them out of the college, readmitting them only after signing a statement acknowledging their error. Zaydan, like many other, refused to do so and left for Egypt soon thereafter.² According to Thomas Philip, "three aspects of [Zaydan's] thinking were formed while growing up in Beirut."

First, the theory of evolution—and with it all modern science—became for him the key to knowledge and understanding. This made him profoundly secular thinker. Second, he became a firm believer in the gospel of self-reliance and hard work, and if his life was not exactly "from rags to riches" it was certainly a move from a lowly social station to that of a respected and well-to-do member of the Cairene bourgeoisie. Finally, the means to realize this social mobility was for him education, largely acquired by autodidactic method.³

When Zaydan moved to Egypt he turned his back on medicine and began a career in journalism; soon he became the editor of *al-Zaman*, a small newspaper. In 1884 he joined the British expedition, as a war correspondent and interpreter to Sudan, in a quest to rescue General Gordon. Afterwards he was decorated for his participation and for the courage that he demonstrated during the campaign. Because of his journalistic experience and his first hand participation with Gordon in the making of history, his interest in history was heightened and he was now determined to research, write about, and popularize the long neglected part of the Islamic world. In 1886 Zaydan visited London and spent most of his time at the British Museum's Library with the intention of researching materials for his work on Arab history. There he consulted ancient Arabic manuscripts which resulted in the writing of his monumental historical works, *Tarikh al-Tamaddun al-Islami* (History of Islamic Civilization). This was the beginning of a lifelong journey (from 1891 until his death 1914) devoted to writing on a vast range of literary topics and cultural subjects that treated topics drawn from Arab or Islamic history. Except for one novel, *Jihad al-Muhibbin* (The Lovers' struggle) all his twenty-three novels deal with subjects drawn from Arabic and Islamic history. His periodical *al-Hilal*, which he founded in Egypt in 1892, became a school in and of itself, and an important source of inspiration for young writers, poets, historians of every age and stripe.

² J. Brugman, *An Introduction to the History of Modern Arabic Literature in Egypt*, L.J. Brill, Leiden 1984, 219.

³ T. Philip, "Juji Zaydan's role in the Syro-Arab Nahda" in, A. Beshara (ed.) *The Origins of Syrian Nationhood*, Routledge, London and New York 2011, 84



ZAYDAN'S HISTORICAL NOVELS

Zaydan pioneered the use of the historical novel in Arabic literature. His twenty-three novels were popular and, to this day, enjoy both fame and wide readership. Matti Moosa's comments on Zaydan's historical novels merit attention:

Between 1870 which marks the birth of modern Arabic prose fiction through the writing of Salim al-Bustani and 1891 when another celebrated Syrian writer Jurji Zaydan publishes his historical novel al-Mamluk al-Sharid, no other Arab writer appeared who could measure up to the status of these two. If al-Bustani was first to lay the foundation of the Arab novel in 1870 as well as the Arab historical novel 1871, in his novel Zenobia, it was Zaydan who later popularized Arab history in fictional form. The scope of Zaydan's historical novel is broader than that of al-Bustani's, while the three historical novels of al-Bustani, Zenobia, Budur, al-Hiyam fi Futuh al-Sham, and the historical short story Hakhir wa Layla treat only certain events in Arab history, the twenty-two historical novels of Zaydan cover much of the spectrum of Arab and Islamic history from the sixth century to the first decades of the present century.⁴

Initially, Zaydan had no intention to write so much about the Arab and Islamic history through the medium of fiction. But when his first historical novel *al-Mamluk al-Sharid* (the Escaping Mamluk) appeared in 1891, and given its positive popular reception, some of his friends suggested that he write a series of novels about the whole history of Islam.⁵ Consequently in 1892-1893 he produced two additional novels; *Asr al-Mutamahdi* (The Captivity of the Mahdi Pretender) treating of the Mahdi rebellion in the Sudan, and *Istibdad al-Mamalik* (Despotism of the Mamluks) dealing with the despotic rule of Mamluks in Egypt in the first half of the nineteenth century. Beginning in 1895 Zaydan initiated a series of historical novels about Islamic history in general. This began with the novel *Armanusa al-Missriyya* (the Egyptian Armanusa) which dealt with the Arab conquest of Egypt in 640, and ended in 1913-1914 with the novel *Shajarat al-Durr* which portrays the events leading to the ascent to the throne in the thirteenth century of Shajarat al-Durr, wife of the Ayyubid Sultan, al-Malik al-Salih.

Zaydan's historical novels did not attempt to deal with history in chronological order, nor did they consider the whole of the Islamic past; rather, his purpose was to popularize Islamic history through the medium of fiction.

⁴ M. Moosa, *The Origins of Modern Arabic Fiction*, 2nd edition, Lynne Rienner, Colorado 1997, 145.

⁵ See al-Hilal V. 24



Zaydan serialized his novels in his periodical *al-Hilal*. When the periodical was not published during the summer months, he would use this estival hiatus to write an additional novel and prepare it for a fall publication. He would ordinarily begin his writing project by first identifying a chosen historical topic, and reading all relevant sources relating to it until a skeleton outline, based on historical facts, began taking shape. Zaydan would then create a romance, usually a love story, choose fictitious characters, and then begin writing. He followed this method with all of his novels except *Armanus al-Misriyya* (Armanusa the Egyptian), which he completed in 1895.

Zaydan's basic task was to faithfully portray the past. In order to follow his goal, he even went so far as documenting his sources. He began each novel with an introductory chapter explaining the historical event relative to his work. In many cases his characters related historical events extracted from Islamic sources, to which he referred in detailed footnotes.⁶ To wit, from chapter 19 to chapter 21 of his novel *al-Hajjaj Iben Yusuf* he referred ten times to *Kitab al-Aghani* (Asfahani's Book of Songs.)⁷ Often times, he provided a separate introductory chapter, and a thorough historical and geographical description of the city or the country in which the events of his novels took place.⁸ In his novel *Fath al-Andalus* (the Conquest of Spain) he provided a detailed prologue describing the country together with its capital Toledo. In another novel, *al-Inqilab al-Uthmani* (the Ottoman Coup d'État) he described Salonika (Thessalonica), the headquarter of the Young Turks, as well as the city of Constantinople.⁹

Zaydan's literary work in these novels had certain characteristics that set them apart. His attention was focused not only on the historical context, but on the treatment of

⁶ Ibid, 159.

⁷ *Kitab al-Aghani* (The Book of Songs) is an encyclopedic collection of poems and songs that runs to over 20 volumes in modern editions. Written by the 10th-century litterateur Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani, who claimed to have spent 50 years in writing the book. It can be seen as having three distinct sections: the first dealing with the 100 best songs chosen for the Caliph Harun al-Rashid, the second with royal composers, and the third with songs chosen by the author himself. It spans the period from the Jahiliyya to the end of the 9th century. Abu al-Faraj importantly included performance directions for many of the songs included in *Kitab al-Aghani* though while these shed valuable light on Persian musical practice at the time they are largely meaningless for a modern-day audience. Due to the accompanying biographical annotations on the personages in *Kitab al-Aghani* the work is an important historical and literary historical source; it is also useful for those interested in the sociology of Arabic literature. H. Kilpatrick, *Making the Great Book of Songs: Compilation and the Author's Craft in Abu l-Faraj al-Isbahani's Kitab al-Aghani*, London, Routledge Curzon 2003.

⁸ See for example Zaydan's novel, *al-'Abbas Ukht al-Rashid*, Zaydan give full description of the city of Baghdad.

⁹ A. M. T. Bader, *Tatawwor al-Riways al-'Arabyia al-Haditha Fi Masir 1870-1938*, Cairo 1963, 100.



character and plot that usually concluded with a love story with happy ending. Walid Hamarneh comments on Zaydan's style as follows:

Many critics have observed that his novels are composed of two basic elements. The first element consists of the historical background, which can be subdivided into two types; historical time, usually composed of long passages (sometimes with footnotes and references to historical works) that provide the reader with elaborate temporal context, and the second type associated with space, where Zaydan provides elaborate and detailed description of cities and areas in which the action takes place. The second element in Zaydan's novel is the love story. This typically involves a man and a women who fall in love, then are separated by circumstance, only to meet again and in most cases come together in a happy ending. The plot structure can thus be considered closed and dominated by historical facts.¹⁰

History and romance, with the latter always integrated into actual historical events, are the two major parts in Zaydan's novels. Moosa comments on how Zaydan presents the character of the novel to fit the purpose of the novel, which is to teach history:

The nature of Zaydan's character fit in perfectly with his purpose to teach history. His fictitious characters are particularly suited to fulfill. They are not deeply rooted in the life and we know nothing about their skills and professions nor are we given insights into how they feel or what they think about the people, society or the institution or their time. They seem only to be Zaydan's means to relate the historical narrative. They are fixed characters and often portrayed as models of vice or virtue.¹¹

The dominant theme in *Fatat Ghassan* (The Young Woman of Ghassan) is the Islamic conquest of Syria, which was predominantly a Christian Country; the novel also contrasts the relationships between Christianity and Islam in the beginning of the seventh century. The novel's characters are relegated to being a vehicle for what the author deemed most important; depicting the status of Christianity in Syria in the pre-Islamic era, and the rise of a nascent Islam as dominant force. The novel's love story between Hammad and Hind is used to depict historical events. Hammad follows the movements of the Muslim armies in search of an elusive exclusive earring that he must give to Hind as dowry in exchange for her hand. In his quest for this prize he visited Mecca, met with Christians, Muslims and pagans, and in the company of the Arab armies, witnessed the Arab conquest of Jerusalem and Damascus. In brief, the novel depicted the collapse of an historical era in Christian Syria, preceding the rise of Islam and eventually the establishment of Muslim rule.

¹⁰ W. Hamarneh, "Jurji Zaydan," in A. Roger, (ed.) *Essays in Arabic Literature Biography, 1850-1950*, Otto Harrassowitz, Weisbaden 2010, 385.

¹¹ M. Moosa, *The Origins...*, 162.



In *Armanusa al-Misriyya* (Armanusa the Egyptian) Zaydan portrayed the Arab Conquest of Egypt in AD 640. He used the love affair between Armanusa, the daughter of al-Muqawaqis, governor of Egypt, and Arcadius, son of the Byzantine army commander, as a mean to portray the historical narrative. The Byzantine Emperor Heraclius (d. 641) however, also desired to marry Armanusa and had already asked her father to send her to his imperial palace in Constantinople. But Armanusa loved Arcadius, and not wanting to marry Heraclius, she joined the Arab army on its way to invade Egypt. Its commander, Amr Ibn al-As, offered her protection and his friendship until he conquered Alexandria. Armanusa, miraculously, meets Arcadius in Alexandria and the two get married after the fall of the city in the hands of the Arabs.¹²

In *Ghadat Karbala* (the Young Lady of Karbala) the author portrays the murder of al-Husayn, grandson of the prophet Muhammad, by the Umayyads, in Karbala Iraq, and the religious and political repercussions of this murder. A romance, again, is woven into the circumstances surrounding this particular historical event. The central character, Abd al-Rahman, loves his cousin Salma, but the problem is that the Umayyad Caliph, Yazid son of Mu'awiya also covets Salma. After many adventures, Salma arrived in the city of Kufa where she witnesses the killing of al-Husayn, whose head was severed and sent to the Caliph in Damascus. At the end of the novel, the Caliph Yazid goes to Hauran, where he dies. Salma then finds Abd al-Rahman and the two travel to Mecca, where they marry and live happily ever after.

In *Abu Muslim al-Khurasani*, the main theme is the ascension of the Abbasids to power in 750 through the support of the Persians in Khurasan. The love story revolves around Jullinar, daughter of a Persian leader, and Abu Muslim who was instrumental in overthrowing the Umayyads and bringing the Abbasids to power. The romance however does not culminate in the marriage of the two lovers, but in their separation. Jullinar loved Abu Muslim who did love her back, but rather used her to further his political ambitions. Thoroughly ruthless, when Abu Muslim discovers that Jullinar's father had betrayed the Abbasid cause, he has him assassinated. Jullinar escapes to Syria where she learns that the Abbasid Caliph Abu Ja'far al-Mansur distrusted Abu Muslim and had ordered him killed. She hurries to Baghdad, witnesses the beheading of Abu Muslim, and subsequently enters a convent.¹³

In *Abdu al-Rahman al-Nasir*, the historical theme deals with the rule of Umayyad Caliph, *Abd al-Rahman al-Nasir*, in Spain, while the love interest involves A'ida and Sa'id. In *al-Amin wa al-Ma'mun* the author describes the struggle for power between the Arabs and the Persians in the person of the two brothers, the sons of the Abbasid Caliph Harun al-Rashid. The novel ends with the killing of the Amin and the ascendance of al-Ma'mun to power, while the romance concentrates on the relationship between Maymuna, daughter of Ja'far al-Barmaki, confidant of Harun al-Rashid, and Bahzad, grandson of

¹² M. A. Shawkat, *al-Fann al-Qisasi Fi al-Adab al-Misri al-Hadith 1800-1956*, Cairo 1956, 146.

¹³ Ibid, 147



Abu Muslim al-Kharasani, who becomes involved in the conflict between the two royal brothers. Like the love affair in Zaydan's other novels, this one between Maymuna and Bahzad ends in marriage. The same pattern is followed in the novels of Zaydan dealing with the recent history of the Middle East. Of these novels one may mention *Asr al-Mutamahdi* (the Captive of Mahdi Pretender), *al-Mamluk al-Sharid* (the Escaping Mamluk), and *al-Inqilab al-'Uthmani* (the Ottoman Coup d'État).

The story-lines of Zaydan's novels were used to unfold historical events, not necessarily to explore the human frailties and sensibilities of the characters in question:

In his historical novels Zaydan did not follow strict canons of historiographical practice in his attempt to reproduce the past. His intention was to recall some of its salient and entertaining aspect to reach a popular audience and inform them of their unknown past. This is why Zaydan's novels invoke historical events rather than minutely reconstruct and profoundly analyze them. Thus, Zaydan portrayed most of his fictitious characters as simple fix—being almost passive instrument for the unfolding of an already determined general historical sequence. Often, he was compelled to create fictitious characters and tie them in somehow with the real ones to lend the novel necessary excitement and adventure. He could not do this with authentic historical characters.¹⁴

We see this evident in his novel *al-Inqilab al-'Uthmani* (the Ottoman Coup d'État) which brought the young Turks to power in 1908. This novel's plot is based not only on the aforementioned "coincidence" approach but the detective-like maneuvers of the fiction's characters.¹⁵ Sirin, a young lady is in love with Ramiz, a revolutionary, who attacks the Sultan's despotism. But Sadiq, an opportunist who comes from an influential Turkish family is also in love with Sirin and contrives with her father to destroy the love between Sirin and Ramiz, so that he may marry Sirin. After many intrigues, which take us in and out of the Sultan's palace and the company of Young Turks, Sirin finally marries Ramiz. As for Sadiq, he is killed in the coup of 1908.¹⁶

With one paramount goal in Zaydan's mind, the popularization of history, his plots and characters were subservient to the historical events that he was recounting. This resulted, in many instances, in creating weak plots and unnatural characters, with fate and coincidence playing a large role in the tying together of historical events. For example in *al-Mamluk al-Sharid* (the Escaping Mamluk) the coincidences pile up as when Gharib suddenly meets his father and neither of them recognizes the other; or when an unplanned meeting with Gharib's brother Salim took place in the city of 'Akka;

¹⁴ Ibid, 165.

¹⁵ J. Zaydan, *al-Inqilab al-'Uthmani*, Beirut (n.d.) 99-100.

¹⁶ A. Bader, *Tatawwor al-Riways al-'Arabyia al-Haditha Fi Masir 1870-1938*, Cairo 1963, 99.



or when one of the characters, Sulayman, turns out to be none other than the escaping Mamluk himself.¹⁷ In a similar vein, *al-Hajjaj Ibn Yusuf* who was governor of Iraq under the Umayyads, Layla al-Ukayliyya seemingly appears out of thin air in al-Hajjaj's camp to rescue him¹⁸ in *Fatat Ghassan* (the Young Woman of Ghassan) Hind meets coincidentally with Hammad in a convent, and in *Adhra Quraysh* (the Maiden of the Quraysh) Muhammad appears out of nowhere and rescues Asma.¹⁹ Such coincidental meetings may perhaps be more meaningful in a fairy tale, or in a detective story, but seem artificial in these historical novels.

At the beginning of most of his novel Zaydan incites the reader's curiosity by introducing a puzzling secret. However that excitement fades as the reader's attention becomes focused on the sequence of historical events. The mystery is diluted when it is uncovered at the end of the novel. For instance in the novel *Asr al-Mutamahdi* (the Captive of the Mahdi Pretender) the story opens up in Cairo, Egypt in 1878. Ibrahim an employee of the British Consulate, and his wife Su'ad, are nervous because of a secret connected with a certain box in their possession. Ibrahim shows his wife the box but, despite her pleas, refuses to divulge the secret of the box or the circumstances associated with it.²⁰ The focus of the novel then shifts to Shafiq, Ibrahim's son, his rescue of a beautiful young lady Fadwa, how they fall in love, how Shafiq's friend Aziz, an indolent and spoiled wealthy young man, tries to destroy the love in order to marry Fadwa himself. We also learn along the way that Shafiq uses Fadwa's father, a greedy man, and Dalila, a cunning old woman, to achieve his own aims. A little after this we see in the narrative that Ibrahim opens the box because of his wife's insistence that he does so. And so, when they open the box they find in it a hairpiece stained with dried blood. Ibrahim's wife pleads with him to tell her the secret of the hairpiece but he refuses.²¹ In the meantime, the story is interrupted several times by Zaydan to relate the history of the rebellion of Ahmad Ibn Muhammad of Dongola, who claimed to be the expected Mahdi, against the Anglo-Egyptian authorities. The military campaign, commanded by Hicks Pasha against the Mahdi and his followers, known as the Darawish (Dervishes), led to the total annihilation of Hicks's forces, and the subsequent delegation of General Gordon to the Sudan and his murder by the followers of the Mahdi in the city of Khartoum. Zaydan continues to interpolate historical events until the very end when the reader has almost forgotten about the box.

And when Zaydan finally divulges the secret of the hair in the box, the revelation is most disappointing. We anticipate that Ibrahim is the one who would reveal the secret. But the secret is revealed through a letter sent by Fadwa's mother, from Egypt, to her husband who is vacationing with their daughter Fadwa in Lebanon. Although the letter is not signed, we discover from its contents that Ibrahim had written it to his wife Su'ad.

¹⁷ J. Zaydan, *al-Mamluk al-Sharid*, Beirut (n.d.) 49-50.

¹⁸ J. Zaydan, *al-Hajjaj Ibn Yusuf*, Beirut (n.d.) 115-122.

¹⁹ J. Zaydan, *Adhra Quraysh*, Beirut (n.d.) 89-90.

²⁰ J. Zaydan, *Asir al-Mutamahdi*, Beirut (n.d.) 4, 29, 132.

²¹ *Ibid*, 28.



Zaydan does not tell us how and why Fadwa's mother possessed the letter, which Ibrahim had initially addressed to his wife. We also have no idea why Zaydan chose to reveal the secret of the bloodstained hairpiece through an anonymous letter and not through Ibrahim (after he found out that his sister was Fadwa's mother, and that Fadwa was his niece.) The obscurity of the plot and the strained attempt to impart fictional intrigue are frustrated, and deny the reader any real literary satisfaction.

Zaydan usually introduces his characters with a description of their qualities, which does not require a profound effort on the part of the ordinary reader to guess the good or bad outcome. This precludes the possibility of any character development and the normal unfolding of a personality.²² When one reads for example the novel *Seventeenth Ramadan*, the reader discovers from the very first few pages that Qatam, daughter of Shihan, son of 'Ali from the tribe of Rabab, is a young women whose beauty has become the daily talk of the people of the city of Karbala. The reader soon discovers, however, that she was bent on revenge, because her father and brother were killed in the battle of the Nehrawan fought between 'Ali and Mu'awiya.²³ There is also the character of Lubaba who, we are informed, is a cunning old woman whom Qatam employs in order to execute her plan for avenging her father and brother. This incarnation of evil is typical of the stereotypes that Zaydan constantly portrays, i.e., "she is hunchback and limps but manages to move more swiftly than her old age might allow"; or "her cheeks are wrinkled, her toothless mouth is sunk in her face and her weary eyes ooze with mucous discharge."²⁴ We know from the outset that the character in question is up to no good! In the meantime young Sa'id whom Lubaba employs to carry out her plan of assassinating the Caliph 'Ali is portrayed as a handsome and naïve young man but not so naïve that he lacks personal vanity. It is this vanity that Qatam shrewdly plays upon so as to extract from him a pledge to assassinate the Caliph 'Ali in exchange for Qatam's hand. Thus, the trusting Sa'id would not realize that Qatam detested him.²⁵

In *al-Abbasa Ukht al-Rashid* (Abbasa the Sister of al-Rashid), Zaydan has the story begin with a description by the poet Abu al-'Atahiya (d. 825) of the much discussed and highly controversial love affair and secret marriage between Abbasa, sister of the Caliph, Harun al-Rashid and the Caliph's minister, Ja'far al-Barmaki, of the famous Barmaki (Barmecide) family. Zaydan provides an in-depth historical biography of Abu al-'Atahiya himself. He tells the reader among other things that Abu al-'Atahiya was known for his stinginess and for using his poetry as a means to make money, by way of panygerics and praising prominent people. But mostly, Zaydan dwells upon Abu al-'Atahiya's close connection with the court of the Caliph al-Rashid. Al-Abbasa and Ja'far were in love with each other, but al-Abbasa's brother the Caliph, Harun al-Rashid was too fond of his sister that he could not bring himself to letting her leave the palace in order to marry Ja'far. Thus he would arrange for a marriage contract between his sister and Ja'far,

²² Cf. M. Shawkat, *al-Fan al-Qisasi al-Adab al-Misri al-Hadith*, Cairo 1956, 148.

²³ J. Zaydan, *Seventeenth Ramadan*, Beirut (n.d.) 5-6.

²⁴ Ibid,7.

²⁵ Ibid, 9-15.



which allowed them to see each other, but only in his presence, while denying them the opportunity to live together or consummate their marriage. However, despite the jealous Caliph's wishes, al-Abbasa and Ja'far secretly had two sons.

On the day the events of this story unfold, Abu al-'Atahiya happened to spend the evening at the home of Phinehas, a Jewish slave trader who provided slaves girls to the Caliph's court as well as to rich men in Baghdad. While there, Abu al-'Atahiya sees a man and a woman carrying two young boys into one of the rooms in Phinehas's house. Curious and alert to any opportunity for ill-gotten gains, Abu al-'Atahiya peeped through the key hole and saw a beautiful woman whom, with the two boys laying in her lap, he recognized al-Abbasa, sister of the Caliph. He surmised immediately that the boys were her sons, and that in order to avoid her brother's wrath she met secretly with them in the house of Phinehas. Having discovered what he believed to be proof of al-Abbasa's defiance of her brother's will, Abu al-'Atahiya, who was greedy, would set out to blackmail al-Abbasa and Ja'far. He does so successfully, but in the end al-Rashid finds out the secret anyway, and beheads Ja'far and kills his two sons, as al-Abbasa manages to escape.²⁶

Zaydan sometimes over-exaggerates and endows his character with extraordinary qualities. This tendency is shown in his novel *al-Mamluk al-Sharid* with Gharib, who is only eight years old when he accompanied the Amir Bashir al-Shihabi (d. 1850) to Egypt in 1821, whom he (mistakenly) thought was his father. Zaydan states the Gharib looked and acted as if he were at least fifteen.²⁷ The eight-year-old boy is portrayed as tall, mature, intelligent, and serene, benefitting of an excellent education at the hands of a private tutor, Butrus Karama (d. 1851) secretary to the Amir Bashir. Likewise, Zaydan would have us believe that at this age, Gharib was an excellent horseman and fencer.²⁸ While in Egypt the young boy never ceased writing to his mother, describing his journey to Egypt.²⁹ In brief, if we follow Zaydan's description, despite the fact that he was only eight years old, Gharib possessed all the qualities of an exemplary precocious child prodigy.³⁰

In *al-Amin Wa al-Ma'mun*, Zaynab, daughter of al-Ma'mun, and her slave girl Dananir, are also portrayed by Zaydan as possessing rare qualities. Although Zaynab was only twelve years old, she, like her father, was intelligent, strong-willed, and independent-minded.³¹ She attended the private councils of her grandfather, the Caliph Harun al-Rashid in the company of her grandmother, Zubayda.³² She often entered in dialogue

²⁶ J. Zaydan, *al-Abbasa Ukht al-Rashid*, Beirut (n.d.) 5-17.

²⁷ J. Zaydan, *al-Mamluk al-Sharid*, Beirut (n.d.) 19.

²⁸ Ibid, 23, 34.

²⁹ Ibid, 23-24.

³⁰ Ibid, 27-31.

³¹ J. Zaydan, *al-Amin Wa al-Ma'muno*, Beirut (n.d.) 16, 17.

³² Ibid, 16.



with her slave girl Dananir about astronomy, celestial bodies, and signs of the Zodiac.³³ Dananir was even more extraordinary than Zaynab herself. She was raised in the home of Yahya al-Barmaki where she developed interest in intellectual matters. Zaydan tells us that when Yahya decided to have Ptolemy's book *Almagest* translated into Arabic, Dananir was said to have met with the translators and discussed astronomy with them. Although Zaydan knew that few books of astronomy and medicine had been translated into Arabic by that time (during the eighth century) he attempted to justify Dananir's knowledge of the sciences, especially astronomy and medicine, by having us believe that she had heard those disciplines discussed in the home of Yahya al-Barmaki.³⁴ Dananir was not a typical slave girl; every time she took the young al-Ma'umun out to play in the palace gardens, she brought along with her astronomical diagrams or medical problems to ponder over and teach to the prince. As a consequence, when al-Ma'mun came of age, as we are told by Zaydan, he had developed a strong inclination toward learning and he became not only a rationalist Mu'tazilite, but indeed a patron of learning and a sponsor of translations from Greek.³⁵

Islamic history records the talents of many extraordinary women. But in the case of Dananir, her intellectual sophistication appears to have been overly exaggerated by Zaydan. Some critics have considered these excesses of Zaydan's to be considerable weaknesses in his historical novels.³⁶

Zaydan was careful to reflect in all his works the moral outlook and social viewpoint of contemporary Arab society. He himself was highly moralistic and viewed love as a pure and sacred emotion, which has inevitably to end in marriage. The lovers in Zaydan's novels met each other and spoke of love, but they never touched, hugged, or kissed; this is the line that he drew between pure and indecent love; "this is the pinnacle of romantic love as Zaydan envisaged it, pure, lofty and sacred. It is a romance based on the avowed devotion of lovers and their anticipation of eventual marriages."³⁷

In his novel *'Arus Farghana* (The Bride of Farghana) Zaydan deals with the affairs of the Abbasid state in the times of the Caliph al-Mu'tasim (d. 842), and the ambitions of the Persians to restore their state, lost to the Arab conquest in the first half of the seventh century.³⁸ Young Jehan, the beauty of the city of Farghana and daughter of Tahmasp, a Persian leader, was in love with Dirgham, army chief of the Caliph, al-Mu'tasim. As the story unfolds with the description of Jehan's manners, dress, and most of all her captivating beauty, our curiosity is provoked when we learn that she was soon to meet her lover, whom she had not seen for a long time since he was on duty in Iraq. When the

³³ Ibid, 18.

³⁴ Ibid, 17.

³⁵ Ibid, 17-18

³⁶ M. Y. Najim, *al-Qissa Fi al-'Adab al-'Arabi al-Hadith*, Beirut 1961, 161.

³⁷ M. Moosa, 166.

³⁸ J. Zaydna, *'Arus Farghana* Beirut (n.d.) front page.



great moment arrives, we see Jehan enter a room and Dirgham standing to greet her with outstretched arms; upon meeting, Jehan immediately releases her hands from Dirgham's and sits on a separate chair facing him. A dialogue then ensues during which Jehan asks Dirgham to forgive her for calling him her love. Dirgham answers that, to the contrary, now that she called him "love" he finds the courage to call her "love" as well. At these words, Jehan bows her head in exquisite shyness and Dirgham becomes even more enthralled "embracing her with his eyes because he could not embrace her with his arms."³⁹ The movement is solemn and the lovers' conversation is solemn as well. In this same vein, in another novel, *Asir al-Mutamahdi* (the Captive of the Mahdi pretender), Zaydan describes the lovers' meeting in similar prudence and continence: "they were careful not to touch the dress of each other in great respect for purity and chastity"⁴⁰

The only non-historical novel that Zaydan wrote was *Jihad al-Muhibbin*, which appeared in 1893. In it Zaydan intended to show the agony of love.⁴¹ The novel takes place in Egypt, but its characters are Syrian immigrants, with whom Zaydan himself could feel more at home and with whom he could easily identify. In most aspects, this novel might have been little different from Zaydan's historical novels, except that its theme did not deal with an historical event. It contained his persistent plot involving love between two young people and the scheming of deceitful others bent on frustrating the lovers' passion, all ending with the triumph of good over evil and the lovers' ultimate union.⁴² In this novel, however, Zaydan appears to have freed himself from the restricted frame of reference associated with his historical novels, by creating more rounded and more believable characters.

And so, in *jihad al-Muhibbin*, while Salim, the main character, appears to be tense, emotional, and at a times compulsive, Habib appears to be a calm, devoted, and unselfish friend, who sacrifices time and effort to insure Salim's happiness. There is also Salma, Salim's girlfriend, who understands his fears and tries to help him. Then there is Dawud, the Alexandrian businessman, casting a shadow on Salim's moral behaviors, because he is jealous of him. There is also the wicked and cunning woman, Warda, who uses the greedy Dawud and her own subservient maid Sa'ida to trap Salim into marrying her beautiful daughter. Amidst this miscellany of characters stands Salim's mother, a naïve and simple old lady who is manipulated by the crafty Warda.

The novel displays the normal strengths and weaknesses of man, his problems and pleasures, stopping short of being different his other novels by the inclusion of the same lovers' triangle, as is the case in all of Zaydan's works, and the strict adherence to the sanctity and purity of love as the author understood it. Nonetheless, the affair between Salim and Salma was a revolutionary social phenomenon in a conservative country like

³⁹ Ibid, 38-39.

⁴⁰ J. Zaydna, *Asir al-Mutamahdi*, Beirut (n.d.), 69.

⁴¹ J. Zaydna, *Jihad al-Muhibbin*, Beirut (n.d.) front page.

⁴² M. Y. Najim, *al-Qissa Fi al-'Adab al-'Arabi al-Hadith*, Beirut 1961, 77.



Egypt. Therefore Zaydan was not able to use Egyptian names in a free social situation involving men and women. This is also why the characters appeared detached from the Egyptian society and lacked a clear sense of time and place.

ZAYDAN AND HIS CRITICS

Nevertheless, Zaydan was criticized by extremist Muslims who judged him more as a professional historian than as popular historian who dressed history in the form of popular novels. Muhammad Yusuf Najim, a Muslim apologist, thought of Zaydan as “a Christian who impinges on the field of Islamic history.”⁴³ Other Muslim writers accused him of prejudice against Islam and deemed him a distorter of Islamic history.

In 1910, four years before Zaydan’s death, a book appeared in Indian, by Shibli al-Nu’mani who wrote scornful critiques of Zaydan’s book *the History of Islamic Civilization*. Al-Nu’mani disputed Zaydan’s to write on the history of Islam.⁴⁴ Such criticism resurfaced at the end of the twentieth century with Shawqi Abu Khalil’s *Jurji Zaydan fi al-Mizan* (Jurji Zaydan on a Scale). In this book, Abu Khalil claimed that Zaydan, as a Christian, did not have the right to interfere with Islamic history, characterizing his books as harmful to Muslim readers, and especially the young among them.⁴⁵

In 1993 Abd al-Rahman al-Shamawi published a book entitled *Waqfa M’aa Jurji Zaydan* (a Reflection on Jurji Zaydan). Al-Shamawi recognized Zaydan as a literary pioneer, but denied the artistic value of his novels due to the following:

- 1) the central characters of his novels were not the ones mentioned in his book titles;
- 2) Zaydan’s overloaded descriptions and details, which contributed to the readers’ loss interest;
- 3) There is no balance struck between historical truth and artistic needs;
- 4) Zaydan’s language was plain but faulty;
- 5) and finally, Zaydan made historical mistakes and was inconsistent in his narratives.

Al-Shamawi also denied Zaydan the right to write about Islamic history because, as a Christian, he would have been prejudiced against Islam: “he wrote Islamic history with a Christian pen.” For al-Shamawi these novels were dangerous for the Muslim reader: “The novels will stir in the souls of the young fatal doubts about their own history. Many are losing their trust in the pure intentions of Islamic heroes, who invested their souls in the victory of Islam, guarding over the *Umma*.”⁴⁶

⁴³ M. Y. Najim, *al-Qissa Fi al-‘Adab al-‘Arabi al-Hadith*, Beirut 1961, 158-159

⁴⁴ See T. Philip, Jurji Zaydan’s Role in the Syro-Arab Nahda, in, Beshara Adel (Ed.) *The national of Syrian Nationhood*, Rutledge London and New York 2011, 89.

⁴⁵ Shawqi Abu Khalil, *Jurju Zaydna fi al-Mizan*, Damascus 1983, 35.

⁴⁶ Abd al-Rahman al-Shamawi, *Waqfa Maa Jurji Zaydan*, Riyadh 1993, 44-45.



In 2004 al-Mahass published a critical study on Zaydan's novels.⁴⁷ He quoted Zaydan saying that his only aim in writing historical novel was to bring history and an interest in history close to the reading public. Al-Mahass commented explicitly that Zaydan's intent was never to vilify Islamic history, nor was he driven by a need to defend the fatherland or anything else of that sort; Zaydan was pragmatic, wrote al-Mahass, and his writing was fair and just. Yet al-Mahass also accused Zaydan of always choosing for his novels periods in Islamic history that were riven by crisis and war, as if wanting to tell his readers: "this is all there is in the Islamic history"⁴⁸ al-Mahass also accused Zaydan of denigrating Islamic history because of his Christian prejudice, blaming this alleged attitude on the close relations that Zaydan cultivated with European Orientalists.⁴⁹

Perhaps the severest criticism of Zaydan's historical novels was leveled by the Shaykh Amin Ibn Hasan al-Halawani who wrote a book entitled *Nabsh al-Hadhayan Min Tarikh Juji Zaydan* (Exposing the Ravings in the History of Jurji Zaydan) published in Bombay, India, in 1889. In response Zaydan wrote a refutation of al-Halawani's allegation entitled *Radd Rannan 'Ala Nabsh al-Hadhyan* (Resounding Refutation of Nabsh al-Hadhyan) published 1891.

The new edition of al-Halawani contains a preface by Muhammad Sayyid al-Wakil, who states that "Zaydan was one the most famous falsifier of Islamic history. He hid behind a cloak of Arabness and was invisible behind national feelings."⁵⁰ Al-Wakil claims that "Western media arranged for him to write a disfigured and fragmented history of Islam." According to the Orientalist Ignaz Kratschowsky, most of al-Halawani's criticisms dwell upon the trivial.⁵¹ The book enumerates 101 mistakes that Zaydan made in his history. Typically those were spelling mistakes or factual errors pertaining to people's names, family relations and other issues of mainly a social nature.⁵² Likewise, al-Halawani's introduction spoke with hostility about the role of Christian (in the main Syrian and Lebanese) immigrants in Egypt, and how they dominated the publishing scene and came to divide the Egyptian "nation" (*al-Umma al-Misriyya*,) or *Ummat al-Mu'minin* (the Community/Nation of Believers.) Noted al-Halawani, the Egyptians always underestimated the danger of these immigrants who propagated Freemasonry, preached local chauvinism, and attempted to split the *Umma*. There were 500 Syrian government employees in Egyptian civil service, claimed al-Halawani, and they collaborated with foreigners because they knew Arabic but were Christians. Al-Halawani noted that Zaydan was one of those Christians.⁵³

⁴⁷ Abd al-Jawad Muhammad al-Mahass, *Riwayat Jurji Zaydan*, Cairo 2004.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 44-45.

⁴⁹ Ibid 148.

⁵⁰ Amin Ibn Hasan al-Halawani, *Nabsh al-Hadhayan Min Tarikh Juji Zaydan*, Edited and Annotated by, Mazan Mutabakani, Medina 1989. 6.

⁵¹ I. Kratschowsky, "Zaydan," *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, Vol. IV, L.J. Brill, Leiden 1934, 1195.

⁵² al-Halawani, 34-35.

⁵³ Ibid, 34-35



According to Bader the critics of Zaydan differ profoundly from him in their understanding of what history and history writing ought to be. For them Islamic history consisted of irrefutable and unquestionable facts as they were articulated in the early Islamic chronicles by Muslim historians. Likewise, they thought historiography's task to be normative, paradigmatic and pedagogical. The recording of the history of Islam was therefore to give examples of morality and virtue and to guide Muslim in their lives as true believers. Therefore, a Christian could not possibly write about Muslim history in the right manner. Zaydan, however, was not interested in writing Christian history or a Christian critique of Islamic history. He was a true secularist who believed in modern science and scholarship. His aim was historiography based on scientific information and scholarly insight. He believed that only in that way could the past enable the present and the future of society.⁵⁴

CONCLUSION

In conclusion we may ask what did those historical novels amount to? The answer may be that they certainly pioneered the use of the novel in the Arab world, and they certainly were a novel tool that introduced generations of Arabs and Muslims to their history, creating a distinctly "Arab" public commitment to a common "Arab" future.

The distinctive characteristic of Zaydan's approach enables us to appreciate not only his literary achievement, but his political and cultural purpose as well. Zaydan succeeded in promoting historical knowledge among the non-intellectual elites and thus provided a broad grounding for a common Arabic identity. Zaydan's purpose was to popularize Islamic history through the medium of fiction, and to achieve this purpose he saw fiction as subservient to history, and not vice-versa.

Albert Hourani remarked that "perhaps it was Jurji Zaydan who did more than any other to create a consciousness of the Arab past by his stories, and still more by his series of historical novel."⁵⁵ Zaydan wrote in clear and simple prose, Philip Thomas notes: "his writing contributed massively to the development of Modern Standard Arabic, a simplified written language which is today understood by all literate Arabs."⁵⁶ Allen Roger in his classical historical critical introduction to the Arabic novel observed that:

⁵⁴ Cf. Bader, Abdu al-Muhsin Taha. *Tatawwor al-Riways al-'Arabyia al-Haditha Fi Masir 1870-1938*, Cairo 1963.

⁵⁵ A. Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1983, 277.

⁵⁶ P. Thomas, "Juji Zaydan's role in the Syro-Arab Nahda" in, A. Beshara (ed.) *The Origins of Syrian Nationhood*, Routledge, London and New York 2011, 74.



The novels of Zaydan and other contributors to the historical-romantic and philosophical novel certainly fulfilled the importance function of bringing genres into the public awareness and at the same time using episodes from Middle Eastern history as a means of rousing and fostering an emerging Arab National consciousness.⁵⁷

Zaydan the novelist had also a major impact not only on Arabic literature but also on the global literature. Moosa argued this by saying that: "it was with the appearance of the eminent writer Jurji Zaydan that the Arab novel, and in particular the historical novel was brought to fruition."⁵⁸ Zaydan selected the historical novel as a means of promoting a new Arab consciousness. He was a specialist in Arabic and Muslim history and also had broad knowledge of many aspect of Western literature. Moosa maintained that what distinguished Zaydan from other Western novelists who used historical settings for their characters, was that Zaydan used historical settings and figures in his novels as a means to teach history to the public.⁵⁹ Moosa also observed that the challenge for Zaydan was not so much to integrate historical knowledge into the novel's narrative as much as how to spice up the historical narrative by using the fictional characters almost as props.

Another question that might come to mind as one parses out Zaydan is whether or not his writings and thoughts are still impacting our world today? Browsing through the holdings of Arabic and English language bookstores, one may still find many of Zaydan's books and novels, which are still very widely read and circulated. The newspaper that he founded, *al-Hilal*, is still being published, although with a totally changed format and content. Likewise his historical novels still enjoy an interrupted popularity and new editions continue to be published every few years. A complete collection of his works was published in 1980.⁶⁰

In America, a foundation that took Zayan's name was established with the aim of making his views and works available to non-Arabic speakers, and to revisit Zaidan's work, his role in the development of Arab thought, and his contribution to the Arab renaissance (*Nahda*) of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁶¹ The foundation has already translated many of Zaydan's historical novels into English and published a number of books on Zaydan's contribution to Arabic thought. The Zaidan Foundation sponsored a Symposium on Jurji Zaidan held at the Library of Congress on June 5, 2012.

⁵⁷ A. Roger, *The Arabic Novel, an Historical and Critical Introduction*, 2nd edition, Syracuse University Press, New York 1995, 62.

⁵⁸ M. Moosa, *The origins...*, 165.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 199.

⁶⁰ J. Zaydan, *al-Mu'allafat al-Kamila*, 24 vol., Beirut 1980.

⁶¹ See, ZaydanFoundation.org



Jurji Zaydan was a man of various talents; he was a historian, a philologist, an essayist, a linguist, a biographer, a sociologist, and a novelist.⁶² Except for a brief period of study at the Syrian Protestant College, he was a self-taught man, and this is ultimately what makes many writers admire him. In the field of Islamic history no other writer was able to come close to what Zaydan has accomplished; according to Moosa, Zaydan “revolutionized the writing of Islamic history for the first time giving it a valid existential relevance. In short, it was alive and meaningful.”⁶³

Regardless of the opinions of his critics, Zaydan occupies a prominent place in the history of the Arab world. He is remembered for his glorious contribution to the modernization of values and the value of modernization. A man with many facets, he was an artisan of the *Nahda* Renaissance of the Arabic world. He championed all the right causes, from the rationality of science to the romance of history, and from the importance of knowing the cultural heritage of the past to the value of creating a cultural heritage for the future.

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⁶² For a complete list of Zaydan’s book see, M. Hasan, *Jurji Zaydan*, Cairo 1970, 229-236.

⁶³ M. Moosa, *The Origins...*, 168.



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