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**REASSESSING ALGERIAN ARAB MODERNITY:  
 AḤMAD RIḌĀ ḤŪḤŪ'S ĠĀDAT UMM AL-QURĀ**

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The aim of this paper is to reassess Algerian literary production in Arabic in the wider framework of Arab modernity. The main idea of my paper is that although set at the margins of literary production in the Arab world, due to the French occupation which lasted until 1962, Algeria had nonetheless a cultural production in the Arabic language of its own, which led to the birth of the modern and contemporary novel in this language. Identifying modernity in works of Algerian writers does not mean, in my opinion, trying to set a binary opposition between tradition and modernity, as it is the case among most scholars, but to dismantle this dichotomy to propose a nuanced reading where modernity is present within the text as a space where different voices merge and produce ambiguity.

To me, this seems especially necessary when approaching the study of Algerian literature and its subsequent path to modernity. The most frequent opinion among scholars is that the Algerian novel written in Arabic begins in 1962, after gaining independence from France, and that Algerian writers are influenced by French modes of prose writing. This at least is what one can read in the very few scholarly contributions on the subject written in European languages. On the contrary, in my opinion, modernity in the Arabic language came as a result of an inner development of narrative prose in this country and from a confrontation inside the Arab world.

**Keywords:** Algerian literature, Arabic literature, Arabic literary modernity, Aḥmad Riḍā Ḥūḥū

The aim of this paper is to reassess Algerian literary production in Arabic in the wider framework of Arab modernity. The main idea of my paper is that, although set at the margins of literary production in the Arab world, due to the French occupation which lasted until 1962, Algeria has had nonetheless a cultural production in the Arabic language of its own, which led to the birth of the modern and contemporary literary production in this language. Identifying modernity in works of Algerian writers does not mean, in my opinion, trying to set a binary opposition between tradition and modernity, as it is the case among most scholars, but to dismantle this dichotomy to propose a nuanced reading where modernity is present within the text as a space where different voices merge and produce ambiguity. The reason for this is that

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modernity is associated with secularism and, as Talal Asad has shown, this association has shifted in the context of the postcolonial nation-state. As he puts it: "The secularization thesis in its entirety has always been at once descriptive and normative" (Talal Asad 2003, 181). This thesis, prevalent in most scholarship in the West – which I consider a historical construct – has funnelled the study of Arab modernity into the limits of relations with the West (and the Rest) (Stuart Hall 1992, 275-331) disregarding the work some writers did within the traditional (religious) framework. In this context, "modernity has been confined to and associated with a specific time period, reflecting specific political and social struggles" (Tarek El-Aris 2013, 9) and scholarship has traditionally ignored current literary production and bypassed texts. What I propose then, is a reading that overcomes binarism and turns itself to *betweenness* (Joseph Allen Boone 2014, xxv) in order to rethink Arab modernity by identifying its written production, which entails texts usually barred from modernity's mainstream narrative, and displacing the West as the sole locus of modern inspiration. My idea is supported by Kamran Rastegar's lucid statement:

Such a methodology also views with greater suspicion the interrelations of Arabic texts from diverse geographic and social contexts than the relations of each of these with the legacy of colonialism and European cultural imperialism. Also, this model all but ignores the fertile connections between the national-literature canon and texts from other non-European languages (Rastegar 2007: 17).

In my opinion, this seems to be particularly necessary when approaching the study of Algerian literature and its consequent path to modernity. The most frequent opinion among scholars is that the Algerian novel written in Arabic begins in 1962, after gaining independence from France, and that Algerian writers are influenced by French modes of prose writing. Or at least, that is what one can read in the very few scholarly contributions on the subject written in European languages, which are scarce precisely for the same reason.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, by reading the available literature one gets

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, if we look at the most important histories of Arabic literature, Algerian literary production is often not even mentioned. This is for example the case of the Italian *Letteratura araba* by Francesco Gabrieli (1967), *Letteratura araba contemporanea* by Vassallo-Ventrone (1969), *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*, Nada Tomiche, *La littérature arabe contemporaine* (1993), H. Toelle-K. Zakaharia, *A la découverte de la littérature arabe* (2003), K. Hassan, *Le roman arabe* (2006). Isabella Camera d'Afflito, in her *Letteratura araba contemporanea* (1998), refers to Algerian literature reporting what written in another book published in 1969 (S. Pantuček, *La littérature algérienne moderne*) and which, apart from being out of date, contains several mistakes in the transcription of the name of the authors. Roger Allen in his book *The Arabic Novel* (1995) states that the interest scholars always had for Egypt put literary production of Maghreb and Gulf countries in the background in critical works about Arabic literature. In this book, although he notices this lack of interest, he does not interest himself in the Maghrebi literature. He has changed his

the impression that nothing existed in Algeria before the French invasion. This is maybe due to the following fact:

Upon reflection, it appears that methodology is not an area of the field in which one hears much about challenge or change. The dominant methodology is philology. Language specialists, trained as philologists, editing texts, writing dictionaries, and producing translations are the arbiters of the field. [...] to philology change is a virtual outsider. It is something which has to be explained. Philology places great weight on the idea of authoritative texts and of authoritative translations. Such texts stabilize and canonize meaning providing a normative basis of continuity. This stability is the primary goal of a philologist; how people actually speak or read or understand is less important (Peter Gran 1998, xxi).

The prevailing opinion among scholars is that the Algerian novel in Arabic began in the 1960s, after the Liberation War and that this production was – and still is – much influenced by the novel written in French. A heedful scholar like Ahmad Lanasri (1995), for instance, focuses his work only on the poetry production in Arabic and defines the prose of the period as associated with religious issues describing it as “sclerotic” (Lanasri 1995, 292) and disregarding the fact that Algerian *Iṣāh* looked at the past “to find a way to create some balance between the individual and society, between faith and reason in a changing age” (Gran 1998, xxvii). That is to say, French ideology still pervades the study of the whole period from 1830 to 1962 and beyond (and even before, in line with the idea of the decline of the Arab culture during the Ottoman rule). On the contrary, in my opinion, modernity in the Arab cultural field came as a result of an inner development of narrative prose in Algeria and from a confrontation inner to the Arab world. It seems to me that the notion of decline has to be substituted with that of change.

Moreover, due to the political situation and the education policy France set up in Algeria,<sup>2</sup> literary production in French was assigned foundational legitimacy, and it has always been considered superior to the one in Arabic, although with no historical or aesthetic ground. On the contrary, what I will look for is “how the formation of a new Arab [Algerian] identity was constructed through experimentations in language, rhetoric, and of course literature, that is, through writing practices in the era of capitalist and imperialist expansion” (Stephen Sheei 2004, 6).

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view only in a recent book (*La letteratura araba*, 2006) focusing his work now on Moroccan contemporary literature.

<sup>2</sup> For a good overview of education and school diachronic development in French Algeria see Yvonne Turin 1983.

If we take a closer look at the development of the literary field in Algeria during the French occupation, we can notice that although French colonialism did its best to eradicate the Arabic language and the Arabic Muslim culture it entailed, the literary production in that language never really stopped for the 130 years of occupation.

The explanation for this can be found in the words of Homi Bhabha:

Colonial presence is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference. It is a disjunction of those two disproportionate sites of colonial discourse and power: the colonial scene as the invention of historicity, mastery, mimesis or as the "other scene" of *Entstellung*, displacement, fantasy, psychic defence, and an "open" textuality (Homi K. Bhabha 1994, 107-108).

Concerning literary prose (ar. *an-naṭr al-adabī*), different genres were present in Algeria, starting from the journalistic article (ar. *al-maqāla aṣ-ṣaḥāfiyya*), especially with the journal *Al-mubāššir*,<sup>3</sup> which was published from 1847 until 1927, to the *risāla* (short prose texts about a specific subject) in its different forms (especially political, and social)<sup>4</sup>, the *taqārīz*<sup>5</sup> – a short prose or verse commentary on a book –, to the *ḥuṭba*.<sup>6</sup> Other popular narrative forms, such as the *buqāla*,<sup>7</sup> *al-qīṣṣa aš-ša'biyya* (popular narrative), *al-ḥikāya* (story, fable), and especially *al-maqāma* (short prose text) were also present.

Concerning the form that will be described as 'novel', we can notice in the period considered (1830-1954) there were a lot of popular '*riwāya*'<sup>8</sup> and *qīṣaṣ* (narrative text) circulating in the country in both oral and written forms. Among those in the written form, suffice it to mention *Ḥikayat al-'uṣṣāq fī-l-ḥubb wa-l-iṣṭiyāq* (1849) by Muṣṭafā ibn Ibrāhīm ibn Muṣṭafā Bāšā. This popular 'novel' is interesting insofar as it is the first

<sup>3</sup> For the development of the press in Algeria both in Arabic and French see Zahir Ihaddaden 2003.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the different kinds of the genre in Algeria see Abū al-Qāsim Sa'd Allah (1998, vol. 8, 85-96).

<sup>5</sup> The first book to be published in Algeria with such a commentary was, in 1901, *Rawḍat al-aḥbār wa nuzhat al-afkār* by Abū Bakr ibn Aḥmad ibn Abī Ṭālib. Cfr. Sa'd Allah (1998, vol. 8, 96-104).

<sup>6</sup> Although the *ḥuṭba* first developed as the public speech during Friday's prayer, it then evolved into a literary genre of model sermon about different religious topics.

<sup>7</sup> The term *buqāla* refers to a jar where water was poured and where women whose men were at sea put a ring or a piece of jewellery. Another woman, who played the role of the officiant, put in the jar pieces of paper on which poetry verses were written. She then coupled a piece of jewellery with a poem in order to let the woman know if her man would return soon and safe. As a literary genre, the term *buqāla* now refers to these poems. About this 'literary game' of Turkish origin that was widespread in Algerian seashore towns see Fāṭima Dīlmī 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Here *riwāya* is defined as "the technical meaning of transmission of poems, narratives and dicta, and also denotes the authorized transmission of books, the transmission of a written text through oral expression". See Stefan Leder (2002, 1).

book which presents Algerian historical characters and is set in an Algerian milieu.<sup>9</sup> What I would like to underline here is that instead of evaluating texts using criteria in line with the site and event of their production, scholars tend to employ a pre-constituted framework focusing on novel only. This leads to what Clifford Siskin calls "novelism", i.e., "the habitual subordination of writing to the novel" (Clifford Siskin 1999, 423) disregarding other literary texts and ascribing the feature of modernity to the novel production only, while in my opinion, modernity is connected with creativity and change irrespective of the writing genre.<sup>10</sup> This prevalent attitude is in line with the scholar's interest for nationalism - considered modern, just like novelism, because it gave birth to a kind of State similar to the western one. These two concepts create what Karman Rastegar defines as "nationalist-novelist paradigm", a paradigm which "has limited scholarly perspectives" (Rastegar 2007, 13).

Before the Second World War poetry, prose and theatre production used to be prolific and, as Abū I-Qāsim Sa'd Allah states:

Since 1939, the majority of newspapers ended their publication and the literary field knew a standstill too. As we have seen, prose and theatre had as main subject religion, society, history and politics. We also demonstrated that theatre was not only present in the capital Algiers but was widespread in the whole country too, as well as it was not only represented in the dialectal form but that it was most of the time in the Arabic language (Sa'd Allah 1998, 142).

Consequently, in my opinion, it seems useless to speak of the 'novel' in opposition to the 'short story', as this discourse refers to a "novelistic" paradigm which disregards all other literary and cultural achievements of specific Arab countries.

The last (but not the least important) issue that should be discussed is the issue of the language. Colonial powers had the separation of ethnic communities on the agenda and so did literature scholars; in fact, in these "marginal" Arab countries, we witness the presence of a multilingual and multicultural literary field which contributed to the development of modernity in the sense I discussed above. At the time I refer to, there were at least four literary fields in Algeria: the one of French cultural production *in* France, the one of French colonials - of course, these two are interrelated, although at times opposed - the one of Algerian Arab authors writing in

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<sup>9</sup> The text of the novel was taken to France after the author's death and the following spoiling of his library by the French Army. It was only returned to Algeria in the 20th century after a long journey and was published anew in 1982. About Muṣṭafā Bāšā library and museum see Pierre Gavault (1894, 241-272).

<sup>10</sup> As Adonīs (1990, 21) puts it: "not all modernity is creativity but all creativity is modernity".

French (linked with the second one) and the one of cultural production in Arabic. Each one had its social, political and cultural values, and although someone hoped for a strict separation between them or thought they should be separated, the latter was not possible; it is, therefore, necessary to read the Arabic writings of the time in a wider framework of interrelations and interactions between all these fields of production. As Pierre Bourdieu notes, "the impetus for change [what I identify with modernity] resides in the struggles that take place in the corresponding fields of production" (Pierre Bourdieu, 1995: 81).

The narrative text I will analyze in the above-mentioned framework is *Ġādat Umm al-qurà*,<sup>11</sup> *The Girl of Mecca*, written in 1947 by Aḥmad Riḍā Ḥūḥū. He was born in 1910 in a village near Biskra (Sīdī 'Uqba), in the south of Algeria. His parents migrated in 1934 to Medina where Ḥūḥū completed his university studies before returning to his country in 1946. Ḥūḥū had had traditional education in the "free school" (*al-madrassa al-ḥurra*) in his country, where he learned the Qur'ān, Arabic, Algerian history, Music, Theatre, Mathematics, and Geography, but was also fluent in French as he studied in Algeria to become a teacher. His sojourn in the Arabic Peninsula and the traditional education in Algeria inspired him to join the Algerian *Iṣlāḥ* movement. When he returned to Algeria, he settled in Constantine, in the East of the country, where he became an active member of the literary scene at the beginning of the Liberation War. He was the Secretary of the Ben Badis Institute, an institution founded by Bašīr al-Ibrāhīmī in order to develop Arabic Higher Education in Arabic in the country, and editor in chief of *Aš-šā'la*, a journal devoted to political issues and the struggle against colonialism. He joined the Algerian Ulamā' Association in 1947. He also translated French authors like Hugo, Baudelaire, Voltaire and Dinet into Arabic. He was taken hostage by the French police after the murder of a police officer and was murdered on 29 March 1956 by a clandestine organization named La Main Rouge. See šālih Ḥurfi 1991. His first article was published in the Arab League Journal in Cairo under the title "Aṭ-ṭuruqiyya fī ḥidmat al-isti'mār" ("About the struggle between the iṣlāḥ movement and the šūfī groups which sustained colonialism"). He also wrote in several journals when he was in Mecca especially in *al-Manhal* starting from 1937 with an article entitled "Mulāḥazāt mustašriq muslim 'alà ba'ḍ ārā' al-mustašriqīn wa-kutubihim 'an al-islām" ("Notes by an Arab Muslim about the views of some orientalists and their

<sup>11</sup> Aḥmad Riḍā Ḥūḥū 1947. The text was first published in Algeria in 1983 by Al-mu'assasa al-waṭaniyya li-l-funūn al-maṭba'iyya, Al-ḡaza'ir with an Introduction by the writer Aḥmad Mannūr. The edition which I refer to is Aḥmad Riḍā Ḥūḥū 2000. Introduction by Wāsīnī 'l-A'riḡ.

books”), in which he comments on books and articles by Westerners on Islam and Arabic culture in general. Among his writings, I recall *ṣāhibat al-waḥī* (short stories, 1954) and *Namādiġ bašariyya* (short stories, 1955).

*The Girl of Mecca* is the object of a great debate among Algerian scholars, first of all, because there is no agreement about how to classify it – as a novel, a short novel, a novella or as a short story.<sup>12</sup> The question is of a certain interest because, in my opinion, the choice reflects a scholar’s idea about when and how the Algerian prose began. That is to say, viewing *Ġādat Umm al-qurà* as a novel, although at an embryonic stage, reflects an internal reading, while considering it a novella or a short story reflects the idea that an Algerian novel is possible only within a framework influenced by French narrative prose. In any way, this seems to me as an unproductive discussion, especially because establishing the time when Algerian novel was born means that all the previous works were created in some sort of literary chaos.<sup>13</sup>

In my opinion, *Ġādat Umm al-qurà* pertains to the modernity, as I will argue in what follows. Its new form and content are a novelty which constitutes the development of the classical literary tradition, but also a synthesis of the new tendencies the *iṣlāḥ* movement created in Algeria. This is a peculiar feature of Algerian *naḥḍa*: as in other countries like Egypt, it was not associated with laicism and a feeling of “Arabity” which overcame religious affiliation; instead it was strictly related to Muslim identity.

In this respect, Sabry Hafez, points out the following in his pivotal study about the Arabic novel:

Before the advent of the *naḥḍah*, Arabic literature’s relationship with social reality was rather tenuous, and literature was highly stylized and reply concerned with verbal and rhetorical accomplishments. The main achievement of the *naḥḍah* was to establish the vital link between literature and reality, and to root literary texts in the life of their readers, in order to legitimize the importance of the writer and intellectual in society. The genesis of narrative discourse was an attempt by authors to establish new literary genres capable of portraying the new social and expressing the anxieties and aspirations of their readers in a coherent and artistic manner (Sabry Hafez 1993, 215-216).

<sup>12</sup> These are the different opinions expressed by scholar as for instance ‘Abd al-Malik Murtāḍ (1998, 23) who considers the text the first tentative novel in Arabic; Aida Bamia, (1976, 39), who classifies “The girl of Makka” in the genre of the short story; Wāsīnī ‘l-A’riġ, “Introduction” in Aḥmad Riḍā Ḥūḥū 2000, VIII-XXXIII who, though considering it as the first novel, criticize it because the author does not address – in his opinion – issues of female citizenship and social participation.

<sup>13</sup> I borrow the term chaos in this context from M. McKeon 2002.

In this sense, *Ġādat Umm al-qurà* fully reflects the emergence of the novel in Arabic in modern Algerian literature. In fact, in what follows, even though it trespasses notions of length and theme, I will try to underline here that the 'novel' feature of *Ġādat Umm al-qurà* is to be found primarily in the fact that it represents the consciousness of a particular group – in this case that of the Algerian *isḷāḥ* movement. I base this claim on Goldmann's view that the narrative work

Corresponds to the mental structure of the particular social group [which] may be elaborated in certain exceptional cases by an individual with very few relations with this group. The social character of the work resides above all in the fact that an individual can never establish by himself a coherent mental structure corresponding to what is called a world-view. Such a structure can be elaborated only by a group, the individual being capable only of carrying it on the level of the imaginary creation (Lucien Goldmann 1975, 9).

That is, the work of Riḍā Ḥūḥū is pivotal in shaping the Algerian literary prose written in Arabic insofar as he represents a group of Algerian intellectuals with a specific ideological feature who tried, through prose narrative, to promote their ideas about Algerian society. In the specific case of *Ġādat Umm al-qurà*, the author was able to represent a social milieu with which he had little relationship (the one of women), thereby creating a world-view which gave birth to the concept of novel.

*Ġādat Umm al-qurà* opens with a dedication: "To that, who lives excluded from the benefits of love... from the benefits of knowledge... and from the benefits of freedom.

To that disregarded creature suffering in this existence, to the Algerian woman, I offer this story as solace and relief" (Ḥūḥū 2000, 3). This gift is put as a counterpoint to the title: here in fact, the phrase refers to the general (*Umm al-qurà*, i.e. Mecca, is not only far from Algeria, but is also the symbol of the centre of ideals for Arab and Islamic culture), whereas the dedication refers to a specific group, that of Algerian women. Moreover, as Sabry Hafez states about a similar linguistic cluster "the linguistic bond between the two words of the titles creates a dialectical relationship between them in which each is emphasized in a different way" (Hafez 1993, 235) and it draws the reader's attention to both the 'girl' and Mecca as representing the Arab Muslim world. Additionally, situating the plot in a country far away from Algeria, the author, by means of a literary device, can refer to the socio-political situation in his country without being subject to censorship (in this case from the French occupation authorities).



We can notice the novelty in Ḥūḥū text from the very beginning: in fact, no one before him had dedicated a narrative text to a single woman, but to women as a social group, because talking about class and gender would be untimely. This has at least two major implications: first, the text is written to be read by women too, and this means an accessible language, and second the message of the plot is certainly addressed to men, too. In 1947, when the novel was published, the *Iṣlāḥ* movement in Algeria advocated for female instruction for various reasons, one being the influence of the Egyptian reformer Muḥammad `Abduh, who travelled to Algiers in 1903, and the reformism's idea that the new Arab Muslim man – now learned, and who began to travel abroad – had to have a suitable wife at his side.<sup>14</sup> Ḥūḥū identifies three spheres that women cannot have access to: knowledge, as just said, love and freedom, but in the end, he says to write the text to "solace" the Algerian woman and nothing more.<sup>15</sup> Although the author does not explicitly defend women's rights as conceived in the West, the underlying idea is to let the Algerian woman benefit from Islamic education as indicated by Ibn Bādīs, i.e., the completeness of individual and social life (*kamāl al-ḥayāt al-fardiyya wa-l-iḡtimā'iyya*). This completeness includes physical fitness, mental capability, and moral aspects:

Human perfection is dependent on knowledge, will, power, and work, the latter being the foundation of noble manners and reputable behaviour. Human's life from its beginning to its end, is based on these three elements: will, knowledge, and work. These three are, in their turn, dependent on another three: work is dependent on the body, knowledge on the mind, and will on the behaviour. Sound knowledge and strong will are the products of wise behaviour, useful work, and robust body. Therefore, mankind must care for and look after these three: mind, behaviour and body. The mind should be fed by knowledge, the behaviour of the holy Prophet should be approximated, and strength should give to the body by balancing diet, avoiding injury and working (*Aṣ-ṣarī'a*, July 17, 1933).

Besides, the Algerian *Iṣlāḥ* had among its goals education in the Arabic language, as it considered it a weapon against the traditional Islam, because "in the same

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<sup>14</sup> This of course did not mean to support the struggle for women's liberation completely, but only to permit access to knowledge to bourgeois women at a "middle" level. This idea is clearly stated by Egyptian Qāsim Amīn in his *Al-mar'a al-ḡadīda* (1901) and Tunisian Aṭ-Ṭāḥar al-Ḥaddād in his *Imra'atuna fī -ṣ-ṣarī'a wa-l-muḡtama'* (1930). Algerian *Iṣlāḥ*, anyway, considers knowledge and education as fundamental for *all* Muslim women.

<sup>15</sup> It would be too much to expect something more from the author, as for instance does Wāsīnī 'l-A'riḡ in the Introduction of the Algerian edition.

manner as the body needs food and beverage, the spirit also needs to be nourished by real knowledge" (*Al-muntaqid*, July 2, 1925, 1).<sup>16</sup>

The story begins with Zakiyya, the protagonist, who sits at home embroidering. She then hears the call to prayer and hurries to the mosque; on her way home, she notices a young man who is going towards her house. She goes inside the house and begins to worry because "There's no one at home!" (Ḥūḥū 2000, 16), the problem being that she cannot meet "a stranger". As the young man approaches the door, she asks herself if she has to speak to him, but "her cheeks became red because of the shame for this lie, evidence that she should not do that..." (Ḥūḥū 2000, 17).

The young man is Ġamīl, whom Zakiyya knows very well. He was her playmate when they were children and they were very close until the day her parents decided she could not play with him anymore. From the first time she mentions the young man's name, we realize that Zakiyya is in love with him and that she – living within the walls of the house – has let her imagination fly, narrating to herself a love story with Ġamīl. She is so sure he is the love of her life and that they are meant to be together, that she interprets everything through this lens. When, for example, a group of men comes to see her father and ask his daughter for marriage on behalf of Ra'ūf, she hears him refuse and say the girl is engaged to Ġamīl. She misunderstood her father, who is speaking of her elder sister, and starts sewing and embroidering her trousseau in secret (Ibid, 30-33). She lives "in a mystifying mirage, in a lying trust, waiting every day for her engagement" (Ibid, 24). Here Ḥūḥū describes in few words the way he sees the woman's condition in his country, due to the spread of traditional Islām. The Algerian woman, in fact, lives in a lie. She gets no education and is raised only for a specific goal: to become a wife and a mother. She lives in a "mirage" because she puts all her energy into the marriage, and when she then faces reality, she is deeply disappointed. In a collection of essays entitled *Ma'a ḥimār Ḥakīm* (*With Ḥakīm's donkey* - the title refers to the Egyptian writer Tawfīq al- Ḥakīm), Ḥūḥū presents an up to date – as he describes himself – Algerian male who has a talk with a donkey every morning about different political and social matters. One morning the donkey comes to Ḥakīm and asks him for his opinion about women, because he wants to get married,

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<sup>16</sup>. The Association established primary schools in the whole country and in 1948 there were forty of them in Algeria. In 1947, the Association established the first secondary school in Constantine.

and Ḥakīm answers: "Women? They do not exist in Algeria. At home, we have machines we use to have children" (Ḥūḥū 1953, 14).<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, the man who asks for Zakiyya's sister's hand represents the healthy traditional Arab class who considers itself worthy just because of the money, as opposed to Zakiyya's family and a new emerging group bound to honour and pride because of deeds and moral qualities and not by landed estate only. Here Ḥūḥū speaks for the first time in Algerian literary prose of the socio-political group he belongs to. He was, in fact, a man of humble origin, who had received an academic degree thanks to both French and Arabic schools and who belonged to a political movement that represented a new emerging class and preached for the defence of Muslim values, in particular for an attitude based on respect and with what is summarized in the Arabic expression *ḥasab wa nasab*. The new Algerian Muslim then, is not only the one who has a *nasab*, i.e. a lineage by birth (or wealth) but the one who has also *ḥasab*, i.e., the respect he achieves during his life due to his deeds. Although this is not a new concept in the Arab-Muslim world view, it is a novelty to use a classical concept as a reference in a political movement like the Algerian *Ġam'iyyat al-'ulamā'*.<sup>18</sup> The well-known slogan of the Algerian revolution - "Algeria is my country, Arabic my language, Islām my religion" - was coined precisely in these years by the leader of the *Ġam'iyya*, Ibn Bādīs.

People who do not have *ḥasab* are ready to use any means to achieve their goals. In this case, as Ġamīl stands in their way to marry Zakiyya's sister, they simply attack him and engage him in a fight, at the end of which only the young boy is sent to prison because of false testimonies (Ḥūḥū 2000, 38-40).

As the witnesses say he was drunk, Ġamīl is condemned to six months in prison with eighty lashes each month to be inflicted in public. This has several consequences: Ġamīl, although innocent, does not have the strength to face the public humiliation and while in prison, he waits for the day of lashes crying and becoming increasingly more depressed; Zakiyya's father has to confront the power of wealthy people. The young girl falls into despair:

The only interest of this girl's life was to see herself one day in the arms of the one she loved; Ġamīl was worthy of her life and of the world she was living in, he was the melody of her happiness, and now he was

<sup>17</sup> The text is a collection of ironic articles about different subjects which take the title from Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm's *Ḥimārī qāla lī*. Ḥūḥū presents his donkey as "an intellectual donkey, who knows about everything" (*ḥimārī muṭaqqaf, lahu 'ilm bi-kull l-qadāyā wa-l-aḥdāt*).

<sup>18</sup> For the history of the Association see S. E. E. ElTayeb 1989 and S. A. Alghailani 2011.

suddenly fleeing from her hands, from her arms, to be absent from her forever... where she could not see him nor hear his voice.

A tormented spiritual change grasped her. Two violent forces began to tremble and to struggle within her: love and family traditions and the latter pushed her not to respect the heritage and the honour of the family. Love broke her heart and let it tremble and ask for revolution; teardrops like stones whose weight demanded relief and which burnt her black pupils (Ibid, 42).

No one in the town believes Ġamīl is guilty, but no one can oppose authority. Ġamīl's family and all the people who love him are waiting for the king's visit, who will be in town in a couple of days, to seek justice from him, while Ra'ūf, the pretender, waits impatiently for the day of Ġamīl's shame. Here, again, the author underlines the different attitudes: on the one hand, Zakiyya's father and Ġamīl's family support the young man, because they know him for his deeds, while on the other hand, Ra'ūf represents the class involved with the colonial rule, the one which has taken advantage of the poor and the simple minded in the period of French occupation and has built its fortune and honour on exploitation. This same social group will be the one which will try to struggle against the social reforms implemented by the new Algerian government after the independence.<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, we are told that the king is about to arrive in town. When he arrives, Ġamīl's mother manages to talk to him and asks for justice. The king promises to take care of her son's case, which he does by asking once more the two witnesses. In front of the king, they can no longer lie: "Look at this sword... it will cut off your head if you do not speak the truth..." (Ḥūḥū 2000, 62).

The king, who represents the righteous Muslim ruler, acts as *deus ex machina*, the one who restores justice. He is the paladin of truth and rectitude, both of which reside in him because he is the *ḥāfiẓ al-ḥaramayn*, the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques. In Ḥūḥū's vision, Islām and especially the *Iṣlāḥ* movement are what can help women get out from their condition.

The king proclaims Ġamīl free and demands to speak with him, but exactly when the reader imagines that the story will have a happy ending, we are told that the young man is found dead in his prison cell.

In the meantime, Zakiyya has fallen into depression and she lies in bed. The last chapter shows the family concerned around her while her father asks her: "Zakiyya how are you now?" (Ibid, 65). The girl whispers repeatedly "Ġamīl is dead Ġamīl is

<sup>19</sup> This aspect is well portrayed in another Algerian novel written in Arabic, namely *Al-zilzāl*, by former great author aṭ-Ṭāhar Waṭṭār.

dead..." (Ibidem) and, notwithstanding the words of her father who assures her that this is not the case, she then dies of depression. The moment when she dies, the news of Ġamīl's death reaches the house.

Zakiyya dies, because living in a world of illusion can only have death as a result. Girls living in the realm of popular Islām, with no education, suggests the author, live in a world of dreams and when they have to face reality – in this case, Ġamīl's imprisonment – they do not have the strength to survive the shock. My reading of *Ġādat Umm al-qurà* is confirmed by another narrative text, 'Ā'īša in the journal *al-Baṣā'ir*,<sup>20</sup> where Ḥūḥū more clearly states:

'Ā'īša is a woman like all Algerian women, one of thousand women whom the oppressed Algerian society is full of, she did not graduate from an oriental nor a western school, nor she received any sort of private education except the natural education and the protected education, both necessities for the only Algerian condition which does not know development nor change. She lives in her oppressive narrow circle and does not know anything about the external world; she knows of herself only that she is a deficiency whose parents let live in memory of her name and the name of her mother and paternal aunts; all of them are a special sort of creatures who do not understand their being, and who do not try to reach maturity but they know that their father and the other men of the family gave to all of them the name of "slave" and do pronounce this word only with a grim. She has heard often her father speaking with his neighbour saying "my slaves" referring to all the family women and apologizes for having mentioned their names as one apologizes for having spoken a bad word in front of a person of respect. 'Ā'īša was educated in this way and occupied this place in society. She inherited it just as her mother inherited it from her women ancestors since the beginning of time. She is then a being with no responsibility in life; on the contrary, she is like one of the animals possessed by his father, who does not care to mention his donkey in front of the others or, when he mentions his horse, it is to say that he is the one who has the responsibility for its life, he gives it the freedom of movement. 'Ā'īša is a human mechanism which does not move or live without the will of her father and only when he likes it. But she does not care nor does she think about all this because she has not the right to think. She goes on an already written limited path like all the girls did in the past and they will do in the present e they will do in the future. They do not know the old nor the new they only know an everyday life where one day is the same as the other. No day is different from the previous one (Ḥūḥū 2000, 195).

As it could have been predicted, a young man takes advantage of 'Ā'īša and she finds herself alone in a big town where she eventually becomes a prostitute in a

<sup>20</sup> The short story was published in *al-Baṣā'ir* on December 1949. It is now available in Aḥmad Riḍā Ḥūḥū 2000, 193-201.

brothel. But in the big town, she begins to meet other people, men, and women, to hear about social and political issues and becomes aware of two basic concepts: nation and liberation from the colonial yoke. Influenced by the ideas of the *Iṣlāḥ* movement, she gives up drugs and changes her attitude; she leaves the brothel and finally finds an honest job as a waitress in a hotel. She eventually manages to get married and to live a simple but honest life.

To Algerian *Iṣlāḥ*, the narrative prose seemed more suitable to convey political and social claims, and writers were committed to promoting the Association's principles through their works. Ḥūḥū, with his bitter sarcasm, severely criticized the political and social situation in his country. In some of the already mentioned articles referring to the *Ma'a ḥimārī al-ḥakīm* collection<sup>21</sup>, he openly attacks different aspects of the Algerian life, for instance the presence of two religions in the country: an official one under the government surveillance and the other, which is free. He speaks of some Algerian writers as magicians who play their role in front of a naïf reading public, condemns the Algerian politics and describes Algerian MPs as "empty beings".

Ḥūḥū, therefore, uses his literary talent to sustain a political point of view on women's education. This education has to be in Arabic and it is also presented as opposed to French education.

In conclusion, I think it is possible to speak of modernity in Ḥūḥū's work because he introduces a new subject in the narrative prose, i.e., a woman, not as a subject of love or as an ideal figure, but as a human being and he tries to present her from a different point of view. In fact, he proposes his perspective on women's education but tries to speak from the inside, something no one before him had tried to do. Moreover, this discourse is set in a wider framework, that of the struggle against the French colonial authorities. In this sense, the female subject is one of many other subjects, which the modern Algerian intellectual uses to promote his political ideas.

As I stated at the beginning of this paper, in order to reassess Algerian modernity one has to take into account the role played by the religious movement of *Iṣlāḥ*. In this perspective, the work of Ḥūḥū is highly representative and can be used as a starting point for rewriting the development of modern and contemporary Algerian prose.

Keeping in mind that Ḥūḥū pertained to an emerging bourgeois élite, we can speak of a culture-specific modernity which developed in Algeria. This leads to our

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<sup>21</sup> *Al-Baṣā'ir*, 90, September 1949. The title of the article is "Sā'a ma'a l-ḥimār al-ḥakīm".

recognition of modernity and its opposite, i.e., tradition, as concepts not exclusively related to the West and to having a critical perspective; modernity is a global concept which is conceived in a different context and in different historical moments, therefore assuming different forms. As Reinhard Schulze affirms:

The ambiguity of the concept "Islamic modernity" is in itself not optional, but compulsory. For it is only through clarifying the historicity of modernity that contemporary Islamic modernity will be understood. [...]

The "tradition/modernity" dichotomy must be seen as the subjective, cultural approach of a particular (bourgeois) elite in a specific historical period. The two terms should not therefore be used as analytical classifiers. [...]

This historical discursive formation must be seen to possess validity in all places where bourgeois culture has developed. The historiography of modernity must recognize that there are no grounds for treating modernity as a European privilege: the basis for a tradition/modernity dichotomy appears to have existed in all societies and cultures (Reinhard Schulze 2000, 30-31).

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