

A Historical Analysis Of The Novel “Al-A‘mamah Wa-Al-Qubba‘h” By Sun‘Allah Ibrahim

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ABSTRACT

As a significant historical novel “al-A‘mamah wa-al-Qubba‘h,” published by Sun‘Allah Ibrahim in 2008, won popularity in the Arab world. Sun‘Allah Ibrahim employs a young Egyptian scholar's perspective to recount, in diary style, the three years of the French Expedition to Egypt between 1798 and 1801, in this book. Like many historical novels, Ibrahim's work also invites readers to reflect on the significance of historical events and their impact on individuals and communities in the Arab world, especially in Egypt. Being an outstanding historical novelist, Sun‘Allah Ibrahim occupied a unique position through this novel in developing contemporary Arabic literature. In this article, an attempt has been made to a historical analysis of Ibrahim's novel “al-A‘mamah wa-al-Qubba‘h,” which played a unique role in the present-day outline.

Keywords: Sun‘Allah Ibrahim, historical novel, al-A‘mamah wa-al-Qubba‘h, French.

Introduction:

Sun‘Allah Ibrahim is perhaps considered a vanguard historical novelist in contemporary Arabic literature. Sun‘Allah Ibrahim's historical novels in the 20th century have enriched Arabic literature by offering profound insights into Egypt's history, society, and culture. His blend of rigorous historical research with literary craftsmanship has solidified his legacy as a prominent figure in the genre of Arabic historical fiction. Ibrahim's historical novel “al-A‘mamah wa-al-Qubba‘h” was originally published in Arabic in Cairo in 2008 by Dar al-Mustaqbal al-Arabi. This historical novel was translated into French and published as “Turbans et Chapeaux” by Richard Jacquemont in 2011. This novel was also translated by Bruce Fudge into English and appeared as “The Turban and the Hat” in Calcutta, India in 2022. As far as I know, there are no translations of this work into any other foreign languages except French and English. Through this novel, Ibrahim acquired a well-known position in the Arab World. In the novel “al-A‘mamah wa-al-Qubba‘h,” Sun‘Allah Ibrahim draws on numerous historical sources to reevaluate Egyptian history during the three years of the French Expedition at the end of the 18th century.¹

Like Sun‘Allah Ibrahim, several novelists such as Naguib Mahfouz, Jurji Zaydan, Radwa Ashour, Ahlam Mosteghanemi, and Ibrahim Koni, have gained popularity through their historical novels in modern Arabic literature. Perhaps the most celebrated Arab novelist, Mahfouz won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1988. His Cairo Trilogy (“Palace Walk,” “Palace of Desire,” and “Sugar Street”) explicitly depicts Egyptian society from the 1919 revolution against British rule to the post-World War II period. Mahfouz's work often intertwines personal and political histories, reflecting the complex transformation of Egyptian society.² A pioneer in historical novels, Jurji Zaydan was a Lebanese novelist and journalist whose works aimed to educate Arabs about their history. His novels, like “The Conquest of Andalusia” (Fath al-Andalus, 1903) and “Saladin and

¹Starkey, Paul, “Sun‘Allah Ibrahim: Rebel with a Pen,” published by Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2016, 189-198

²Brugman, J., “An introduction to the history of modern Arabic literature in Egypt,” Published by E. j. Brill, Leiden, The Netherlands, 1984, pp- 293-304, & Moosa, Matti, “Naguib Mahfouz: Life in the Alley of Arab history,” *The Georgia review*, Spring 1995, pp-226-227

the Assassins" (Salah al-din al-Ayyubi, 1913), are popular for his historical accuracy and engaging narratives. Zaydan's works played a crucial role in shaping modern Arabic historical fiction.³ An Algerian writer, Ahlam Mosteghanemi's works often reflect the tumultuous history of Algeria. Her novel "Memory in the Flesh (1993)," set against the scenario of the Algerian War of Independence, won the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature in 1998.⁴

Like many historical novels, Sun'Allah Ibrahim's novel also invites readers to ponder on the significance of historical events and their impact on individuals and communities in the Arab world, especially in Egypt. Being a remarkable Historical novelist, Sun'Allah Ibrahim occupied a unique and significant position through his novel "al-A'mamah wa-al-Qubba'h" in developing contemporary Arabic literature. He was the recipient of the Sultan al-Owais Award for stories, novels, and dramas in 1992-1993.

Historiographical interpretation of "al-A'mamah wa-al-Qubba'h":

A notable historical novel, "al-A'mamah wa-al-Qubba'h" (The Turban and the Hat) won popularity in the Arab world, especially in Egypt. Ibrahim's novel "al-A'mamah wa-al-Qubba'h" challenges long-held myths about Napoleon Bonaparte's three-year expedition to Egypt, portraying it as a crucial turning point for Egypt's modernity. Written in the form of a diary, the story is narrated by an unnamed young scholar living under the protection and mentorship of the renowned historian and Azhari scholar Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti (1753-1825). From the afternoon of Sunday, July 22nd, 1798, until August 31st, 1801, the young scholar provides a detailed account of his daily life and activities. While the short anecdotes and constant intersection of events could confuse the reader, the overarching historical context of the French presence in the city offers a coherent framework for the novel.

"Al-A'mamah wa-al-Qubba'h" narrates the story of the French occupation of Egypt (1798-1801) through the eyes of a young man in Cairo. This occupation marked Egypt's first significant encounter with European military and technological power, which greatly shocked the people. However, it was not their first experience with foreign rule. In the 18th century, Egypt was nominally under Ottoman Turkish control, but real power lay with the Mamluks, foreign-born slave soldiers from the Caucasus. The Mamluk emirs, who were often at odds with the Egyptian population, held significant power for centuries. The arrival of the well-organized European invaders, who claimed to liberate the Egyptians from the Mamluk rule, was unexpected. In July 1798, General Bonaparte led the largest seaborne invasion to date, landing at Alexandria with 335 ships carrying 1,200 horses, abundant weapons, and nearly 40,000 troops, including 300 women. Among them were over 150 intellectuals, such as geographers and artists, bringing scientific instruments and equipment. After occupying Alexandria, they marched up the Nile to Cairo, capturing cities and forts, while clashing with Mamluk forces at Imbaba, though mistakenly called the 'Battle of the Pyramids'. Despite various motives, such as countering England and Bonaparte's ambitions, some French saw themselves as benevolent liberators aiming to bring European civilization to the Egyptians oppressed by the Mamluks.

Sun'Allah Ibrahim's novel "al-A'mamah wa-al-Qubba'h" centered around Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti's historical chronicles of Napoleon's occupation of Egypt. It follows an unnamed narrator, a student of Jabarti, who documents his transformation from observer to participant in the chaotic political events. Ibrahim vividly portrays the societal divisions in Cairo in response to the French presence, depicting both resistance and collaboration among the Egyptians. The narrator's experiences include working at the Institut d'Égypte, interacting with French scientists and artists, and witnessing the devastating Syrian campaign, marked by plague and atrocities. He aims to record the truth, revealing complexities and challenging preconceptions about both the French and Egyptians.

In this historical novel, the author Ibrahim incorporates French sources selectively, primarily relying on Jabarti's original work. Instead of merely providing commentary, these documents narrate the story directly. Much of the novel consists of passages taken directly from the Egyptian historian's contemporary accounts, sometimes verbatim. Ibrahim occasionally substitutes Jabarti's original words for his paraphrasing to enhance clarity or context. Thus, the novel offers a highly readable portrayal of the French occupation from an Egyptian perspective and serves as a nuanced historical narrative.

However, "al-A'mamah wa-al-Qubba'h" goes beyond being a straightforward historical novel. This novel was originally published in 2008 during the American occupation of Iraq, it avoids direct references to contemporary events. Nonetheless, readers inevitably draw parallels with recent Western interventions in Arab countries, noting similarities such as disingenuousness, incomprehension, incompetence, and a disregard for native lives. Unlike later Western interventions, the French endeavor could at least boast of scientific achievements, exemplified by the "Description de l'Égypte," though this allowed them to portray their actions as an "expedition" rather than a disastrous military intervention.

In this novel at one point, a rumor spreads that Bonaparte might establish Palestine as a homeland for European Jews. This detail is not an anachronistic projection of Arab anti-Zionism; a French government newspaper in 1799 reported Bonaparte's supposed announcement of such a plan. While historical accuracy remains uncertain, the episode reflects contemporary concerns. Bonaparte's incursion into Arab lands was

³https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jurji_Zaydan, access date: 26-12-2022

⁴https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ahlam_Mosteghanemi, access date: 26-12-2022

one among many to follow, differing primarily in degree rather than kind from successive interventions, all viewed unfavorably from the inhabitants' perspective.

Jabarti's chronicle, as depicted in Ibrahim's novel, prioritizes that the oppressive French were not in opposition to them unified. Despite being Muslims like the majority of Egyptians, the Mamluks and Ottomans did not guarantee fair treatment based on religious fraternity alone. As a member of the elite, Jabarti openly displayed condescension toward 'the common people' and harbored few illusions about his fellow countrymen. He portrayed many Muslims unfavorably and praised French achievements when he deemed it appropriate. Ibrahim's novel highlights Jabarti's fallibility, showing how he benefited from French patronage as a member of Bonaparte's council of notables and scholars. Jabarti's subsequent revision of his initial account of the French occupation, removing praise for the French and criticism of the Turks to gain favor with Ottoman authorities, is also depicted in "al-A'mamah wa-al-Qubba'h".⁵

In the last pages of this novel, a reflection on the narrator's contemplation of whether he would bravely write the truth despite potential consequences, echoing the author Ibrahim's own dilemmas. The novel addresses a persistent issue in Egyptian society: the struggle over who controls historical narratives and preserves the necessary documents. In the backdrop of Egypt's 2011 revolution and its aftermath, scholars and activists worked diligently to record events accurately, ensuring the uprising wouldn't be erased from history. Ibrahim's fiction serves as an archival tool, exemplified by "al-A'mamah wa-al-Qubba'h," which skillfully weaves together a compelling narrative from historical sources, exploring themes of cross-cultural encounters and their profound impacts on love, hate, war, and peace.⁶

Conclusion:

I would like to declare through this brief study that Sun'Allah Ibrahim was perhaps an Egyptian well-known historical novelist in contemporary Arabic literature. His novel "al-A'mamah wa-al-Qubba'h" is considered one of the best historical novels in the Arab World. In this novel, Sun'Allah Ibrahim explores a young Egyptian scholar's perspective to recount, in diary style, the three years of the French Expedition to Egypt between 1798 and 1801. Therefore, he, through this historical novel, played an important role in the development of modern Arabic literature in the Arab world.

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⁵Starkey, Paul, "*Sun'Allah Ibrahim: Rebel with a Pen*," published by Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2016, pp- 189-198, & Ibrahim, Sun'Allah, "*The Turbun and the Hat*," translated by Bruce Fudge, published by Seagull books, 2022

⁶ Ibrahim, Sun'Allah, "*The Turbun and the Hat*," translated by Bruce Fudge, published by Seagull books, 2022