

Iḥsān ‘Abd al-Quddūs’ Paths to Freedom Between Journalism and Popular Fiction in the Novel *Anā Ḥurra* (I Am Free)

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Abstract

Iḥsān ‘Abd al-Quddūs (1919-1990) is one of the best-known journalists in the history of Egyptian political journalism. He began his career at *Rūz al-Yūsuf* magazine, founded by his mother, the celebrated actress and journalist who named the journal after herself. He was also a famed author of popular fiction, which was serialised in Egyptian mainstream weeklies from the late forties through the eighties. His name is associated with mass readership and sentimental novels and short stories whose protagonists often are young women struggling for freedom in a traditional and patriarchal society.

In this article we will analyse his first success, the novel *Anā Ḥurra* (I Am Free), which was written a year after the 1952 Egyptian revolution. The aim of this study is to re-evaluate the underrated field of popular and middlebrow Arabic literature. We will focus on the relation between female liberation and politics in the novel, in particular how the story of the young protagonist’s search for freedom reflects the failures of the 1952 revolution.

Keywords: Iḥsān ‘Abd al-Quddūs, Rūz al-Yūsuf, *Anā Ḥurra*, Journalism, Popular literature, Rebellion, Freedom.

“It is not true that he was the writer of the woman.
The truth is that he was the most involved in politics among Egyptian writers”
SHUKRĪ (cited in AL-QUWAYSNI 1991: 35)

Introduction

Iḥsān ‘Abd al-Quddūs (1919-1990) is one of the most notorious writers of the 20th century Arab popular literary scene. Tireless freedom fighter, committed journalist and daring author, his extremely large literary production has enjoyed a large-scale circulation in Egypt and the Arab world since the fifties, when his first novel—and first commercial and public success—*Anā Ḥurra* (I Am Free) saw the light in 1953. Many of his novels and short stories have been

adapted into films, television miniseries, and radio series, thus contributing to the popular recognition of his production. However, the multimodal circulation of his fiction has not done justice to the boldness of his ideas, since the transpositions mainly appear as edulcorated versions—if not complete rewritings—of the original works, softened for the sake of political censorship and public morality.¹

Since its very beginning, the leftist gatekeepers among the literary critics have labelled Ḥsān ‘Abd al-Quddūs’ fiction popular² romantic, sentimental, commercial, and sensationalistic, void of any remarkable literary value, easy readings for an unpretentious general public. A profound prejudice against popular culture was fed by nationalist critics. The dominant critical view on the sentimental novel has been well summarised by ‘Abd al-Muḥsin Ṭāhā Badr, who—in his 1963 classic study—stated that these works were produced to merely entertain the general public influenced by a popular taste (BADR 1992: 183). They are considered simply imitative works, without an aesthetic of their own, a corruption of great art. Much of ‘Abd al-Quddūs’ fiction has been serialised in *Rūz al-Yūsuf* magazine, for which he was journalist and editor-in-chief, as well as in other major Egyptian magazines. The author chose stories about young women struggling for self-liberation and emancipation in a traditional and patriarchal society, fighting hard to choose who to love and how to plan their future. Most of the time, however, they end up defeated, alienated, and lonely. ‘Abd al-Quddūs’ prolific fictional writing, however, cannot be reduced to simply appealing stories. The writer, one of the most representative figures in the history of Egyptian political journalism, has constantly infused his fiction with inner political meanings, especially after the revolution of July 1952 and other major events of contemporary Egyptian history (ABDEL KOUDDOUS 2021: 5-6). An attentive reading of his works reveals that the representation of female subjectivities and gender relations has been a means to diagnose the dramatic and rapid changes the Egyptian society experimented with in the political, social, and economic sphere in the second half of the 20th century, thus making his fictional writing deeply tied to his journalistic activity and inseparable from his political prose.

For a long time literary critics have deliberately chosen to neglect his production, considering it at the periphery of the official national canon,³ so therefore not worth studying.

1 One of the most striking examples of this process of rewriting is that of the short story *Ba‘īdan ‘an al-Ard* (Far from Land). The original version—written in the fifties—narrates the romantic story between an Egyptian Muslim man who falls in love with an Israeli–American Jewish woman a few years after the establishment of the Jewish state in 1948 (‘ABD AL-QUDDŪS 1961: 385-428). ‘Abd al-Quddūs wanted to carry the message that politics exploits religions with the aim of creating divisions. No director agreed to turn the story into a movie. After some years, the author was requested to completely rewrite the plot for a cinematic adaptation (‘ABD AL-QUDDŪS 1998: 10-11); the result was a flat story void of any reference to nationalities and religious faiths.

2 The adjective ‘popular’ is often used to denote ‘Abd al-Quddūs’ fictional production. We have to specify what ‘popular’ means here. We do not mean a production that emerges out of orality, as in premodern Arabic popular prose, such as folk epic or other genres intended for oral performances, but in terms of public and writing. This type of novel enjoyed a considerable commercial success, a fact that can be explained as a result of the expansion of mass-literacy in the fifties.

3 According to Reuven Snir, canonical literature includes texts that have been accepted by scholarly circles as part of dominant Arab culture and collective memory. In other words, texts that are seen as legitimate and highbrow by the literary establishment of a certain society (SNIR 2017: 2; 21).

Moreover, ‘Abd al-Quddūs was not affiliated with any literary school or trend, neither the social realism which emerged in the fifties nor the new sensibility of the sixties’ generation. Hence, his literary production has been relegated to the obscure margins of the history of Arabic literature for decades, an epitome of tantalizing love stories produced for pure entertainment, if not to provoke readers with taboos and “inappropriate” topics. The author has shared his destiny with other popular writers such as Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm ‘Abdallāh (1913-1970) and Yūsuf al-Sibā’ī (1917-1978), whose fiction has been analysed by Stephan Guth (1987) and Gail Ramsay (1996). In the last few years some scholars and specialists have started to approach ‘Abd al-Quddūs from an engaged and academic perspective, in order to re-evaluate those forgotten margins and the contribution of popular fiction in the field of Arabic literature. In 2019 Hanan Hammad analysed two novels by ‘Abd al-Quddūs to shed light on how the author, by adopting the perspective of women, creates a forum of commentary on Egypt’s postcolonial politics and transformations, concerning the Arab–Israeli conflict, the oil boom in the Gulf, and the 1978 Camp David accords (HAMMAD 2019). In 2020 the Egyptian journalist Zaynab ‘Abd al-Razzāq published a detailed essay on the author’s biography, connecting his journalistic and literary activities to the socio-political context of monarchical and Republican Egypt (‘ABD AL-RAZZAQ 2020). In 2021 Jonathan Smolin translated the 1955 novel *Lā Anām* (I Do Not Sleep), with a powerful and necessary introduction that elucidates how the writer’s relation with the Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser (Jamāl ‘Abd al-Nāṣir) and his disapproval of the military dictatorship strongly influenced his fiction (ABDEL KOUDDOUS 2021).⁴

More in general, the realm of Egyptian popular fiction has started to be scrutinized in recent years,⁵ following the impact of the study of popular fiction in a worldly perspective. Umberto Eco, for example, has reconstructed the history of the success of serialised popular novels from the 19th century until the 20th century, to demonstrate that genre fiction is a fundamental category in the analysis of the novel as a literary genre. His “Superman of the masses”—how he defines the heroes of popular novels he has taken into account—is not a purely imaginary figure but embodies the ideals and aspirations of readers (ECO 2016). The derogatory connotation ascribed to middlebrow culture and literature⁶ started to be revised in Anglophone cultural and literary studies in the nineties, as it can provide useful information about a large section of cultural consumption that has been ignored by literary history (HOLMES 2017). Samah Selim’s study on translated and adapted Egyptian popular fiction in the early 20th century analyses a corpus of texts neglected by critics, with the aim of

4 SMOLIN’s translation of *Anf wa-Thalāth ‘Uyūn* (A Nose and Three Eyes) was published in 2024 (ABDEL KOUDDOUS 2024), and his book that explores the love-hate relationship between ‘Abd al-Quddūs and Nasser and its effects on the author’s literary production will be released in 2024.

5 The wider field of popular culture and the role of “ordinary people” in popular cultural production during the Nahḍa has been investigated in several studies, with the aim of emphasizing the active role of everyday masses responding to the forces of modernity. Here we cite only two studies: *Ordinary Egyptians* (FAHMY 2011) and *The Arab Nahḍa as Popular Entertainment* (AUJI 2023).

6 A definition of “middlebrow” will be provided in the paragraph “The Politics of Freedom in *Anā Ḥurra*”.

investigating the delegitimized field of paraliterature⁷ that was the national literature's counterpart. The scholar thus questions the authoritative accounts of Nahḍa (Arab "Renaissance") modernity, based on the binary opposition between high and popular cultures, and on the willing delegitimization of popular fiction by Nahḍa intellectuals, considered with circumspection due to the deteriorated Arabic language deployed in these texts and the allegedly deleterious effects it would have had on young readers (SELIM 2019).⁸ Richard Jacquemond has tackled the issue of the limits of addressing only the field of legitimate literature, undermining the importance of examining the illegitimate margins. For this reason, he has paid attention to Egyptian paraliterature produced in the second half of the 20th century and to the bestsellers of the 21st century (JACQUEMOND 2008: 145-65; 2016). Snir endorsed the theory that the study of non-canonical literature and its relationships with canonized novels is essential for a full comprehension of the development of Arabic literature in a diachronic perspective (SNIR 2017: 2-3). As we will point out, 'Abd al-Quddūs occupies an in-between place between the two strands, representing a sort of intermediate literary production. Heavily influenced by translated and adapted European novels that were serialised in the Egyptian press in the late Nahḍa, the destiny of his fiction has been the same of the "slaughterhouse of literature"⁹ revisited by Selim.

In light of these recent critical approaches, we will propose a multilayered reading of Iḥsān 'Abd al-Quddūs' first novel *Anā Hurra*, thus concentrating on the early production of the author, that of the early fifties, a phase of passage from the positive and optimistic horizons of the post-war period to the disillusionment of the avant-garde writers of the sixties (HAFEZ 1994: 93-96). We choose this work as a model of the author's view of the function of literature because in it individual struggle and national fate run in parallel. *Anā Hurra* has gained an unprecedented popularity among the Egyptian and Arab reading public, gaining the status of an unofficial classic and bestseller. The novel has been published in several editions and still today it continues to be republished. It is part of the Arab collective cultural heritage but it has not been recognised by dominant circles. Composed a year after the 1952

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- 7 This term was coined in 1967 by French literary historians to designate non-literary works of fiction pertaining to popular culture and excluded from high culture. In particular, it indicates popular genres of fiction that spread in 18th-century England and 19th-century France, such as detective novel, sentimental novel, science fiction, historical romance, detective stories, traditionally associated with simplicity of language, repetitions, and narrative stereotypes. See, for example, BOYER 2008.
- 8 As Selim explains in her study on the canonization of the novel genre in Egypt, the national novel that emerged at the beginning of the 20th century was produced to contrast the popularity of serialised novels and other subgenres of paraliterature. The artistic novel aimed at carrying a civilising mission, consolidating a national consciousness, and opposing the falsehoods of popular literature (SELIM 2004: 62-72). From the late forties, especially after 1948, the admiration of the liberal intelligentsia of Europe and support for a corrupted political establishment were no longer possible. The novel became the place where middle-class writers, dissociating themselves from the old generation of writers, developed their critiques of political power and economic liberalism, promoting socialism as the best means for national liberation and independence (SELIM 2004: 127-132).
- 9 Selim borrows this expression from Franco Moretti, who uses it to indicate a wide range of 19th century English novels that were more or less canonical but officially excluded from any canon, the forgotten 99.5% of literature (SELIM 2019: 16).

revolution, *Anā Hurra* is a fictional rendering of the writer's disenchantment with the authoritarian direction taken by the Free Officers after the coup that overthrew the Egyptian monarchy. Its 1959 cinematic adaptation, one of the milestones of the golden age of Egyptian cinema whose script was written by Najīb Maḥfūz (1911-2006), has radically changed its plot, transforming it from a story about a powerful but failed female rebellion into a nationally acclaimed, happy ending *Bildungsroman*. We think that the wide circulation of his novel, together with its status of "unrecognized classic", imposes on us to consider it, in an effort to "unlock the archive of forgotten texts"¹⁰ which has circulated since the fifties.

We will try to unfold the great potentiality of studying 'Abd al-Quddūs' novels and more generally popular writing. The analysis of his fiction cannot be detached from his political commitment, his journalistic activity, and the particular manner in which he was raised. Considering that 'Abd al-Quddūs is an understudied author, we will give prominence to contextualise him in his private and public *milieu*, in order to provide a wider framework where we can place *Anā Hurra*. For this reason, this study will be organised in two sections. Given that *Anā Hurra* is a fictional rendering of the socio-political upheaval commented on by 'Abd al-Quddūs in his articles in the early fifties,¹¹ we will firstly focus on 'Abd al-Quddūs' career, in particular the impact of his journalistic activism on his fictional writing and his style. Secondly, we will analyse his first success, suggesting a reading of the novel that goes beyond the surface and acknowledged story. To this end, we will consider the editorials he published in *Rūz al-Yūsuf* magazine in the last part of 1952 and in 1953. Moreover, our reading of the novel will take into consideration the novelist's relationship with his mother Rūz al-Yūsuf (1898-1958), the celebrated theatre actress and journalist. The active role of this eminent Nahḍa pioneer in the artistic and journalistic fields in an age of great changes for women is, in our opinion, one of the leading factors of 'Abd al-Quddūs' choice to deal above all with female personalities in his works. The novel will also be placed in the field of middlebrow literature to assess its relation with the national canon. It will emerge that our writer has been a storyteller not only of individual feelings, passions, and disappointments, but also of national ambitions, betrayed hopes, and collective failures. The aim of this study is to deconstruct the trope of 'Abd al-Quddūs as exclusively the writer of the woman and their feelings, by showing the multiple implications of his literary commitment. By analysing the writing practice of this popular author, we will demonstrate that mass literature is not detached from reality, but closely entangled with it. He has not been engaged in the illegitimate margins of the literary field, but he has worked for a different conception of literature, commitment, and literary consumption. The type of literature he has promoted may provide new insights into the Egyptian novel, and it could help to understand the interests and expectations of the mass public as well.

10 Selim takes this expression from Margaret Cohen. The latter coined it to indicate forgotten popular genres that have been relegated out of the official masterpiece-based library, in particular the sentimental novel produced in 19th century France. Selim uses it to refer to hundreds of books of fiction that were very popular during the Nahḍa but excluded from the teleology of the genesis of the Arabic novel (SELIM 2019: 21-22).

11 I would like to express my gratitude to Jonathan Smolin for calling my attention to the deep relation between 'Abd al-Quddūs' serialised fiction and the editorials he published along with the instalments of a certain work.

1. Between Journalism and Fiction

As highlighted by Jacquemond, the connection between press and literature has always been very strong in Egypt, and reached its peak in the period between the thirties and the sixties (JACQUEMOND 2008: 77-79). As mentioned above, ‘Abd al-Quddūs is a main actor of 20th century Egyptian journalism, a tireless voice of dissent in the monarchical era and a more nuanced voice in the years of Nasser’s control of the press. After what he considered the total failure of the 1952 revolution and the silencing of journalists, he resorted to serialised fiction to express his disapproval of the authoritarian politics imposed on Egyptian citizens and intellectuals by Nasser (ABDEL KOUDDOUS 2021: 5-6).

‘Abd al-Quddūs grew up hand-in-hand with journalism and started his career as a journalist in *Rūz al-Yūsuf*¹² in the forties. His mother’s magazine was one of the major forces in the intellectual life of that period and a platform to express political views. The magazine was renowned for its political satire and Egypt’s most widely circulated journal where distinguished literati would publish their contributions without remuneration (KENDALL 2006: 19). He was editor-in-chief of *Rūz al-Yūsuf* until 1966, when he moved to *Akhbār al-Yawm* (News of the Day) and then to other important weeklies. From the beginning he stood out for his whole-hearted dedication to the Egyptian national cause, as his mother had done. He debuted with a series of inflammatory articles which denounced the incurable corruption of the indigenous political class, the tyranny of the monarchy, and the British exploitation of the local politicians’ disinterest in the national cause. In one of his 1951 articles, he condemned without ambiguity the failure of the Egyptian government and the incapacity of the prime minister to achieve any national goal (‘ABD AL-RAZZĀQ 2020: 123). He tirelessly invoked revolution and intensively called for it, looking for revolutionaries and giving space to every pro-revolution voice in the magazine. He was arrested for the first time in 1945 because of an article calling for the removal of the British ambassador to Egypt. Under his direction, *Rūz al-Yūsuf* became the foremost political and literary magazine of its time, certainly because of ‘Abd al-Quddūs’ fame as an activist committed for the sake of the nation.

He kept himself away from any political party¹³ and literary group. He was not a dedicated politician or writer, given that he deliberately avoided having any official affiliation (ABŪ ’L-FUTŪḤ 1982: 65), perhaps because that would have entailed a commercial failure for his magazine (TEMIMI 2008: 535). He guaranteed a space to every voice—Muslim Brotherhood exponents, left-wing, conservatives, atheists—in his mother’s magazine (ABŪ ’L-FUTŪḤ 1982: 81).

The pre-revolutionary press played a key role in the development of modern Arabic fiction. It contributed to the development of an easily accessible literary style freed from the constraints of classical Arabic prose. Language ceased to be an object of contemplation and

12 In 1925 his mother founded the cultural and literary magazine named after her, a very significant statement in a period characterized by an increasing female participation in the public sphere but also by women’s marginalization in national politics (BARON 2005: 80).

13 To officialise his distance from political life and parties, ‘Abd al-Quddūs coined the expression *al-shārī‘ al-siyāsī* (the political street), to indicate his free political commitment—far from parties or organizations—which symbolically took place in the street, not in the palaces of politics (ABŪ AL-FUTŪḤ 1982: 65).

developed into a vehicle to deliver a message (MEHREZ 1994: 98). 'Abd al-Quddūs' journalistic activity heavily influenced the style of his fiction, which is lexically and syntactically straightforward, aimed at increasing the magazines' sales. As the writer admits in the preface to the second edition of *Anā Hurra*, in the early phase of his literary career his journalistic personality forged that of the writer, to the point that his early works look like reports ('ABD AL-QUDDŪS 2021: 5).

The relation between journalism and fiction is visible not only at a stylistic level, but also at a thematic one. His novels and short stories are fictional rendering of Egyptian affairs. A perfect example of this intermingling is already found in one of his earliest short stories, *al-Nazzāra al-Sawdā'* (The Dark Glasses), published in 1949. Here the author started to experiment with what would become his hallmark, that is his predilection for narratives exploring women's sentiments and sexual desires as a means to analyse multiple aspects of the Egyptian society of his time.¹⁴ With this prototypical story, he inaugurated his distinct fictional production which gave him unprecedented popularity, shocked the audience because of his breaking taboos, and attracted negative criticism because of its "immoral" content and the excessive simplicity of its style.

Al-Nazzāra al-Sawdā' engages with the themes the author had at heart in the pre-revolutionary period: the moral decay of the young generations due to the influence of Western customs and to the weakness of the nationalist sentiment; the nobility of struggling for the nationalist cause; the greediness of the political class in the monarchical era. These concerns are fictionalised through the story of an indigent principled Egyptian artist who falls in love with a rich, insensitive, attractive, and sexually available young woman of foreign origin, presented as an untameable animal. She represents the Westernized upper-class dissociated from national projects and aspirations who does not believe in any ideal. The artist strives to make the woman abandon her materialistic life and embrace values, to make her a good citizen who has at heart her homeland. He succeeds in his "civilising" mission that also has a collective dimension.

He would fight her silliness and resignation, and he would fight his people's silliness and resignation as well. He would fight her ignorance, and he would fight his folk's ignorance as well. He would fight the weakness of her patriotism, and the weakness of the patriotism of all Egyptians. ('ABD AL-QUDDŪS 1966: 69)

By trying to humanise her, he intends to create a political consciousness, to defeat materialism and the inaction embodied by those in power. Like Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm in *Uṣfūr min al-Sharq* (Bird of the East, 1938), 'Abd al-Quddūs reverses the colonial trope of the West representing manhood, with a masculine victorious East and a feminine West (ELSADDA 2012: 67). However, when the man is given the opportunity to join a political party, he drastically changes, becoming a prominent public personality focused on his personal achievements,

¹⁴ As the author states in the preface to the second edition of the short story collection *al-Nazzāra al-Sawdā'*, talking about revolution, oppression, and institutionalised corruption had not prevented him from painting stories about relationships between men and women ('ABD AL-QUDDŪS 1966: 7). When asked if there is any contradiction between writing about love and writing about political themes, he answered that famous personalities involved in politics such as Gandhi, Gabriele d'Annunzio, and Aḥmad Shawqī did not renounce to write about love (ABŪ 'L-FUTŪḤ 1982: 61).

and completely forgets the national cause. He turns into a being controlled by overpowering desires, as she was before knowing him. The story is a clear statement of loyalty to the principles in which the author firmly believed, and a vigorous critique of the political scene of the forties. Hence, even the masculine ends up defeated.

2. The Politics of Freedom in *Anā Hurra*

Iḥsān ‘Abd al-Quddūs has given rise to a sort of hybridization between high and popular literature. We agree with Hammad that ‘Abd al-Quddūs’ fiction can be included in the field of middlebrow literature (HAMMAD 2019: 151). This label was coined in the Anglophone world in the twenties to indicate a mass-market literature which addressed middle-class consumers with attractive and accessible novels (BROWN 2012: 1-2). The pejorative value ascribed to the category has then been revised by American critics, who have considered it a complex phenomenon that combines democratic aspirations of accessibility and a critique of cultural monopoly of elite literature (RADWAY 1997: 12).¹⁵ ‘Abd al-Quddūs was well aware of the in-between status of his literary writing, having admitted that he was never able to separate his political personality from the literary one, and that he never claimed to be a professional novelist. The function of his writing is manifold: to entertain, to promote social commitment, to talk about society without hypocrisy.

‘Abd al-Quddūs’ fiction has traditionally been associated with romance and sexual content.¹⁶ Love in its numerous nuances is the *leitmotif* of his production. Heir of the rich Arab poetry and prose tradition about love, he has deeply explored the polymorphism of this feeling: romantic, platonic, carnal, filial, illicit, interconfessional, lesbian. His interest in these complex forms of affection, however, should not be ascribed only to the sales priority of the press, where his novels were serialised, and to the need to attract a mass readership with sentimental contents. Moreover, his audacious inspections in the field of relationships do not intend to invoke a change in the Egyptian traditional society. It is his personal way to express his anxiety for major changes occurring in the political and social sphere, his focus on the freedoms and spaces of participation acquired by women in the 20th century. He advocates for women’s rights, but not unconditionally.

Anā Hurra is usually considered a light story of a teenager experiencing a suffocating family and social life, who does her best to liberate herself and live without constraints. This novel has played a performative function, having inspired many young women to pursue higher education in the years of its publication. In this paragraph we will take *Anā Hurra* as

¹⁵ We believe that the definition of national-popular literature coined by Antonio Gramsci also may be applied to ‘Abd al-Quddūs’ works. In the fifties, the Italian philosopher asserted that we should move from the “study of the beauty of the work” to the study of why it is “read” and “popular”. According to him, a literature is popular when it expresses the deepest aspirations of the nation-people, when the writers share the feeling of the people (GRAMSCI 1996: 181-248).

¹⁶ The novelist’s name is linked to *al-riwāya al-‘ātifīyya* (sentimental novel; AL-BATĀYINA 2002), which was very popular during the Nahḍa and affected the popular love novel that emerged at the end of the forties.

a case study to re-read ‘Abd al-Quddūs’ fictional production from a new perspective, in order to demonstrate the constant tension between love, desire, and politics.

Anā Hurra was serialised in *Rūz al-Yūsuf* in 1953, eleven months after the July revolution. Unlike Maḥfūz, ‘Abd al-Quddūs did not finish his novels and later serialise them, but he wrote gradually, publishing an instalment a week (QUALEY 2022). Thus, the serialised story was shaped by current events, in particular the political events that ‘Abd al-Quddūs used to comment on in the editorials he published in the same magazine. Written in a journalistic language and style, *Anā Hurra* is a powerful witness to the political context of the pre- and post-revolutionary period and to major changes that affected women’s lives in the first half of the 20th century. It is a novel where personal life and national issues merge. Moreover, this work is a very honest representation of several aspects of the Egyptian society between the forties and the fifties: its mobility, its religious minorities, and the high tension between tradition and modernity as reflected in the urban landscape, social practices, music, trades, dressing styles, social and gender relations, and education. Our reading of the work will be informed by some documents such as the editorials published in 1953 and a letter ‘Abd al-Quddūs dedicated to an imaginary daughter.¹⁷ Also, the short story *al-Nazzāra al-Sawdā’*, written a few years before *Anā Hurra*, illustrates how his political commentary was advanced through the life experiences of his fictional characters.

As bluntly indicated by its title, the main theme of *Anā Hurra* is freedom: the tireless fight for freedom, the apparent pursuit of freedom, and the shock of the death of freedom shortly after the revolution. The concept of freedom has dominated humankind since antiquity to such a degree that it is very difficult to establish a universal definition of it. In the *Concise Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* entry on “freedom”, two basic ideas are associated with this concept: autonomy, i.e., rightful self-government, and optionality, i.e., possessing open options, the ability to do, choose, achieve. Interestingly, to be free is equated to self-governing and independence, in a manner similar to the freedom of a sovereign nation state (FEINBERG 2000: 295). Considering that the Arab world has been in the grip of colonization, absolute powers, and limitation of the individual’s basic rights, freedom has been one of the core subjects of contemporary Arabic literature.¹⁸ It was ‘Abd al-Quddūs’ principal concern in the forties, when he constantly called for a revolution against the monarchy, the British, and local politicians. He used his mother’s magazine to invoke the revolution, and in 1951 he became the treasurer of an armed nationalist group. In the articles published before July 1952, he called for a male leader who should have led the revolution and overthrown the ancient regime. He was an enthusiastic supporter of Nasser and sincerely trusted him and his battle for independence. ‘Abd al-Quddūs took part in the revolution, which was the epitome of his dreams of freedom. However, his hopes were soon betrayed. In autumn 1952, he began to realize that the Free Officers had no political programme and he was informed that Nasser would have censored an article in which he called for the dismissal of the prime minister ‘Alī Māhir (ABŪ ’L-FUTŪḤ 1982: 156-158). The coup leader did not want ordinary citizens to express their opinion about the revolution and to make suggestions about the political scene.

¹⁷ The author was father of two sons.

¹⁸ See, for example, ALLEN 1995.

Despite that, the journalist continued to believe in the cause of the revolution and undertook a campaign for a democratic government, until he was imprisoned in 1954.

In our opinion, *Anā Hurra* illustrates the downward trajectory of the Egyptian president-to-be and of the betrayed aspirations of the Egyptians immediately after the revolution. The author traces this path through the story of Amīna, a determined and charming teenager who lives with her paternal aunt and her authoritarian husband in the traditional Cairene quarter of al-‘Abbāsiyya. Divorced during her pregnancy, her indigent mother was obliged to entrust the baby to the family of her former husband. Amīna grows up in a very conventional and patriarchal context where girls have to be modest and to get married as soon as they complete secondary school, passing from the authority of the father to that of the husband. Despite that, the young girl strongly refuses to conform to this system, considering it out of date and contrary to women’s ambitions and expectations. She displays her resentment by rebelling to everything associated with social mores and never misses the opportunity to break customary rules. She manifests her rebellion in the domestic space, contravening the rules imposed by the aunt and her husband, and in the public space, not behaving as expected from a girl of her age and often going beyond the limits of “decency”. She hates everything associated with the past, which she perceives as an obstacle to progress and a modern life. The past is represented, for example, by the old tram, the narrow and decadent streets of al-‘Abbāsiyya with their dilapidated buildings, the gossip ladies living in her quarter, and her aunt’s submission to her husband.¹⁹ She is allowed to play piano, which was considered the appropriate musical instrument for an upper or middle-class girl (BADRAN 1994: 155-156). A recurrent verb employed by the omniscient narrator to describe Amīna’s attitude is *tathūr*, to rebel and to oppose the burdens imposed on her, as when one day she decides not to go to school in order to violate the rules.

She felt she wanted to engage in a rebellion (*thawra*) against all that. She clung to her rebellion and kept stubborn. She wanted to be free (*tataḥarrara*), if only for a day. She wanted to break the routine that life had established for her. She wanted to feel that she was stronger than surrendering to a system of regulation (*niẓām*), to be more audacious than the other girls. (‘ABD AL-QUDDŪS 2021: 49)

Amīna tries to escape from the suffocating ambience in which she feels entrapped, and seeks refuge, for example, in the friendship with an openminded Jewish girl who initiates her to physical contact with boys. The novel is a significant contribution to the debate about the role of the “New Woman” in the newborn nation. Amīna is a middle-class girl who embodies the new horizons of the Egyptian woman in the forties and fifties, the opportunities gained thanks to the battles carried out by feminists in the previous decades, such as the battle for

¹⁹ The construction of Amīna’s personality is infused with biographical details by ‘Abd al-Quddūs. The author grew up in a twofold environment. His mother was a capable and independent woman who was a star of the Egyptian theatre scene in the early 20th century, and a popular vaudeville actress who participated in a series of melodramas, a capable and independent woman (CORMACK 2021: 119). He was brought up by his father’s family, and was raised by his paternal grandfather, a conservative Azharite who did not accept his son’s marriage to an actress. As a consequence, the young boy was taught mores and traditional values and at the same time he used to be present at the cultural salons organised at his mother’s home, where personalities of the artistic scene, of both sexes, gathered.

state secondary education for girls (BADRAN 1994: 143). Amīna attends al-Saniyya secondary school whose female students, not surprisingly, contributed to the 1919 revolution by distributing leaflets (BADRAN 1994: 78). Some critics assert that the character of Amīna is partially modelled after Rūz al-Yūsuf ('ABD AL-RAZZĀQ 2020: 39), who was one of the main protagonists of the Egyptian journalistic scene in an age of great political ferment and turmoil, one of the eminent representatives of *al-Nahḍa al-nisā'iyya*, the women's awakening through which women gained visibility together with cultural and social resonance (BARON 1994: 2). She contributed to the reduction of women's domestic seclusion in Egypt in the wave of many other middle and upper-class women (BADRAN 1994: 48). As 'Abd al-Quddūs emphasizes in the introduction to his mother's memoirs, she was the one and only maker of her successful career, for which she persevered despite economic, social, and political troubles to which she was exposed throughout her life (AL-YŪSUF 2008: 8). She renounced any kind of income and deprived herself of necessities of life in order to guarantee the release of her magazine, and always tackled the obstacle of being a woman active in the public field (AL-YŪSUF 2008: 125, 127).²⁰ She embodied the great changes witnessed in Egypt at the beginning of the century, namely the expanding capitalism, secularization, and urbanization that changed the boundaries of class and gender. She represented the expanded horizons of the Egyptian "New Woman", the battle against the cult of domesticity and restrictions imposed on women, and became an outspoken proponent for normalizing women's work outside the house. At the same time, however, she also epitomized the new forms of oppression, domination, and anxiety generated by such changes.

Amīna always tries to cross boundaries; one day, after entering the female compartment of the tram, she challenges the separation of the sexes.

She did not jump into the women wagon. Instead, she persisted in her rebellion (*thawra*) and sat next to men. ('ABD AL-QUDDŪS 2021: 49)

Here, the writer seems to suggest that Amīna carries out this action not because she really believes in specific principles, but simply because of her stubbornness. One of the most controversial questions concerning the analysis of the complex concept of freedom is its relation to desires and wishes. According to the philosophers who support a "value-oriented" theory, freedom is not solely the power of doing everything one wants, but the capacity of doing something that is important or valuable to a free person (FEINBERG 2000: 295). It is not difficult at all to distinguish that the rebellious Amīna represents the desire to overthrow the monarchy and liberate Egypt and its people from an inadequate and outdated political class. Over time Egypt has been depicted as a woman, but a feminised nationalism is tendentially weak (BARON 2005: 1-12). As Hoda Elsadda affirms in her study about the genderizing of

²⁰ Rūz al-Yūsuf was a middle-class woman and, as Beth Baron stresses in her study about the connection between nationalism and gender in Egypt at the turn of the 19th and 20th century, the real push for women's citizenship rights came from women of this class, who were very active in political journalism (BARON 2005: 187). These women, however, became disenchanted with the Wafd's systematic exclusion of women from the political scene, and important national figures openly criticised women's insistence on female citizenship rights.

the nation in the 20th century Egyptian novel, conflicting representations of gendered roles may reflect a contestation over the idealised image of the nation (ELSADDA 2012: XIII; XV). Amīna becomes convinced that the only actual way to freedom—from family and from the need of a husband—is economic independence. Consequently, she refuses to be dominated by a man. For this reason, after graduation she decides to move into her father’s apartment near the elegant Qaṣr al-Nīl street, inhabited by many foreigners. Her life radically changes and she achieves the much-desired freedom.

She became free (*hurra*). Complete freedom (*hurriyya*). No one would contradict her, no one would ask her anything, no one would be entitled to impose anything on her. Her father renounced all his rights in her favour [...]. She felt the responsibility for this freedom. She kept feeling responsible for her conduct and her mistakes. She indeed acted in a suitable way and she did not commit errors. (‘ABD AL-QUDDŪS 2021: 110)

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Amīna enrolls at the American University which—being a Western institution—can ensure a modern and competitive education, far from Oriental traditions and religious extremism. She represents the “New Woman” who is no longer sitting behind the *mashrabiyya* window watching outside without being seen.²¹ In the letter written to his imaginary daughter, the author states that, in order to be free, the woman has to enter the public space and live on the street (‘ABD AL-RAZZĀQ 2020: 76). Amīna designs her own revolution, at least on the surface, which is in fact the same longed-for revolution of ‘Abd al-Quddūs. She succeeds in overthrowing the *ancien régime* of her life and, after completing university studies, she gets employed by an American company. The protagonist anticipates the prototype of the working woman before Nasser’s state ideology made this figure central in its politics of modernization (BIER 2011: 71). She achieves responsible freedom. Responsibility and autonomy are closely related to the concept of freedom. Being autonomous and having the capacity of choice implies personal responsibility and acting according to reason (SVENDSEN 2014: 76; 85). Amīna’s being responsible for her own life may correspond to the national independence called on by ‘Abd al-Quddūs journalist and activist, a liberation which should be followed by free democratic elections, a constitution, and a party system.²²

However, from the start of 1953, ‘Abd al-Quddūs began to openly express his doubts about the Free Officers who, in his view, should have left the army and joined a political party after the revolution. The phantom of a military dictatorship was about to materialize. The Free Officers did not observe the democratic aspirations of the revolution and imposed a single party system (GORDON 1992: 152). Journalistic freedom was under threat because of the imposition of censorship. In the editorial published on the occasion of the first anniversary of the revolution, the author admits bitterly:

²¹ In the novel’s opening scene, Amīna stands in the balcony watching male students passing beneath it. This simple but eloquent image is the result of a gradual process of women’s conquest of the public space. Women should not stand behind the *mashrabiyya*, but they should be free to watch from open windows, stand in balconies, and go into the streets, as ‘Abd al-Quddūs puts it (‘ABD AL-RAZZĀQ 2020: 76).

²² As he stated, for example, in the editorials published in the last months of 1952 (GEER 2011: 305-306).

The coup leaders have not striven to set up a programme for after the coup as much as they have striven to plan and execute the coup. [...] They believed in democracy, but they have realised that democracy cannot become a fact by simply announcing it. They believed in a constitution, but they have realised that a constitution can be a way to corruption as well as to reform. [...] The principles that led to the coup are still alive. Know that the day we stop criticising, demanding, opposing, and debating, we will have lost these principles. (‘ABD AL-QUDDŪS 1953)

As we have seen, the novel establishes a parallel between national liberation and women’s liberation. The latter seems to be the precondition for a modern and free state. However, after achieving her aims, Amīna’s concept of freedom reveals superficial and evanescent elements. The freedom she has firmly fought for is not inspired by any serious principle, but only by her conceited ego. In short, she does not believe in anything. She recognizes it when, during her brilliant career, she decides to meet ‘Abbās, a journalist who lived in al-‘Abbāsiyya when she was a teenager, and to whom she was physically attracted. In a conversation about freedom, the woman proudly informs ‘Abbās that she has finally achieved her personal liberation after years of battles. The man stimulates a reflection about what the real essence of freedom is in his—and in the writer’s—view.

Freedom is a means, not an end. For example, I want the freedom to write what I think, and I ask freedom for my adversary too, so that he can write what he thinks. I believe that freedom of speech can lead us to the truthful opinion. Egypt does not demand freedom just because it wants to be free, or because freedom is the end of the path. Absolutely not. Egypt claims it because only a free nation can serve its people and elevate them. If the road to freedom is hard, the road after freedom has been achieved will be harder. (‘ABD AL-QUDDŪS 2021: 153-154)

Like the Free Officers and unlike ‘Abbās, the protagonist does not know why she has fought for freedom; like the Officers, she has aspired to liberate herself by all means, but she realizes she is not free; on the contrary, she is a slave of her job and loneliness. Amīna embodies women’s achievements and male anxieties for female liberation, as well as the influence of a European life style that has corroded traditional customs. Work for middle-class women was perceived as a challenge to a patriarchal culture. Women’s entering into the masculine public domain posed the question of how to reconcile domesticity, marriage, and motherhood with work life.

The young woman’s path to freedom mirrors Egypt’s path to freedom, and ‘Abd al-Quddūs’ gloomy vision of the coup’s outcomings is represented by the fact that Amīna does not fit into the “exemplary” model of womanhood.²³ This clearly emerges at the end of the novel when the woman, a slave of her desires, starts an illicit relationship with ‘Abbās,

23 The topic of the dangers deriving from women’s breaking into new professions and abusing their freedom is recurrent in the fiction of the thirties and forties. For example, a play by Muḥammad Khūrshīd tells the story of a young doctor who refuses marriage because she does not want to be dominated by a man (BADRAN 1994: 136-137). The novel *al-Ribāṭ al-Muqaddas* (The Sacred Bond, 1944) by Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm blames the modern Egyptian woman who wants to be liberated and westernized, failing to represent the model of the modern but modest woman of national discourse (ELSADDA 2012: 70-71).

agreeing to live with him in the old-fashioned al-Antīkkhāna quarter, and completely forgets the target of her life, to be free.

Amīna lost her freedom for the sake of that. She was no longer free. She became his property, property of his outbursts, of his time, of his will. (‘ABD AL-QUDDŪS 2021: 185)

She ends up being like her aunt, a non-working woman acquiescent to her man. Moreover, she ends up socially discredited because her lover does not marry her, and she accepts passively his decision. Amīna is presented by the narrator as a victim, because she has not been taught what proper freedom is. Her obstinacy and stubbornness resulted from her childhood, when she was deprived of the love of her parents and raised by a severe aunt who had restricted her desires.²⁴ The author’s pessimism for the future of social rights in his country is also reflected in ‘Abbās’ final decision not to marry his lover, with the argument that a conventional relation could destroy their unique love. His hegemonic masculinity and his revolutionary activism²⁵ are obscured by this unconventional choice. The treatment of the theme of freedom does not embrace profound existential and metaphysical dimensions in the novel, but instead addresses its political and social aspects. Political freedom, the author tells us, is the foundation of a liberal democracy and all other freedoms.

As Selim states in her study on the development of the Egyptian novel, the “national feminine” is central in the Egyptian fiction of the 20th century. Feminine virtues and chastity mirror a wealthy nation, while a corrupted feminine, a woman who has ambitions and manifests sexual agency, symbolises the decay of the nation (SELIM 2004: 20). Amīna is thus placed into a rooted tradition of allegorical feminization of Egyptian nationalism. ‘Abd al-Quddūs reflects a middle position: he supports women participating in public life on condition that morality is respected. He exemplifies contrasting attitudes towards women’s sexuality. Amīna’s fate underlines the perils to which a woman who seeks independence is potentially exposed. In this character we can glimpse the writer’s personality and its opposing forces, his twofold formation, his dreams of political freedom, and fears for the wrong use of freedoms. He supports a woman’s right to education and economic participation, but always showing regard for her traditional role. As mentioned, the woman protagonist is invested with several references to the author’s biography, such as his childhood in al-‘Abbāsiyya, far from his parents. Amīna embodies some distinctive features of his mother, the highest example of the free working woman always subjected to forms of male domination. In the figure of Amīna we find all the ambiguities surrounding the role of the woman: every time she tries to liberate herself, she takes a wrong turn. The author implies that postrevolutionary Egypt—with the parliament suspension and its antidemocratic ruling class—is anti-revolutionary.

What has emerged from this analysis is that the middlebrow novel *Anā Hurra* deals with several aspects of the highbrow novels produced in the same decades. The Arabic canonical novel has been created to reflect a nationalist agenda, to take on themes that dominate

²⁴ In the letter to the imaginary daughter, the author states that girls should be left to be free, but parents have to teach them how to manage their freedom (‘ABD AL-RAZZĀQ 2020: 76).

²⁵ Another element that suggests the author’s pessimism about the failure of revolutionary principles is the fact that the revolution is not described in the novel.

national discourse, and to represent the Egyptian reality. ‘Abd al-Quddūs’ middlebrow novels are in all respects—and not less than canonical novels—an intervention into contemporary debates concerning political independence, liberation, and the new forms of participation acquired by women. At the same time, *Anā Hurra* anticipates some changes that occurred in the Arabic novel after the social and political upheavals of the fifties and sixties. The certainties and the cohesion of the national self—a coherent entity in contrast to the foreign other—give way to a ruptured self and the absence of cultural cohesion which threatens traditional stability (HAFEZ 1994: 94). *Anā Hurra* is the story of a failed formation, a story without a hero. *Bildungsroman* has been central to the creation of the Arabic canon; the coming-of-age theme is a narrative trope and the young male protagonist presented as a national hero (PANICONI 2023: 1-7). In ‘Abd al-Quddūs’ novel we have a becoming-an-adult subject whose formation does not conform to an ideal path and fails. The young protagonist’s trajectory reflects the trajectory of the nation.

Conclusions

This article aims at demonstrating the relevance of Iḥsān ‘Abd al-Quddūs, as well as contributing to liberate the middlebrow category in Arabic literature from its strong negative charge. The author has been ignored for a long time by literary critics due to its association with popular fiction and not with the intelligentsia. This analysis, however, has tried to point out that middlebrow fiction is a very elastic concept, without clear borders, and it does not exist in a vacuum. On the contrary, it is strongly rooted in reality and gives insights into a set of social practices and tastes of the middle class. Moreover, it contributes to elucidate the relationship between high and popular cultural production. We have analysed ‘Abd al-Quddūs’ literary production in the wake of recent studies about both the popular fiction produced during the Nahḍa and the bestseller’s successes beginning in the nineties. In fact, ‘Abd al-Quddūs’ novels and short stories can be seen as a bridge between these two phases of popular writing.

In particular we have focused on the author’s first novel, *Anā Hurra*, serialised in 1953. This popular work captures the author’s frustration and the disillusionment for the liberticidal output of the 1952 revolution, along with his anxieties for the role of women in a changing society. We have proposed a reading of the novel which takes into account the journalistic activity of ‘Abd al-Quddūs, to underline how the story of the rebellion of the young protagonist reflects the destiny of Egypt before and immediately after the 1952 revolution. The novel traces the physical and emotional development of Amīna, whose final failure coincides with that of the nation’s following the revolution. Before July 1952, the author invoked freedom – which was represented by Amīna’s struggles to liberate herself from the chains of old traditions. Immediately after the coup, the author was very optimistic for the future of the Republic – which was represented by Amīna’s newfound freedoms. Some months after the revolution, ‘Abd al-Quddūs was disappointed with the Free Officers and Nasser’s politics that denied freedom—this feeling is represented through her incapability to “properly” manage her freedom. Amīna successfully liberates herself but ends up a victim of her desires. The young woman’s path can be seen as the symbol of a specious national project, and shatters

the model of the ideal working woman and the cult of domesticity promoted since the late 19th century by intellectuals such as Qāsim Amīn (1863-1908). This novel demonstrates how the author was entrapped between two opposing forces: his progressivism in the political field, and his concern for the moral decay of the society.

As demonstrated by Wen-chin Ouyang, in contemporary Arabic literature love stories are emblematic of the fate of the nation (OUYANG 2012: 24-25). *Anā Hurra* confirms this paradigm. Moreover, the novel may represent a transitional phase in Egyptian literature; it presents elements of the canonical novel that emerged in the first decades of the 20th century, such as the dualism between tradition and modernity. Concerning its relation with the committed novel of the fifties, where the protagonist is a representative of the masses who fight for social and political liberation, a hero of the masses, the middle-class Amīna represents, in a certain way, an obstacle to the full commitment of the revolution. Lastly, it anticipates the end of the illusions typical of the novel of the sixties for its negative view of the outcomes of the nation-state project.

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