

Imaginative Migrations: Narratives of Otherness in the Egyptian Literature and Cinema

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Egypt has become one of the main sources of emigration in the Middle East; six million Egyptians currently live as expatriates in the Gulf States, North America or Europe. Encouraged by the *infitâh* economic reforms introduced by Sadat in the 1970s, emigration has since been a safety valve for the authorities as they attempt to cope with the economic, political and social blockages which affect Egypt. It is also a financial resource, and the migrants' remittances have become indispensable for the country's economic development. In the absence of economic strategies to create enough jobs to absorb newcomers to the job market, for an increasing number of Egyptians expatriation has become a preferred, though risky (because increasingly illegal) way of escaping social downgrading.

The huge number of Egyptians who have emigrated in the last four decades means they play a central role in the national imagination, which is cultivated by writers, filmmakers and journalists, who themselves have very often been migrants at some time in their lives. Nevertheless, the topic remains largely unexplored by researchers. A number of studies have been published about migration and the cinema (Gautier 1992; Al-Hamarneh 2005), but very few about migration as a topic in the general literature. We found only one very brief paper in Arabic, entitled *Ruâyât al-Higra* (Migration Novels), in which the author points out that "Migration has become one of the main subjects of Egyptian literature but surprisingly, considering its importance, its political influence both inside Egypt and abroad has been ignored" (Nâsir 2006). This lack of academic interest is even more surprising given the large number of studies on the topic in North African, Turkish (Muhiddin 1991) or Lebanese (Hout 2007; Sakr 2011), books written from a postcolonial perspective, using the concepts of "exilic" or "diasporic" literature (Hout 2007) of hybridization and transnationalism. Usually, migration and its consequence, confrontation with other cultures, appear as a revealer of Self, and Self's relations with the Other.

Based on a survey of Egyptian novels and films dealing with recent international migration, this paper aims to explore the nexus between migration and otherness: How are the contacts and interactions between Egyptians and foreigners described in novels and films? How are other cultures, lifestyles, and spaces represented? How do writers and

directors use, interpret, or reshape stereotypes about the “Other”? The other is considered to be the foreign country or people the migrant encounters, but in fact migrants themselves become the “other” for their family as well as for their own society. Critical repertoires usually join forces in condemning the migrant as a vector of social change who threatens Egyptian moral values, and accuse the Egyptian government of being responsible for the death of young people who cross the Mediterranean Sea illegally, and of being incapable of standing up for the rights of Egyptian citizens living abroad. Beyond these criticisms, what is at stake is the redefinition of links between individual and collective identities, and ongoing reevaluation of the national ideal.

For a geographer working on Egyptian migrations, and using traditional methods (fieldwork, interviews, statistical analysis and map analysis, etc.), this multidisciplinary comparative approach to the analysis of films and books appears to be an appropriate way to explore migratory imaginations, and to compare their different discourses and perceptions. Despite their differences, I will argue that the main representations of Egyptian migrations, both in the cinema and in the general literature, are embedded in methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003) rather than in a transnational paradigm. After briefly describing the corpus of books and films used as reference, I will try to map the ‘otherness’ for Egyptian migrants by describing the perceptions of the host countries which are usually represented by strong stereotypes. Starting from the usual distinction between migration to the West and migration to Arab countries, I will demonstrate that the “alien” is not exactly who we may think at a first glance and that the cultural frontiers are not always where we expect them to be. I will then question the representation of migration as a loss of identity, analyzing it at four scales, the nation, the society, the family and the body of migrants.

1. A largely unexplored corpus

Migration is usually portrayed as a negative experience in both books and films. Writers and the filmmakers denounce the harsh living conditions of Egyptians in host countries, and the deep feelings of nostalgia toward their homeland.

(1) Of books and migration

Broadly speaking, the chronology of Egyptian modern literature dealing with migration can be divided into four periods. The first is the early 20th century, when, for intellectuals like Taha Hussein or Tewfiq Al Hakim travelling to Europe to study at the most famous universities was part of their education. The second period coincides with the Nasser era (1950–1960s), except when emigration served the interests of Pan-Arabism, it was strictly controlled.¹ Consequently for this period, no books deal with international migration, but

many novels describe the waves of migration from the countryside to Egyptian cities.² The third period (1970–1990s) is the period of economic migration to Arab oil countries, starting from the *infitâh* economic reforms launched by Sadat in the middle of 1970s (Sonallah Ibrahim, Gamal al Ghitany, Ibrahim Abdel Meguid). The last period (since the beginning of the 21st century) is characterized by two trends, one, avant-garde literature, often written by female authors who continue to live abroad (May Telmissany, Miral al-Tahawi), and the second, authors who migrated for the purpose of their studies, but chose to return and live in Egypt. Famous bestselling authors like Alaa Al Aswany and Khalid Khamissi both devoted their second opus to the topic (*Chicago*, *Safinat Nûh*).

The corpus analyzed for the purpose of this study comprises twelve books most of which have been translated into English or French,³ and can be divided into two categories. The first category refers to books whose main topic is migration and includes, among others, *Chicago* by Al Aswany, which relates the intertwined destinies of Egyptians living on an American campus; *The Other Place* by Abdel Meguid, which portrays a young educated middle-class Egyptian from Alexandria facing the harsh alienation of economic migrants in Saudi Arabia; *Amrikanli* by Sonallah Ibrahim pictures an Egyptian history professor who spends one term at a university in San Francisco; and finally *Safinat Nûh* paints a good picture of the diverse experiences of Egyptians who are voluntary expatriates. The second category comprises novels in which migration is a secondary but recurrent topic, usually linked to the *infitâh* upheavals (*Zaat* by Ibrahim, *Risâlat al-Basa'ir fil Masa'ir* by Ghitany). Some of these books are bestsellers, which means readers are interested in this topic not only in Egypt, but also in the West and in the Gulf States, since *Chicago* was the second top seller in bookshops in Dubaï in the first week of 2012, five years after it was first published.⁴

All these novels account for a feeling of being uprooted, of alienation and cultural confrontation experienced by those who live abroad, but they also describe the difficulties experienced by migrants when they return, and the hardships faced by their families who remain behind in Egypt. Written by well-known and committed Egyptian writers, these books are mostly novels, or collections of short stories (*Friendly Fire*, *Risâlat al-Basa'ir fil Masa'ir*), inspired by realism, and represent the main trend in contemporary Egyptian literature (Jacquemond 2008).⁵ In most cases, these narratives are inspired by the author's own experience, since almost all spent several years of their life abroad, to study, to earn a better salary, or for political reasons.⁶ But with the exception of Miral al-Tahawy and May Telmissany, who defines herself as a transnational writer, most of these novels were written in Egypt after their author's return. Migration appears to be a fundamental time for literary experience, since the first modern Arabic novel, *Zeineb*, was written by Husayn Heykal in 1914, when he was living in exile in Paris. Writing is a way of overcoming the suffering caused by exile. Although many writers confess that their experience of solitude and

nostalgia encouraged them to write, others, like Mohamed Bisatie, who worked as an accountant in Saudi Arabia, said that, on the contrary, their experience as a migrant prevented them from writing for a considerable period of time (Nâsir 2006).

(2) Of films and migration

According to Alaa Al-Harmarneh (2005), “the presentation of the “other” in Egyptian cinema is somewhat rare”: images of European and American countries are “mainly limited to using them as settings and/or background for spy activities, love stories and honeymoon trips”. Indeed, Egyptian cinema is marked by stereotyped plots, characters and settings, deeply concerned by social mobility and strongly embedded in the local context (Shafiq 1998). However, films dealing with migration are becoming more and more common (Shafiq 2011). Nevertheless, the migration topic is not completely new, several films released in the 1980s addressed the return of Egyptian migrants from the Gulf states, and have already been analyzed (Gautier 1992). For this reason, in this paper, I focus on films released in the 1990s and the 2000s, which belong to various genres, from drama to comedy, and documentaries, including popular and independent films (*Hello America* by Nader Galal versus *The City* by Yousry Nasrallah). Most of these films starred famous actors (Adel Imam, Mohamed Heneidy, Ahmed Helmy) and were viewed either at the cinema, or at home on videos, DVDs, or on the Internet.⁷ A TV series broadcast during Ramadan 2011 *Mr Ramadan Mabrouk* is also included. It portrays the adventures of a school teacher from a Delta village who goes to Paris to prepare his PhD, becomes a teacher of Arabic, and discovers the harsh reality of Egyptians living in France. At the end of the series, he returns home to Egypt.

- In *Hello America* by Nader Galal (1998), Bakhit (Adel Imam) succeeds in making his dream of travelling to the United States with his fiancée, Adila, come true, by obtaining a visa sent by his cousin who already lives there. But, once there, the American dream turns into a nightmare: Bakhit can only find unqualified jobs, and has to face the hostility of Americans towards Arabs and Muslims.
- In *The City* by Yousry Nasrallah (1999), Ali, a young accountant, lives in a working class neighbourhood, and dreams of being an actor, against his father’s wishes. He decides to leave Egypt for Paris, where he lives for several years as a boxer in fixed matches. After being attacked by his employers, he loses his memory but manages to return to Egypt, where he eventually becomes an actor.
- In *Lost in America* by Rafi Girgis (2002), Sherif, a young man with little money, embarks on the adventure of expatriation. At LA airport, he pretends to be Adel, a rich farmer from the Nile Delta, coming to the US to marry his cousin Nour, whom he had never seen. Adel himself arrives on the same plane but is mistakenly arrested by the police. The

misunderstanding lasts several weeks until the day of marriage of Sherif and Nour, who have fallen in love, when Adel reappears, having being injured by delinquents and after a long stay in hospital, having recovered his memory.

- In *Cut and Paste* by Hala Khalil (2006), Gamila is a resourceful young woman who above all wants to emigrate to New Zealand. To increase her chances of obtaining a visa, she decides to marry Youssef, a young man she met by chance, who also wants to find a job abroad. They end up truly loving one another.
- In *Black Honey (Asal Aswad)* by Khalid Marai (2010), Masri, an Egyptian who has lived for 20 years in the United States returns to Egypt after his father's death, to spend his holidays and see if he can live there. After having forgotten his American passport, he is embarked in a series of adventures, which reveal the different value placed on human life depending on one's nationality, and the negative aspects of Egyptian society. But Masri also rediscovers his Egyptian identity and the positive aspects of Egyptian life. In an obvious happy end, he decides to remain in Egypt.

2. Mapping otherness: Imaginative geographies of migration

Since the great majority of migrants go to Arab countries, Egyptian migrations cannot be considered as being post colonial, but rather south-south migration (if this expression is appropriate when referring to oil-rich countries like the Gulf States). Official Egyptian statistics and scholars usually distinguish two types of migration: migration to Arab countries, known as temporary migration, and migration to Western countries, which is assumed to be permanent. The distinction, based on differences in migration policies, is largely artificial. In Europe, for example, not all migrants want to settle permanently and many spend only a few years there before returning to Egypt. Such temporary migration is often clandestine because of the toughening of migration policies as a consequence of the Schengen agreements. In books and films, this distinction between the West and Arab countries is also portrayed, but before distinguishing these two kinds of migration, let us first recall that, irrespective of the host country, migration is usually described as a negative experience.

(1) Migration as a negative experience

Academic works on Egyptian migration can be divided into two categories: one that takes an optimistic view inspired by a neo-classical viewpoint and states that, in the long run, capital and human flows between Egypt and the Gulf States will shift the balance between wealth and salaries; and the other that takes a more pessimistic view, held by supporters of the dependence theory, inspired by Marxism. These authors criticize the increase in the number of imports caused by the return of migrants and their negative influence on

Egyptian society, in which Pan-Arab ideals are replaced by the search for individual satisfaction, through the rise of the consumer society (Gruntz and Pagès-El Karoui 2012). Films and novels about migration mostly represent the latter viewpoint.

Even though, in practice, migration concerns all social classes, in the books discussed here, the main character is usually an educated middle-class or upper-class bachelor (doctor, teacher or university lecturer,⁸ engineer, etc.). In films, the social spectrum is broader, and the working class is more frequently represented (*Hello America*, *The City*). Migrants are mainly men; when women migrate, they accompany their husband or their fiancé rather than make the move on their own. Portraits of female migrants alone are very rare, two exceptions being the teacher portrayed in *Risâlat al-Basa'îr fil Masa'îr*, or the nurse in *The Other Place*. In *Cut and Paste*, in order to emigrate to New Zealand, Gamila has to get married, and this strategy of an independent woman is the core subject of the film.

The decision to emigrate may be the collective choice of the family. In *The Other Place*, Ismail travels to Saudi Arabia under pressure from a distant cousin who finds him a job and reminds him of his duty as head of the family after his father's death. In contrast, in *Chicago*, the departure is the result of an individual choice, sometimes against the family's will. Shaymaa, a 30-year-old woman, wears the veil and lives in Tanta, a large town in the Nile Delta. She is a hard working student who wishes to continue her studies against her mother's will, and who is afraid that at her age she is destined remain single, because Egyptian men do not want to marry a women who is better educated than themselves. In *The City*, Ali leaves for France to escape a limiting social environment and to fulfill his desire to become an actor. A deadlocked situation in Egypt is often the reason for migration, like in *Safinat Nûh*, in which Ahmad Ezz al-Din cannot afford to pay the bribe needed to become a civil servant. University lecturers escaping the stifling intellectual atmosphere in Egyptian universities are often portrayed (*Safinat Nûh* or *Amerikanli*). Coptic doctors who have to face strong discrimination at work are also frequently portrayed (*Safinat Nûh*, *Chicago*). In *Safinat Nûh*, Khalid Al Khamissi very realistically describes two possible but illegal routes for migrants: one to the United States passing through several countries in Latin America and another leading to Europe. The character leaves Libya on a boat, having paid 15000 Egyptian pounds for his passage. Unfortunately, the boat sinks and the character is arrested in Libya and sent back to Egypt by plane. The author also mentions organ trafficking: Yassine al-Baroudi sells one of his kidneys to pay the smuggler.

Rather than an experience of individual empowerment, migration is usually depicted as a negative experience consisting of confrontation with otherness, a painful experience characterised by nostalgia and solitude. In his novel *Chicago*, among his characters—young Egyptians studying histology at the University of Chicago—Alaa al Aswany describes the prevailing feeling of *ghurba* (in Egyptian, the state of being a foreigner, a stranger, which he

uses as a synonym of emigration, exile and homesickness⁹). Usually, the characters have little contact with people in the host country, either they are very lonely (like the teacher in *Risâlat al-Basa'îr fil Masa'îr* by Ghitani), or they live with fellow citizens. In *The Other Place*, Ismail decides to limit his contacts with permanent residents of the host country, because he does not intend to stay there, he keeps his distance from people and things, but does not confess his loneliness and moral distress to his family in Egypt. Like every other migrant, he transforms his nightmare into a beautiful dream to avoid worrying his relatives (Abdel Meguid 2005). This recurrent topic of the migratory myth, not to say lie, is also the subject of the documentary *Messages from Paradise*. Solidarity is described occasionally and its place is, by excellence, the cafe, which is a « place of encounter for compatriots » where newcomers come and where migrants exchange advice, share food, and borrow money (Ghitany 1993, 184).

In novels and films, like in the press, discourses concerning migrants oscillate between denunciation and victimisation, the variations depending on the destination: the death by drowning of many clandestine migrants seeking to emigrate to Europe is condemned (Cantini and Gruntz 2010). A wide range of migrants is described ranging from a greedy selfish nouveau-riche returning from the Gulf States to the traitor who denies the Egyptian part of his identity by trying to be more American than the Americans, or the exile who struggles to escape from discrimination—often a Copt or a highly qualified character, or from social downgrading (doctors selling hotdogs in the streets of New York (Al Aswany 2011)—and the hero-martyr who risks his life crossing the Mediterranean illegally to feed his family.

Books and films describe Egyptian migrants' living conditions abroad, although differently, since books deal more often with migration to the Gulf States, whereas films depict migration to western countries. In both cases, we encounter narratives of disillusionment either with the American dream or with the Pan-Arab myth.

(2) Migration to the West: USA versus Europe?

The description of the United States is often ambivalent, and only in certain cases very negative. If the American dream is usually described, confrontation with reality usually reveals the dark side of the American way of life, with no effort to avoid clichés. The United States is portrayed as a violent country in which urban violence is common (there are many scenes in which characters are attacked in the street, witness a supermarket robbery, or are the victim of sexual violence in prison), where access to health care is limited to the rich, and lawyers are all powerful. In *Hello America*, before leaving his native country, the hero Bakhit imagines his stay as a way of achieving his wish for social upgrading. He imagines himself quickly becoming a millionaire, with a big house with a swimming-pool, big cars, a jet;

marrying a tall blonde to obtain American nationality and, why not, one day, becoming president of the United States, in this land of immigrants where anything is possible. In *Chicago*, the United States is depicted as the country of freedom and the place where one can contest the Egyptian autocratic regime undermined by corruption and torture. But it is also portrayed as racist, particularly against black women, and where Islamophobia and xenophobia against Arabs is common. In *Hello America*¹⁰ and *Lost in America*, Egyptian characters have hardly arrived on American soil, when they are suspected of being terrorists. Egyptian food is often used as a dramatic resource: in *Hello America*, when *mish*, a strong Egyptian cheese, falls out of the luggage bin on the plane, a bacteriologic alert is triggered and Bakhit and Adila are arrested. In *Lost in America*, Adel is arrested by custom officers because his *mouloukhiyya*, a green powder made from plants used to make soup, is suspected of being a drug. These kinds of not very subtle artifices are considered to have high comic potential.

The rhetoric tool used by film directors and writers is to point out the negative aspects of the advantages of American way of life. When freedom is praised, its limits, seen from an Egyptian point of view, are rapidly depicted. In *Hello America*, Bakhit is very enthusiastic when he sees a demonstration in the street and starts shouting with the demonstrators, but is rapidly disillusioned when he realizes that they are demanding the right to gay marriage. Women's freedom is often challenged: Bakhit is scandalized when he sees his Egyptian cousin, who has become an American citizen, let his daughter have boyfriends and sexual relations before marriage. He angrily witnesses the rapid emancipation of his fiancée, Adila, who decides to go to a nightclub scantily clothed, and responds to his indignation: "I'm a free woman in a free country". This idea of inversion is also apparent when Bakhit and Adila see a couple kissing each other languorously in a car. They alert the police, but end up being arrested by the policemen for voyeurism. The topic of moral depravity extends to representations of animals, perceived as real people in the West: in *Hello America*, the dog Baby has her own room in the ground floor, while Bakhit and Adila sleep in the attic. In the TV series, *Monsieur Ramadan*, there is a ludicrous scene when Ramadan is arrested for having insulted a dog and his punishment is being obliged to take care of the dog. Protagonists happen to eat dog food, either out of need (*Hello America*), or by mistake (*Lost in America*). As a last example, freedom of speech has led to some strong salafi movements in New York: when Bakhit takes his nephew to the mosque to teach him the principles of religion, he is astonished to find a fundamentalist imam and believers shouting virulent anti-American slogans. When his cousin throws him out because of his conservative attitude, he goes to the mosque for shelter and aid. The imam tries to persuade him to marry Barbara, a heavily built poor black woman who is also an alcoholic, to obtain American nationality.

Crossing national frontiers can sometimes transform the categories and boundaries of otherness. For instance, Al Aswany shows how, when his main character Nagui is confronted with the reality of the American system, it becomes more difficult for him to hate the Americans he had previously often rebelled against in Egypt. However, the possibility of having a double culture, Egyptian and American, is seldom mentioned. Usually migrants become completely Americanised, like in *Hello America*, and lose their Egyptian values, a change which is perceived negatively. In *Chicago*, characters who try to become part of American society by marrying an American woman, and sometimes denying their Egyptian culture, meet a tragic end: Mohamed Saleh split up with his American wife and committed suicide. Rafaat Sabet lost his daughter, who died from an overdose, after accusing him of being the cause of her problems. "You don't know who you are, your whole life, you have tried to be an American, and you have failed" (Aswany 2007, 398). Generally speaking, migrants resist the siren call of westernization. The prevailing vision conveyed by filmmakers and writers—who belong to the Egyptian cultural elite—is thus more a clash of civilizations than the meeting of two cultures. The very negative image of America "reflects the deep distrust of Egyptian intellectuals towards American policies and democracy" (Al-Hamarneh 2005). They blame Americans' double standards, and their imperialism. In *Hello America*, there is an eloquent scene in which Bakhit delivers a patriotic speech on TV condemning American imperialism and asserting that Egypt doesn't need American financial and military aid. Even in symbolic novels, like *Return to the temple (Al awda ila al-Mabad)* by Nabil Naoum, a negative image of Americans prevails: Americans are portrayed as looters of Egyptian heritage. In comparison, French protagonists are portrayed in a more sympathetic way.

The cultural dichotomy in Egyptian films between the USA and Europe was analyzed by Alaa Al-Hamarneh (2005): "Europe is portrayed as a friendly space and as a home of cultures that are very similar to the Arab-Egyptian culture, while the USA is shown as the "other", a space in which values and phenomena that are completely unacceptable to Arab audiences flourish and dominate." He noted that in the three films he analyzed¹¹, there are many positive European characters who are open-minded, friendly and generous to Egyptian migrants. "Paris is exactly like Cairo", writes Nasrallah's main character to a friend in Egypt. Bad characters in Europe who try to cheat the new migrants are either Israeli (in *Hamman fi Amsterdam*), or Arab migrants depicted as criminals or individuals who have lost their identity. This reflects the widespread distrust found in Egyptian society of Egyptians abroad, or more generally of Arab migrants: "Never trust an Egyptian abroad" was repeatedly heard in interviews with Egyptian migrants in Paris in 2011. Also worth mentioning are the particular stereotypes used for North Africans: in *The City*, there is the character played by Roshdy Zem, a French man of North African origin who finds jobs for

clandestine migrants like Ali, and sees himself as a benefactor to his Arab “brothers”, but doesn’t hesitate to exploit or cheat them (when chased by the police, he steals the passport of his “brother Ali” to escape to Egypt). Although the image of Europe is certainly better than that of the USA, this needs to be qualified. In the novel *Risâlat al-Basa’îr fil Masa’îr*, after years spent in transit in an Arab country, Europe appears as the final destination. Without specifying the name of the country, Ghitany portrays a cold and inhospitable country where ordinary racism prevails and where the migrant is usually exploited by another Egyptian or by a European. In the TV series, *Mr Ramadan*, there is a recurrent scene in which on their return from France, migrants meet in the Delta village café to weigh the pros and the cons of life in France. Some praise social justice and unemployment insurance, others blame the bad weather and the strong racism against Arabs and Muslims.

(3) Migration to Arab countries: The disillusion of Pan-Arabism

While migration to Arab countries is frequently described in Egyptian books (although the host countries are generally unnamed), in films, descriptions of Egyptians living in Arab countries are relatively rare, without doubt because of difficulties of shooting there¹² as well as the problem of censorship. In reality, otherness is not only encountered in Western countries, but often reveals itself in the heart of Arab “brother” countries.

This is the topic of *The Other Place*, by Ibrahim Abdel-Méguid, which portrays a young Egyptian emigrant in Saudi Arabia—the main destination for Egyptian labourers—gradually discovering this familiar otherness. He denounces the rigid interpretation of Islam by Wahhabites, the violence towards women, and the abuse of migrants, despite the fact they are Arabs or Muslims. Criticism of the Gulf States is equally virulent in Ghitany’s book *Risâlat al-Basa’îr fil Masa’îr*. He denounces the bad treatment of Egyptians after Sadat’s visit to Jerusalem, and the signing of the peace treaty with Israel. He calls the labour management system in the Gulf (*kafala*) a modern form of slavery (migrants can’t travel without permission from the *kafil* and are thus completely dependent on his good will), he criticizes the strong social divide between natives and foreigners, and the double standards applied in the case of rape.¹³ Here again, like for the West, the description is highly stereotyped: one could imagine that every inhabitant of a Gulf State is backward, fundamentalist, a hypocritical Bedouin, and a child rapist.

Positive opinions about the Gulf States are occasionally expressed by secondary characters, who praise the consumer society in Saudi Arabia, the immensity of the buildings and highways, the cleanliness of public spaces, but who regret the emptiness of social life (Ibrahim 2004). This negative view of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States predominates among the Egyptian elite and may extend to other Arab countries, Libya for example. The rare positive references in the corpus to an Arab country refer to Iraq, which was the main

destination for Egyptians in the 1980s. In *Taxi* by Khamissi, a migrant confesses to having spent the best years of his life in Iraq. He praises the protective attitude of Saddam Hussein towards Egyptians and above all, the kindness of Iraqis, who offered plenty of food to their Egyptian neighbours during Ramadan, even though at the same time tensions with Egyptian migrants were increasing in Iraq.

In Arab countries, Egyptian immigrants often find themselves confronted with precarious working conditions and acts of xenophobia, which reinforce their nationalist sentiments. Several writers denounce the Egyptian government's failure to protect Egyptian expatriates in the Gulf, frequently criticised in the opposition press in the 2000s (Al Aswany 2011; Khamissi 2011). In the 1970s, Arab intellectuals had imagined that the increased circulation of people, goods and capital generated by oil revenues would lead to the political advent of the Arab fatherland (Beaugé and Roussillon, 1988). Thirty years later, with the ideology of Pan Arabism all but dead, displaced by Islamism, labour migrations appears to be less a vector of integration than of increased regional differentiation, and Egypt finds it difficult to accept that it is no longer the centre of the Arab World. Another writer, Alaa Al Dib, who has also written novels about migration (not translated into English or French), sums up his negative experience: "I've tried to write and describe the impacts of the experience on my personality, but these 60 days of exile remain a human and artistic nightmare [...]. It opened my eyes about the terrifying experience of millions of Egyptians in quest of bread and money, dragging themselves from one place to another in the Arab World, from towns to deserts, suffering from behaviours that range from martyrdom to shock and dishonesty. For us, the words "the Arabs" and "Arabness", express a notion that has lost its meaning, whose future is dark, and this increases our dismay. We lie to ourselves? and fail to perceive what has happened" (Nasîr 2006).

In another connection, space also plays an important role in the structure of books and films, since many writers or directors begin their story with either a description of the spatial framework (the corniche in Alexandria in *Hello America*; the history of the city in *Chicago*, the description of the structure of a town in the Emirates in *Drumbeat*), or the idea of crossing boundaries (in *Lost in America*, *Black Honey*, the first scene takes place in a plane). On the map of imaginative migrations, there is a kind of division between books, which talk more about Arab countries and films, which talk about the West. However, there is also a great blank: very few films or books relate the experience of Egyptians in the Soviet world, although in the period between 1950 and 1970, many Egyptians went to Moscow or other East European cities. Sonallah Ibrahim, who lived in East Berlin and Moscow, is very discreet about his own experience. Despite these blanks, discourses about migration are very critical of host countries, but at the same time, they condemn Egyptian contemporary society, while praising the traditional Egyptian values, in an ambivalent nationalist vision.

3. Migration as loss of identity

Away from their homeland, migrants run the risk of losing their Egyptian identity under the influence of the more conservative values of the Gulf States, or the more liberal values of the West. At the same time, the characters deliver a devastating criticism of the new Egyptian society born from the *Infitâh*, describing it as the collapse of traditional family and educational values, corrupted by easy money. The recurrent question of identity is dealt with at four levels: the nation, the society, the family and the body of migrants.

(1) When the migrant redefines the nation

Expatriation is generally a temporary experience, thanks to the migrants' strong attachment to Egypt. As mentioned previously, the fictional characters display deep feelings of nostalgia towards their country. A character in *Safinat Nûh* frantically tries to keep up with the news from Egypt to maintain ties with his homeland while another, a Copt, declares "Egypt is my country. My roots have thrived in its soil from thousands of years; how could I uproot myself from it?" (Khamissi 2009, 225). The root metaphor is embedded in a vision of the self, based on inside versus outside. The migrant is an example of someone from the outside (*min barra*), like an imported product versus an Egyptian product (*masrî*). So an individual's identity is defined by his situation in space: one can be inside or outside, but the idea of being both inside and outside, beyond the national boundary, which is the core of the scientific concept of transnationalism is not considered here. Interestingly, several main characters in films have a symbolic name, Masrî, (literal meaning 'Egyptian') is used as a first name in *Asal Aswad* and as a last name in *Lost in America*. Disillusionment and the risk of losing one's identity through migration are also at the heart of several books and films. There are a number of stories about identity theft in which passports play a key role (*Lost in America, The City*), or stories of amnesia (*Lost in America, The City, Brooklyn Heights*¹⁴).

A dual uprooting is often described: the Egyptian society which hasn't offered them any other solution than leaving the country, appears to betray them on their return. Homecoming migrants don't recognize their own society, which has undergone tremendous changes, and this is the core topic of films about migration made in the 1980s. In addition to the feeling of *ghurba*, caused by the distance from the homeland, a new feeling of *ghurba* emerges: "all returning migrants say the same thing. Once in Egypt, they feel nostalgic for here [the host country]. Why?" (Abdel Meguid 1994, 260). In *Taxi*, a driver relates how, after years of expatriation, he has ended up hating his own country.

The nationalist¹⁵ view of some authors emerges more clearly when it is time to return. Usually, in films about migration to the West (except in *Hamman in Amsterdam*), the main character is sent back to his native country after unpleasant experiences in the West. The

moral of the story appears to be: “The migrant has more to lose than to win by emigrating”. The moral is the same for migrants to the Gulf States, who are depicted as returning to Egypt with capital but as having failed in make their capital yield a profit. Most of the characters end up bankrupt, in the grip of swindlers and crooks. The massive flows of capital from the Gulf States have triggered speculation (property speculation, a parallel exchange market, etc.) and the development of Islamic investment funds, in which returning migrants have largely invested their savings. Many high-profile bankruptcies have been caused by fraudulent practices, as apparent in the press clippings that are visible in the fictional narrative of *Zaat* (Ibrahim 2004). In films made in the 1980s, the migrants who were most successful are those who stayed and started up a business (Gautier 1992).

(2) Migrants, vectors of mass consumption and Wahhabisation

In Egypt, the increasing prosperity of emigrants and the dissemination of new modes of ostentatious consumption imported from the Gulf States have often been criticised by intellectuals, journalists, novelists and filmmakers. For them, migration is in itself the symbol of everything that is wrong with the *infitâh*, which is considered to be when traditional values collapsed—the family, knowledge—poisoned by easy money. It is associated with disintegration of society (*tafasukh*), with a culture of consumption and waste (*istihlâk*), and with the dangers of loss of identity. In *Zaat*, Sonallah Ibrahim expressed the deep frustration felt by Zaat, a typical middle-class woman, who can’t accept that her husband is not rich enough to renovate their apartment and replace their equipment and furniture with modern imported products, according to the new fashion, like all their neighbours.

The remittances sent home every month are used to secure the future of the migrant (to pay for the marriage ceremony, buy an apartment) and his family (education, health, clothes, etc.). It frequently happens that a migrant is supporting several family members, like in the short story *Friendly fire*. Considered as prodigal sons, for relatives, migrants represent an opportunity to take part in the global consumer culture (Gruntz and Pagès-El Karoui 2012). As symbols of success, migrants who are returning permanently or temporarily to Egypt are expected by their relatives to bring presents: “These first holidays ruined me. They were all expecting a present. It’s impossible to arrive empty-handed at anybody’s place. Most of all the family. They were waiting too, a silent look of greed in their eyes. They looked me up and down, touched my clothes, ogled my jewelry” (Ghitany 2001, 282). Social obligations towards those left behind sometimes turn into predation, as described in several stories of migrants’ savings being appropriated by swindlers: “my family has eaten up half my savings and crooks the other half” (Abdel Meguid 1994, 190).

Migrants are also accused of contributing to the propagation of new standards, values and

practices: the re-Islamisation of Egyptian society is often felt to be the doing of expatriates in the Gulf States, who are held to be responsible for importing a strict, conservative Islam from Saudi Arabia, which is different from Egyptian religious practices. This refrain is omnipresent in intellectual discourse, which tends to overestimate exterior causes of social change, using the rhetoric of “imported” versus “authentic” values. Although alone, this explanation is not enough to explain the re-Islamisation of Egypt¹⁶: Islamism is not an exogenous force and the ruling classes, both in Egypt and in Saudi Arabia, along with new satellite TV channels, also share responsibility for this phenomenon. These accusations are in agreement with allegations in the opposition press referring to scandals linked to migrants in the Gulf.¹⁷ Pronounced in a vengeful tone, reproaching the Saudis for their lack of culture and their violence, the criticism of Saudi power challenged the claim of the Guardians of the Holy Places to hold the monopoly of Islamic interpretation (Cantini and Gruntz, 2010). Behind these declarations, what is at stake is a struggle for regional leadership: Egyptians resent the place taken by Saudi Arabia since the oil crisis of 1973 and try to resist the growing marginalization of Egypt on the regional and international stage. Egypt is no longer the heart of the Arab world, challenged in its centrality by the emergence of other regional powers, Saudi Arabia or other non-Arab countries such as Turkey or Iran. What is also at stake is the marginalization of leftist intellectuals by neo-liberalisation and re-Islamisation.

Nevertheless, this interpretation recalls that while in Europe, migrants often tend to be perceived as a threat to the identity of the society they join as migrants, while in the societies they leave behind, they may also represent a threat to the social order, through the ideas, values and practices they bring back with them and reinterpret. This topic is treated in more detail in books than in films, although in *Hello America*, we mentioned scenes with Muslim fundamentalists helping and exploiting the poor Arab migrants, who had been rejected by their family.

(3) When migrants become strangers to their own families

The topic of money destroying family ties occurs very frequently in both books and films. Tempted by gain, certain migrants will go to any extreme to earn more money, even if this means abandoning their original values of honesty and integrity. In *Risâlat al-Basa'îr fil Masa'îr*, Gamal Ghitany tells the story of a female school teacher who led a decent austere life for seven years in a Gulf country in order to save enough money to marry in Egypt, but who, on the day of her return, accepts to hide drugs in her luggage to double the stake. In another short story, Ghitany describes the sad life of a young printer, who reluctantly emigrates to maintain the standard of living his wife demands. After a long absence, his daughter no longer recognizes him and calls his brother-in-law “dad”. When his second

daughter is born, his wife doesn't even ask his opinion about the choice of her first name. His whole life, he will remain a stranger to his family, and for years the only relationships with them will be limited to the remittances he sends every month. In *The Other Place*, the writer also points to the bad behaviour of the family left behind, since the brothers and sisters of the hero, Ismail, prefer not to tell him about their mother's death, because they are afraid he will return to Egypt and the remittances will stop. Sometimes there is an even more brutal rupture, with migrants disappearing completely and sending no news or money to their families. The same topics occur in films. For example, the film *The Return of the Citizen* by Mohamed Khan is all about a returning migrant who has become a total stranger to his family. In *Hello America*, Bakhit's cousin refuses to lend him money but offers to let him do odd jobs around the house for very low pay. The film *Asal Aswad* recounts the reverse process: a "second generation" migrant returns to Egypt after 20 years of absence (he left when he was a child), but he has become a complete foreigner to his own culture (he speaks with an American accent, he is being cheated like an ordinary tourist, he doesn't remember where his flat is located). But despite all the shortcomings of Egyptian society, he discovers the positive side of Egyptian life, and chooses to stay in Egypt, thereby recovering his Egyptian identity.

(4) The migrants body: Place of encounter and conflict with the Other

Abdelmalek Sayad (2004) writes "The immigrant is only his body", and we have already mentioned the risks that threaten migrants' bodies (accidents, amnesia, etc.). The host country is often the place where social norms are transgressed, particularly sexual norms. In Egypt, society imposes the absence of sexual relationships before marriage. Al Aswany (2007) writes how Shaymaa, a young girl from the provinces, gradually throws off the principles she had learned: she will have sex with Tarak without being married, and will choose to have an abortion when she realizes he is not ready to marry her. Sexual transactions may also be part of the migratory project. In *Safīnat Nûh*, Ahmad is forced to break up with his girl friend Hagar, because he wants to marry an American woman, met on Internet, in order to obtain a visa and citizenship. To follow Ahmad, Hagar will marry Ayman, an Egyptian living in the USA who is coming back to Egypt to find a wife. In this book, there are many examples where the migrant's body becomes one factor in the exchange required to enable him to escape his condition in Egypt: one leaves for Europe thanks to a rich German tourist who is 25 years older than him, another obtains a visa for Italy with the help of a Consulate employee with whom he is having an affair, a third is the subject of advances by gays.

According to Sayad, the body epitomizes the migrant's contradictions. Books and films offer a gendered vision of the migrant's body, since in Western society, women are exposed

to the “temptation of vice” and free themselves from a patriarchal society, while in Gulf countries, men who are confronted with ‘domination relations’ become impotent. The sexual metaphor of emigration as castration for men was used in two recent novels: *Drumbeat* by Mohamed Bisatie, and *Unemployed* by Nasser Iraq. Bisatie’s anonymous narrator, an Egyptian who works as a driver in a small, nameless Emirate, describes a utopian situation in which the Emirate soccer team qualifies for the World Cup, and the Emir orders each Emirati citizen to travel to France, where the championship is being held. The foreign workers then have the run of the place. But alienation and oppression have emasculated the migrants, the “curse” as the migrants call it among themselves. The narrator is scared to go home to Egypt, because he is afraid of disappointing his wife. The central scene, which gave the name to the book, occurs when “the local male workers congregate at a café to watch “the African” perform a feat of sexual prowess” (Lindsey 2010). *The Unemployed* relates the story of Mohamed, a thirty-year-old bachelor, who couldn’t find a job in Egypt and eventually found one in Dubai. But, once there, he suffers from sexual impotence and is unable to honor his female conquests, a Moroccan, a Russian, a Chinese and an Egyptian woman. This sexual impotence is clearly the symbol of the political impotence of all Egyptians before the 2011 revolution.

Conclusion

Discourses and representations of migration in books and films are still very negative. As the Sudanese writer, Tayeb Salih, so masterfully showed in *Season of Migration to the North*, the confrontation with otherness is not limited to the West, but is also felt by migrants to the Gulf States. If the topic is so successful, other than the fact that it represents a major social phenomenon, this is because it questions the foundations of the national imagination, which is deeply rooted in a patriotic view but at the same time is torn between two poles, the Gulf on the one hand, and Europe and USA on the other. Moreover, the topic perfectly expresses the tension between identity and otherness common to all contemporary Egyptian literature (Jacquemond 2008).

Books and films portray fragmented imaginations: some places, some social classes are under-represented, and we have to question the blanks, i.e. what remains unspoken in the discourses. Are the films and books lying, as the migrant lies when he hides the nightmare of his life abroad from his relatives? Isn’t there a contradiction in the assertion that Egyptian migrants are very badly integrated in Gulf societies, yet are said to absorb Gulf values and to bring them back to Egypt when they return? What is sure, for now, is that there is a major gap between the scientific approach to migration, dominated by the transnational paradigm (Müller-Mahn 2005; Saad 2005; Ahmed 2011), and literary and cinematic imaginations, which are still embedded in methodological nationalism, dominated by the root paradigm.

According to the distinction made by Syrine Hout (2007) between the “exilic literature” and “diasporic literature”, Egyptian literature and cinema belong to the former. Paradoxically, visions of politically engaged authors like Aswany still convey conservative principles of Egyptian society, very often using stereotypes, which fulfill the readers’ expectations. In the actual context of political upheaval, Egyptian society is perhaps now more prepared to seriously examine prejudices about otherness.

Notes

- 1 Nasser sent several thousand Egyptian teachers in the Arab World to strengthen the development of education in Arabic in the postcolonial period.
- 2 Internal migration (rural exodus) in Egyptian literature was studied by a geographer Galila al-Kadi (1993) who mostly dealt with urban representations by rural migrants.
- 3 French translations of Egyptian novels are more numerous and published before English translations. Most French translations are published by the French publisher *Actes Sud*.
- 4 *Al Imârât al-Yûm (Emirates Today)*, 11th January 2012.
- 5 Sonallah Ibrahim and Gamal Al Ghitany were jailed by Nasser in the 1960s. Alaa Al Aswany was an active member of *Kefaya (Enough!)*, a political opposition movement which rebelled against Mubarak’s authoritarianism in the mid-2000s.
- 6 In the corpus used for this study, the only author who did not emigrate is Gamal Al Ghitany.
- 7 Many of these films were cited by Egyptian migrants interviewed in France or in Egypt in 2011.
- 8 University lecturers are over represented (*Return to the temple, Chicago, Amrikanli*).
- 9 Interestingly enough the West (*gharb*) comes from the same stem.
- 10 This view was reinforced after 9/11, but was already present before, for instance in *Hello America*, released in 1998.
- 11 *America Abracadabra* (1993) set in Romania, *Hammam fi Amsterdam* (2001) set in the Netherlands, and *The City* set in France.
- 12 Among the 7 films released in the 1980s about economic migration to the Gulf States analyzed by Gautier (1992), none obtained permission to shoot in Gulf countries. This explains why the films do not describe living conditions in host countries but focus on the question of return.
- 13 According to Ghitany, in the case of child rape, if the child is a native, the rapist will be beheaded, while if the victim is a migrant’s child, and the rapist a national, the complaint may not even be followed up.
- 14 Lilette, the Egyptian bourgeoisie who has lost her memory serves as a counter model for the central character Hind, who recently arrived in New York.
- 15 Strengthened by this historical depth and fusional identification with a territory (the Nile), Egyptian nationalism remains particularly powerful, fired by the pride of being the seat of a great civilization. Other possible references to self-identification or collective identification are then added to this base (“Arabness”, Islamic identity, Coptic identity) which may be in conflict.

However national belonging is not subsumed in all the facets of migrant identity (urban or rural origin, class identity, gender identity, generational identity, etc.).

- 16 It can be argued that re-Islamisation is a way of inventing a specific form of modernity which is not incompatible with a certain “Westernisation” of social practices: inspired by American tele-evangelists, the new Muslim preachers present young Egyptians with a vision of “market Islam”, which may be strict but is compatible with the development of a consumer society and a desire for individualism. Urban landscapes, above all those of the great metropolis of Cairo, express this American influence, which has travelled through the Gulf, leading to the appearance of an increasing number of *malls and gated communities* in the new towns being built in the desert.
- 17 For example, in 2008, the scandal when two Egyptian doctors accused of being responsible for the drug addiction of a Saudi princess were condemned to a whipping and a heavy prison sentence provoked the anger of the opposition press.

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