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A Struggle for Independence

A Young Woman's Coming of Age as National Allegory in Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt's *al-Bāb al-maftūḥ*

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Abstract

Without question, Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt (1923-96), ranks among the most important Egyptian and Arab writers, critics, and activists of the 20th century. Published in 1960, her breakthrough novel *al-Bāb al-maftūḥ* [*The Open Door*] chronicles the emotional, psychological, and political growth of Layla, daughter of a conservative, Egyptian middle-class family. The backdrop of her story is the decade of tumultuous nationalist political activity in Egypt (1946-56) that leads to national independence. This thesis attempts to find thorough support for the hypothesis that Layla—and her female body—symbolizes contemporary Egypt.

This thesis shows how—on a structural level—Layla’s struggle to free herself from patriarchal traditions parallels Egypt’s battle for national liberation from British imperial rule. As a quasi-autobiographical novel, insights about the author’s life and political commitment, as well as the historical (and literary) context in which *al-Bāb al-maftūḥ* emerged, help the reader to understand the novel’s underlying dimensions. The inseparable intertwining nature of the personal and the public imbues the novel, not only in terms of plot but also as illustrated by sideline events, specific quotations, and its use of dialect and borrowed words in the standard Arabic language. To conclude, this thesis finds strong evidence for the assumption that Layla can be considered a symbol of Egypt, and her personal struggle can thus be read as a national allegory.

Key words: Egypt, feminism, modern Arabic literature, national allegory, *The Open Door*, Zayyat

Transliteration

In this thesis, longer quotations are reproduced in Arabic script. References to writers, specific words or shorter novel passages employ the diacritic signs below, according to Lund University Library's transliteration system. To improve readability, Egyptian spelling (which does not differentiate between letters such as *yā* and *alif maqṣūra*) has been changed to standard spelling.

For simplification and ease of reference, established spellings of Egyptian cities are used as well as spellings of writer names used in their sources.

أ	°	ط	ṭ
ب	b	ظ	ẓ
ت	t	ع	°
ث	ṯ	غ	ġ
ج	ǧ	ف	f
ح	ḥ	ق	q
خ	ḫ	ك	k
د	d	ل	l
ذ	ḏ	م	m
ر	r	ن	n
ز	z	ه	h
س	s	و	ū, w
ش	š	ي	ī, y
ص	ṣ	ا	ā
ض	ḏ		

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1 Introduction

Al-Bāb al-maftūḥ ..? Kitāb? [The Open Door? A book?]

Al-Kātiba mīn? [Who's the author?]

Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt?

Lā, mā sami'atiš ḥāga 'anhā... [No, I haven't heard about her...]

These were the responses I came to expect whenever I turned the conversation to *The Open Door*, Egyptian Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt's breakthrough novel. Published in 1960, *al-Bāb al-maftūḥ* had even been made into a well-received and widely seen movie in 1963, with the legendary star of Egyptian cinema Fātin Ḥamāma in the leading role¹. Amazed by the ignorance about al-Zayyāt and her writings among the people I encountered in Cairo, I began my search for the original version of *al-Bāb al-maftūḥ*.

As it turned out, this was not an easy task. Not only taxi drivers had not heard about her; to a large extent, Cairene librarians, the intelligentsia and publishers professed ignorance about Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt and her novel. I nearly lost all hope when not a single copy of *al-Bāb al-maftūḥ* was to be found at the Cairo International Book Fair, host to all Egyptian publishing houses.

How was it that a literary classic—one of political, historical and literary significance—could be erased from people's minds and bookshelves? This was a book whose female protagonist, like her creator, was one of the most interesting, complex and inspiring characters I had encountered in my Arabic studies. In my search, I was often answered with "it is of no interest any longer" and "it is too old". But Ṭaha Ḥussayn's and Naḡīb Maḥfūz's novels had been published even earlier and were still easily found in bookstores, so age seemed a poor excuse. Was lack of interest, then, the real reason—or was it something deeper?

Whatever the reason, I was—and still am—astonished about the near impossibility of finding *al-Bāb al-maftūḥ* in its original language. A three-week long desperate search turned up what was probably the last Arabic-language copy for sale in Cairo. And so this thesis came into being.

¹ *Al-Bāb al-maftūḥ*, produced and directed by Hinry Barakāt (one of the foremost film directors in Egypt), starring Ḥassan Yūsuf (as 'Iṣām), Maḥmūd Mursy (as Dr. Ramzī), Ṣāliḥ Salīm (as Ḥussayn), and Šwaikār (as Gamīla)

1.1 Statement of Purpose

Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt’s lifelong dedication to Arabic literature—as novelist, professor and literary critic—and to political activism made her one of the most distinguished women in Egypt, and in the Arab world, before her death in 1996. Her involvement in the struggle for national independence and the rights of the oppressed made her a symbol of integrity and commitment to the Arab masses.

Al-Bāb al-maḥtūh was a landmark of feminist and nationalist writing in Arabic; Naḡīb Maḥfūz, 1988 recipient of the Nobel Prize of Literature, acknowledged her as one of his early sources of inspiration. Her approach to issues of personal freedom and sexuality in the context of social expectations and constraints of political torpor, economic travail, and class was new and, for many, appalling. Not least as a woman writing about female experience (Booth 2002:cover, *ixf*). As one of the pioneering committed Arab women novelists, Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt helped pave the way for today’s generation of outspoken female activists and writers. As the nation shaped her, so she helped shape the nation and its literature.

The linking of the personal with the public imbues and distinguishes Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt’s authorship. So this thesis hypothesizes that the protagonist Layla—and her female body—symbolizes contemporary Egypt in *al-Bāb al-maḥtūh*, an assertion already made by former academics, such as Mara Naaman (2008) and Ellen McLarney (2009). However, to my knowledge, a thorough analysis of the close personal and national intertwinement that permeates the *whole* novel has not yet been published. Thus, in essence, the aim of this thesis is to show how Layla’s personal struggle to free herself from patriarchal traditions consistently parallels Egypt’s quest for liberation from imperial rule, and thus becomes a national allegory.

1.2 Materials and Methods

A full analysis of Layla as a symbol of Egypt in *al-Bāb al-maḥtūh* requires that the whole novel be taken into account, although some passages, such as the historical turning points, are obviously more crucial to the theme. So the exploration of Layla’s personal struggle as national allegory² began with several in-depth readings of the English translation of the Arabic novel. In these readings, general trends were explored: *What happens to the nation when Layla is happy or sad? What happens to her during the crucial transforming moments of Egypt?* The joint timeline in Figure 1 illustrates how each advance or retreat in the political sphere parallels one in Layla’s personal sphere.

Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt skillfully illustrates the national allegory on different levels, so the analysis was made on both a structural and an in-depth level. A representative sample of quotations (from different passages of the novel) that illustrate deeper dimensions of Layla as a symbol of Egypt was selected to support the hypothesis. Often the illustration

² In this thesis the term *Allegory* refers to a narrative structure in which one line is a trace of—and consistently represents—the other, which invites a double reading of narrative events. (cf. Sommer 1990:120ff)

of the inseparable, intertwining nature of the personal and political is very much connected to the plot. But then again, a sudden insight is often revealed in an obscure line or passage.

In general, this thesis focuses on the novel's content, and only occasionally touches on issues of style or language to flesh out the analysis. For example, Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt uses the Arabic language and the colloquial Egyptian dialect as a means of expressing aspects of the national allegory and depicting the characters as representatives of higher values in various value systems. For this reason, significant passages were studied in the Arabic original for further interpretation and analysis.

The weakness in this methodological approach is that the original Arabic version was not the starting point of analysis; a translation can never be complete. This is perhaps especially applicable to a translation from Arabic, one of the world's more complex languages, where the meaning of a word may vary, depending on context. But *al-Bāb al-maftūḥ*'s length, nearly 400 pages, made this necessary. Sources of error were reduced through use of a widely acknowledged translation³. Besides, key passages and quotations were constantly reviewed in the original Arabic version. Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt used simple language, much of which was colloquial Egyptian Arabic dialogue. Risk of misinterpretation in the English translation was less than it would have been in a text of higher complexity.

The problem of misinterpretation is highly related also to the understanding of symbols and allegories. As Jonsson and Sjöberg (2005:145) point out, it is important to stay suspicious of one's own reading, to avoid overinterpretation. However, the analysis of *al-Bāb al-maftūḥ* was not done randomly. Since a fictional work and its message does not emerge from a vacuum; a "close reading" of a novel (cf. Holmberg & Ohlsson 2007:38) is not enough to gain an understanding of its symbolic and political dimensions. Contextualization is essential.

To this end—a more profound understanding of *al-Bāb al-maftūḥ*—and to support my interpretation, previous research on the novel and its creator, done by Egyptian and foreign scholars, was scrutinized. Unfortunately, due to linguistic complexity, few Arabic texts could be used. The English translation of Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt's biography, *Ḥamlat taftīš: awrāq šaḥṣiyya*, and transcriptions of some interviews of her were thoroughly read. Background on the author and her life is especially crucial since *al-Bāb al-maftūḥ* is a quasi-autobiographical novel (Morgan 1998:35; al-Baḥrāwī 2010) and since she employed her own experiences to depict the struggles of Layla and Egypt. The story, though, is not the personal story of al-Zayyāt.

Furthermore, to put the novel in context, this thesis explores secondary literature on the prevailing literary, historical, and political climate. In fact, a profound analysis of Layla as a national allegory is impossible without insights into the popular resistance and the political developments in Egypt (1946-56), since hidden meanings would have remained undiscovered. The struggle for national independence would still be pivotal for the novel, but not as closely linked to Layla's personal struggle for liberation. The risk is that *al-Bāb al-maftūḥ* would then have been read only as a romance.

³ Translator **Marilyn Booth** earned her D.Phil. in Modern Arabic Literature and Modern History in the Middle East at St. Anthony's College, University of Oxford. Her research interests include gender politics of Arabic fiction, and the emergence of the Arabic novel in the nineteenth century and its relation to emergent gender activism and early feminism. She has published numerous translations from Arabic to English (e.g. *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* (2007) by Nawāl al-Sa'dāwī and *Thieves in Retirement* (2006) by Hamdī Abū Julayyil).

In theory, contextualization as methodology to strive for objectivity and full understanding of a novel has no limits. For the purpose and scope of this thesis, however, it is limited to the domains just mentioned: background on the writer and her political activism, and the historical and literary context.

Since *al-Bāb al-maftūḥ* is relatively sparsely investigated, two professors in Cairo, well acquainted with Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt and her literature, were interviewed. Sayyid al-Baḥrāwī, professor of Modern Arabic Literature at Cairo University, was also a close friend of hers and was the editor of the anthology *Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt: al-Adab wa-l-waṭan*⁴. These interviews had neither an informant nor respondent character (Esaiasson *et al* 2007:284-303), but rather the form of a dialogue or supervision where my interpretations were discussed and viewed from a professional's perspective. These encounters greatly improved the validity of this thesis' findings.

1.3 Outline

Chapter Two introduces the reader to the plot of *al-Bāb al-maftūḥ*. In Chapter Three, a summary of political events contemporary to the novel (3.1) paves the way for an introduction to the literary climate in Egypt (3.2). An account of Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt's life, writings and political commitment (3.3) follows. In Chapter Four, the intertwining of personal and political aspects of the work is analyzed, in general (4.1) as well as in detail (4.2). Numerous quotations from and references to the original Arabic version illustrate how Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt portrays Egypt through the experiences of Layla. Chapter Five summarizes thesis findings and presents a conclusion.

⁴ Since the anthology is written in academic Arabic, only one chapter is referred to in this thesis. (see Mehrez 1996)

2 **Plot:** Layla's destiny in *al-Bāb al-maftūḥ*

In 1946, in the wake of massive anti-British demonstrations in Cairo—when her nationalist brother survives a bullet wound—11-year-old Layla, the youngest daughter in a conservative middle-class, Cairene family, menstruates for the first time. This is a crucial turning point, the start of her journey to adulthood. Traditional societal norms, applied by her family, are increasingly limiting her existence; as a sexually mature girl, she must protect the family honor and live by the “fundamentals”. To her, entering womanhood feels like crossing the gates of a prison.

Inspired by her brother Maḥmūd—who defies their father by joining the struggle for national independence—Layla participates in demonstrations with other female students as teenage girl. For this, she is beaten by her father, and when she looks to her brother for support, she finds that he, too, is against her and he raises the banner of tradition. In despair, Layla confronts Maḥmūd with the contradiction in his thought, which recognizes gender equality “on paper” only.

Shortly thereafter she falls in love for the first time—with her cousin °Iṣām—and instead of confiding in her brother, Layla imagines a new world of freedom and love in which only she and °Iṣām exist. The illusion soon dies, however; when °Iṣām does not join Maḥmūd to fight the British in the Canal Zone, she feels disappointed and abandoned. As Layla's emotions toward her cousin change and weaken, her relationship with her brother gets stronger and they exchange letters daily; Layla is the only one in their circle of family and friends who truly understands and supports Maḥmūd's dangerous struggle for national liberation. In turn, he begins to understand her as well.

Perhaps sensing Layla's increasing intellectual and emotional distance, °Iṣām becomes more and more obsessed (sexually) with Layla and fears losing her. Her strong personality, self-confidence and strivings for independence and gender-equality frighten him. His behavior becomes wildlike—uncontrolled—and his eyes harbor threat. All the while, he is trying to find a solution to their relationship. Layla constantly fears that he is about to hit her. And this finally occurs at his sister Ğamīla's engagement party. In a fit of temper, he tries to strangle her, screaming “You belong to me!”. Days later, a newborn °Iṣām announces his solution: he will not touch her before their wedding.

Maḥmūd's letters become shorter and shorter, and an emotional angry undertone emerges. He writes about how he feels isolated and how everyone has betrayed him and the few people fighting in the Canal Zone; about how the true betrayal is the betrayal of the millions of Egyptians who love Egypt as long as this love does not clash with their personal interests.

At his homecoming, Maḥmūd is totally changed, and Layla feels as if something has come between them, as if she has failed him. She immediately faces personal betrayal when Ğamīla—who is trying her sumptuous wedding dress—tells her that °Iṣām is cheating on her with the maid, Sayyida. It is then that Cairo starts burning; the people put fire to their own city. Maḥmūd sees this as the end—the end of the battle for the

Canal—although Ḥussayn, his best friend, promises Layla that it is not. That evening the two men are sent to jail.

In the following months, life for Layla goes on as usual, but at the end of each day she is exhausted and her whole body aches. Since challenging the rules and traditions of family and society clearly is useless—she and Maḥmūd had both fought for a world of love and truth beyond their time, and they had been crushed—Layla becomes increasingly introverted and decides to follow the norm to avoid getting hurt again. After all, Ğamīla—who accepted life as it was by marrying the aristocrat man of her mother’s dreams—was splendid; so why would she not choose this “rational” way of life?

In the wake of the July Revolution—in which Maḥmūd and his friend are released from prison—Ḥussayn professes his love for Layla. She, however, does not want to ever fall in love with—or be attached to—anyone again, so she erects a barrier between them. But when Ḥussayn tells her about his decision to accept a three-year scholarship to Germany, he detects a sad expression in her eyes and realizes that she *does* need him, despite her reluctance to admit it to him, or even to herself. Before departing for Europe, he sees Layla a last time in Port Said, and he confidently tells her that he *knows* she will wake up one day and realize that she loves him. Although she obviously dismisses the idea, a seed has been planted. She now realizes that the ache in her body is gone and that she is over °Iṣām. After Ḥussayn’s departure, Layla is not herself, she is nervous and ill at ease. And when she sees her friend Sanā and Maḥmūd together—indeed there is something that links them to each other—she feels lonely, as if she has lost everything.

Layla enrolls in the Department of Philosophy at Cairo University with her two distinct friends. Working class °Adīla is intelligent, practical and down to earth; she considers love a waste of time and life an unvarnished fact. Upper-class Sanā likes beautiful clothes and sweet perfume; whenever reality does not satisfy her, she retreats into fantasy, and she is positively “in love with love”. The love she feels for Maḥmūd is of the kind she has come to know through novels and films.

Layla had always felt closer to Sanā than to °Adīla, but the encounter with °Iṣām had changed this. By embracing °Adīla’s rational view of life, Layla manages to conceal her feelings for Ḥussayn, even though something in her heart rebels. Layla is torn by her friends and their views on love when she receives a love letter from Germany, and finally—with tears in her eyes—she asks °Adīla to write a letter to Ḥussayn in which she asks him to stop writing her.

When Layla’s lecturer—the emotionless, authoritarian and rigid Dr. Ramzī—asks her father for her hand, the two men read *al-fātiḥa*⁵ without consulting her. In fact, during the first year at university his influence on her is more pervasive than °Adīla’s had ever been; his words are law. Layla has become his parrot and has no opinions of her own. Sanā is truly concerned about her friend—who she thinks has undergone a sad transformation and become “unbearable” in Dr. Ramzī’s vicinity. She is not at all happy about their engagement while °Adīla and Layla’s parents rejoice at her coming wedding with the black-and-white-thinking professor with high social status.

Layla questions her approaching marriage. When she realizes that her engagement party—arranged by Ğamīla who is trapped in a loveless marriage—and her white dress

⁵ *Al-Fātiḥa*, the first chapter of the Qurān, is read by the two concerned families as a sign of agreement. This is the first step of engagement according to Egyptian (sunni) tradition.

mirror those of her cousin, Layla is assailed with foreboding. And when Dr. Ramzī turns out to be as much a chauvinist as ʿIṣām or anyone else and finally tells her that he only marries her because of her obedient personality—and not out of love—Layla knows that the path she is treading is the wrong path for her. Her apathetic state of mind and feeling of powerlessness, however, restrict her from challenging her arranged fate. A few days after the engagement party, Layla receives a letter from Ḥussayn, who despite everything, still loves her.

In the face of Layla’s father’s and Dr. Ramzī’s disapproval, Maḥmūd and Sanā marry and move to Port Said. In disappointment, the parents place all their hopes on Layla’s forthcoming wedding. But even though she is a “good girl”, her father fears that she is under a bad influence from Maḥmūd and Sanā. In fact, Layla is secretly seeing Sanā daily, and during one of their talks, she discovers that Ḥussayn has returned to Egypt. Surprisingly, the news strikes Layla to the core; she realizes her deep love for Ḥussayn—as he had predicted—and her dislike, even hatred, for Dr. Ramzī.

Slowly but steadily Layla’s confidence increases and she starts challenging Dr. Ramzī. Instead of working as a teacher in Cairo—as he demands—she arranges to be sent to Port Said. The wedding has been postponed, and due to the Israeli attack on the Sinai, Layla’s two-week stay in Port Said turns into months. Her place at the center of war changes her dramatically, and she actively participates in the resistance; she becomes a part of the whole. When Egypt wins the war, the country starts a new history as an independent nation, and Layla wins herself and begins a new life with Ḥussayn in an egalitarian relationship. Both Layla and Egypt leave the past and look to the future.

3 Context: Egypt, the National Struggle and Feminist Writing

3.1 Historical Developments in Egypt (1946-56)

Although Egypt had been nominally independent since 1923, Britain continued to exercise financial and military control throughout the 1930s. Negotiations for true independence resulted in few improvements and was known as the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty (1936), which favored maintaining the status-quo. Real power remained in British hands as London kept the right to dictate financial organization, to station troops and control Egypt's military as well as the Suez Canal. (Booth 2002:*xix*)

Resentment against Britain's continued hold over Egypt was strong, and after the Second World War, public anger grew. On February 21, 1946, downtown Cairo became the scene of dramatic, violent demonstrations when thousands of young Egyptians joined up with workers to demand abrogation of the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian treaty and evacuation of all British troops from Egypt (a day known as Evacuation Day)⁶. Textile workers were at the center of the demonstrations—and formed the core of the resistance movement—revolting against deteriorated working conditions and mass unemployment that followed the Second World War due to the British control of textile manufacturing with Egyptian cotton (Beinin 2010:174*f*).

Both rightist and leftist groupings, including communist—male and female—student leaders, were proponents of the demonstrations. For this generation of young Egyptians, new ideas about social organization and personal freedom were inseparable from political demands. In their fight for national independence, they advocated more liberties for women and encouraged them to enter the public sphere. Actually, the “woman question”⁷ had been at the center of ideas of nationalism and anti-colonialism since the late 19th century. In the first real expression of public resistance on Evacuation Day, demonstrators literally clashed with the British, bodily attacking their armored cars and setting them on fire. (Elsadda 2008:116*f*; Rizk 2004)

Ismā'īl Ṣidqī, known as the repressive prime minister of the 1930s, had resumed power just before this mass show of public protest. For many, this unpopular prime minister represented “the reactionary stranglehold of the old aristocracy” (Booth 2002:*xxi*). During the time he was arresting popular protesters, he recommenced negotiations with the British. Once again, these failed. British troops withdrew from

⁶ In connection to Evacuation Day the National Committee of Workers and Students was formed; a formidable political force in the late 1940s' Egypt. (cf. 3.3 *Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt: Life, Writings and Commitment*)

⁷ The “woman question” is a phrase usually used in connection with the social change that started to take shape in the late 19th century, which questioned the fundamental roles of women. Issues of discussion were e.g. reproductive rights, bodily autonomy, property rights, legal rights, medical rights, and marriage.

Cairo and the Nile Delta, but they remained in the strategically important Canal Zone⁸. (Booth 2002:xxi)

In the early 1950s, the British military complex at Suez was one of the largest military installations in the world. Consequently, the region held symbolic and practical importance in the fight against neocolonialism. In 1951, after the 1936 treaty had been abrogated, volunteer commandos and British troops clashed there. Ten thousand students from Cairo University were trained in military maneuvers, and student divisions left for the Canal Zone. In January 1952, the British responded by attacking an Egyptian police barracks in Ismailia (on the Canal), believing that Egyptian police were taking part in the resistance there. Cairo exploded upon learning that 50 Egyptians had died. Police- and firemen watched in passive solidarity as crowds burned institutions and neighborhoods associated with the British presence. (Booth 2002:xxif)

The Cairo Fire, as it came to be called, may have hastened the July Revolution later that year. The Free Officers assumed power and forced King Fārūq, ever unpopular, to abdicate. The end of the *ancien régime* was not the end of the British presence though. Further negotiations resulted in a 1954 agreement that gave British forces 20 months to withdraw from their base at the Suez Canal. (*ibid.*)

Within months of the British withdrawal, Ḡamāl °Abd al-Nāṣir, the new president, denounced Western influence in the Arab world by announcing the nationalization of the Suez Canal. This came as a response to the US pullout of the decision to, together with Britain, finance the building of the Aswan High Dam. Instead, °Abd al-Nāṣir explained that revenues of the Canal would go to construction projects that Western governments were unwilling to finance. This move provoked the Great Powers while non-allied governments and populations applauded its sign of independence. (Booth 2002:xxiif)

Three months later, France, Britain and Israel—who for varying reasons of their own opposed °Abd al-Nāṣir—concluded a secret agreement that led to an Israeli strike into the Sinai on October 29, 1956. It was followed by a wave of British bombings, and a week later by British and French paratroop landings in Port Said and an advance on Suez City. The following day, a United Nations ceasefire ended the European advance as US troops entered and the British and French troops—followed by the Israelis—withdraw. (Elsadda 2008:116f)

Although this was not a military victory for Egypt, °Abd al-Nāṣir enjoyed a political victory and became a national hero and symbol of the revolution against imperialist forces and corruption. This was a defining moment for the nation, and ended a decade of tumultuous political activity in an Egypt that was trying to free itself from both British control and the political system of the past. The air was filled with a sense of liberation and hope in the newly independent nation. (Booth 2002:xxiii; *ibid.*)

⁸ The economic potential of the Middle East, with its vast oil reserves, as well as the Suez Canal's geo-strategic importance—as the only land-bridge between Africa and Asia, the shortest ocean link between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean—prompted Britain to consolidate and strengthen its position there.

3.2 The Egyptian Novel in the 1950s and early 1960s: Committed, Nationalist and Feminist

Referring to a body of literature and other creative arts that is recognized as emblematic of the dominant ideology, values, and organization of social forces in a given society, a canon is thus inseparable from—indeed, it is often central to—struggles over political power and economic and social pressures and structures. (Booth 2002:xi)

In the 1950s and 60s, the canon of Arabic literature responded to the surrounding social and political upheaval. A strong trend emerged that encouraged a literature of commitment and stressed the role of writers in giving voice to national issues. Writing soon after the 1952 revolution, this generation of engaged writers was optimistic, convinced that the struggle for liberation and justice would be undoubtedly victorious. Political commitment in literature appeared to be a cure against European dominance, strong also within the cultural sphere. (Booth 2002:xif; Elsadda 2008:116; McLarney 2009:187)

It is hardly surprising that most novelists chose to engage these social and political realities in the most accessible fictional mode, that of realism. The common characteristic of the major realistic novels of the 1950s⁹ is their focus on the basic preoccupations of the time. Social, economic, intellectual, and political themes all interweave in some way with the national cause. Patriotic concerns are the focal point of these novels, and the writers' attitudes are continually directed against their country's enemies and the obstacles hampering Egypt's progress. (Allen 1995:65)

Sabry Hafez, professor of Modern Arabic Literature at the School of Oriental and African Studies at University of London (SOAS), views the typical hero in these novels as one who “engages all his intellectual and physical activities in the task of transforming external reality” (1976:70). This behavior stems from the protagonist's wish to fulfill himself in society, for which development he feels strong responsibility. Despite strong affinities with his nation and fellow citizens, he might criticize power figures and particular structures in society, and may *act* thereafter. Not seldom, the novels shed light on marginalized people—along both class and gender lines—in the Egypt of that time; as in *al-'Arḍ* (1953), by °Abd al-Raḥmān al-Šarqāwī, which depicts peasants' resistance to oppressive landlords, as well as in the novel that this thesis analyzes, al-Zayyāt's *al-Bāb al-maftūḥ*. (Hafez 1976:70; Amireh 2002:55)

Egyptian women novelists writing in the 1950s also started linking their heroines to a broader communal and national existence instead of solely focusing on the personal and self-centered. Like Egyptian men, these women had been writing and publishing fiction since the late 19th century, and they began to stress themselves as “beings in society” and at the same time achieved an increased sense of individuality. By giving it a national dimension, Egyptian women writers tried to make their own experience concrete, even “placing feminist concerns within the context of the national identity crisis” (Zeidan 1995:229f). By that, they argued for expanded rights for women, they rethought gender roles, and they increased female visibility and involvement in society.

⁹ Such as the Cairo Trilogy by Maḥfūz, *Qiṣṣat ḥubb* by Yūsuf °Idrīs, *al-'Arḍ* and *al-Šawāri' al-ḥalfiyya* by °Abd al-Raḥmān al-Šarqāwī, and *al-Bāb al-maftūḥ* by Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt.

It is no coincidence that three important novels were published by Egyptian women in the early 1960s: al-Zayyāt's *al-Bāb al-maftūh*, *ʿItirāfāt imraʾa mustarjila*¹⁰ by Suʿad Zuhayr, and *Mudakkirāt ṭabība*¹¹ by Nawāl al-Saʿdāwī. These novels illustrate womens' uprising against various forms of female oppression: as women and as citizens. By bravely criticizing contemporary problems in society through exposure of patriarchy's various effects on women, they advocate societal change in attitudes and institutions. These three novels “crown the burst of optimism that followed the years of struggle for liberation on all levels” (Elsadda 2008:120). In fact, they appeared during a period when ʿAbd al-Nāṣir's regime was imprisoning many of its opponents and strictly limiting freedom of expression. Yet memories of recent triumphs were still fresh and the young generation embraced these innovative works. (*ibid.*; Booth 2002:*xif*)

Although *al-Bāb al-maftūh* at first seems to participate fully in a realist approach to social critique, it hinted at some of the ways in which the Egyptian novel would develop away from that approach—both caused by external circumstances (as the 1967 war) and the fact that the realist approach had been thoroughly explored, by Naḡīb Maḥfūz and Yūsuf ʿIdrīs among others. (Booth 2002:*xviii*) Symbolism would come to be frequently used in the 1960s. (Zeidan 1995:229)

3.3 Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt: Life, Writings and Commitment

Born into a middle-class family in the Egyptian Delta city of Dimyat, 11-year-old Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt (1923-96) decided, as she looked down at demonstrations from her balcony, that her life would be one of commitment to national causes:

I trembled with feelings of powerlessness, of misery, of oppression, as the bullets of the police killed fourteen demonstrators that day. I screamed for my inability to act, I screamed for my inability to go down to the street to stop the bullets from coming out of the black guns. I shed the child in me and the young woman came of age—prematurely—for I encountered knowledge that went beyond the home to include all of the homeland. My future fate was decided at that moment...

(al-Zayyāt in Amireh 1996:1)

In her innovative autobiography from 1992—*Ḥamlat taftīš: awrāq šaḥṣiyya*¹²—one can trace the main lines of al-Zayyāt's life. She writes about her quite happy—but sometimes “gypsy-like”—childhood in the Nile Delta, and about her undergraduate days, when she joined the Communist Party and the National Movement and she led the struggle against British colonialism. As general secretary of the National Committee for Students and Workers, al-Zayyāt was one of the main organizers of the 1946 demonstrations. In her memoirs she describes her activism as transforming her body:

¹⁰ *Confessions of a Masculine Woman* (1960)

¹¹ *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* (1960)

¹² See further Appendix A: *The Novels of Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt*

From the cloak of contact with the masses I was born and from their warmth and stability I was transformed, from the girl who bore her womanly body as if it were a sin into that tough, liberated young woman, so full of vigorous protest, who knew how to win over the masses (Al-Zayyat 1996:104)

She further writes about her first marriage with a political activist in 1949 and about her arrest by the political police the same year; her isolated six months in prison, and her unhappy second marriage, which lasted for more than 12 years with a man of sentiments opposite to hers; and her capability to at last divorce him. The final part of her autobiography was written in the Qanater Prison in 1981, where she—together with 1,500 other opposition figures of different affiliations—was detained without trial on President ᵓAnwar al-Sādāt’s orders. (Al-Zayyāt 1996; Al-Nowaihi 2001:493; Morgan 1998:37)

Like al-Zayyāt’s activism, her imprisonments had a profound impact on her intellectual life. One effect of the 1949 detention was that her political work took on a double meaning, because it was a collective act in which the personal self dissolved, to be enriched by the collective one, and “because it was an act against the authority which charges all the psychological and mental faculties of a human being” (Zeidan 1995:165; Muqābala).

According to Maggie M. Morgan (1998:34), former graduate student in English and Comparative Literature at the AUC, the attempt to concentrate on the personal to uncover its collective dimensions is evident in all al-Zayyāt’s works. In fact, when reading about her, one realizes that throughout her life, her own—*personal*—destiny and the one of the nation have been closely intertwined. She believed that:

Man [...] does not really find himself, does not become whole, unless he first loses himself in a whole, a totality greater than his narrow, individual self. The open door to the true peace with the self is the door that opens on to belonging to the sum, the whole, in thought and word and deed. (Al-Zayyat 1996:100)

It was in this spirit, in a newly independent Egypt, that al-Zayyāt’s first fictional work *al-Bāb al-maftūḥ*—her *magnus opus*—came into being. While not strictly autobiographical, she revisited her college years and created a heroine after her own heart (Al-Zayyat 1994:250). “I wanted to capture my vision of reality when I was young, because if I didn’t it would have escaped me in the end” (Al-Zayyat 1996:100). Paradoxically, she wrote this novel—her most optimistic one—during a very difficult period of her life, as if she turned to the past for help. During her second marriage she wrote little and totally left her political work.

After the divorce she resumed her suspended activities and engaged herself in numerous organizations, for example, she became chair for the Committee for the Defence of National Culture¹³. In addition, she continued working as a professor of English Literature at Ain Shams University and as a literary critic. But it would take until the mid-1980s until she allowed her own voice and vision to stand side by side with the writers she was studying; she published her second work of fiction—*al-Ṣayḥūḥa: wa qīṣaṣ uḥra*—in 1986. (Al-Nowaihi 2001:493; Amireh 1996:1-3)

¹³ As chair for the Committee for the Defence of National Culture, al-Zayyāt e.g. campaigned against the normalization toward Israel and its potential effects on Egyptian society and culture.

In her autobiography, al-Zayyāt examines her life from different perspectives and at different moments of being, to question her earlier set of beliefs. She comes to realize that her 26 year long silence was—instead of a sign of weakness—an expression of her ambivalence about “power and its structures”; during that time she felt alienated from the nation, and from herself. (Morgan 1998:39f) She writes for example about the national defeat of Egypt against Israel in 1967, and how it coincided with feelings of personal disillusionment after her second divorce and her brother’s death. “This defeat happened to me on a personal level and it is the hardest thing that has happened to me” (Al-Zayyat 1996:66).

The unison of the private and the public is very much evident in her autobiography. Al-Zayyāt presents her life as life—not as a private or a public life, but as one that is connected and complete—by lending other dimensions to the writer, the critic, the professor, the prisoner, the child, the woman, the adult and the political activist. (Bennett 1998:291) National and personal concerns are articulated with equal intensity, in Morgan’s words: “in the eyes of al-Zayyāt, the nation comes into being [...] only in the area where the personal meets the collective” (1998:40).

Samia Mehrez, professor of Modern Arabic Literature at the AUC, interprets *Ḥamlat taftīš* as a negation of al-Zayyāt’s beliefs of her youth, and as an abandonment of them (Mehrez 1996:140). However, the fact that she—after personal and national defeats—rejoins the community, starts writing again, and in the end finds herself, is rather a way of reasserting her old ideas. Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt even said in an interview late in life that she still holds tightly to the dream of socialism, even if a proper application of it has not yet occurred (Muqābala). And with the ending: “then I opened the door as wide as it would go and slipped into the courtyard and the sunlight” (Al-Zayyat 1996:125) her autobiography cannot be anything else than an updated and revised, *Open Door*. (Morgan 1998:50)

Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt published a few more novels before her death of cancer in 1996. When she looked back on her—often difficult—life, she had no regrets:

Perhaps it would have been possible for me to be a better writer, or a better fighter, or a better professor, if I had confined myself to one role. But my languages are multiple. And it is through the use of these many languages that I have enriched myself and others. (al-Zayyāt in Amireh 1996:3)

That same year the Egyptian government finally acknowledged her accomplishments by presenting her with its highest literary award, the State Prize for Literature; *Ġāʾizat al-dawla al-taqdīriyya*. (Badran & Cooke 2004:409)

4 Layla and Egypt: The Intertwined Struggle for Independence

4.1 Analysis Overview

Unfolding as it does between 1946 and 1956, *al-Bāb al-maftūh* takes place in a key period of Egyptian nationalism. Events such as the Free Officers' Revolution and the Suez Crisis provide the setting and the ideological frame of the work. The plot, however, revolves around Layla's, the protagonist's, entering into adulthood; around love and courtship scenarios. Mainly expressed through Layla's own struggle for personal liberation and fulfillment, the political events pave the way toward complete independence from the British. They are not simply footnotes to the novel's story; the historical occurrences are central to the plot and "shake the protagonists to their core, emotional upheavals that lead to tumultuous change in body and politics" (McLarney 2009:189).

Al-Bāb al-maftūh develops linearly and every advance or retreat in the political sphere is matched by one in Layla's personal sphere, and vice versa. One realm never precedes the other. Al-Zayyāt uses this (allegorical) structure of the novel, to suggest that the heroine's will to free herself from conservative social customs is similar to Egypt's goal of freeing itself from the dying institution of colonialism. The novel indeed serves the purpose to illustrate how the relation between the private and public realms are intertwined and inseparable since events consistently take place on both levels.

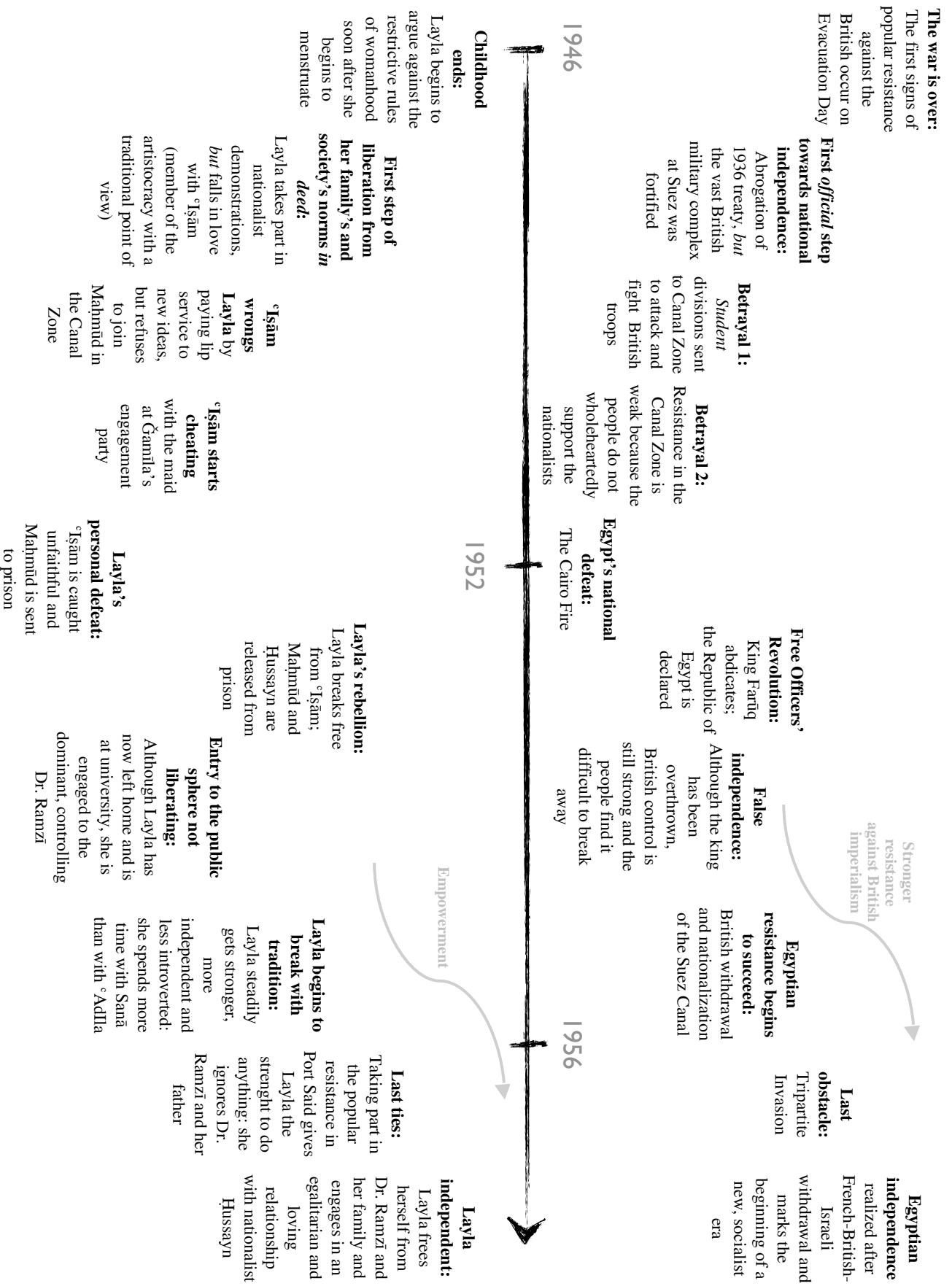
This is Egypt's own coming of age, as she struggles against an overbearing protectorate that had taken the form of an economic paternalism (British ownership of the Suez Canal and control of natural resources like cotton). New alliances—with the masses, the workers, the freedom fighters—replace old infatuations with wealth and the West. In this sense, *the body becomes the very field of articulating the political economy* [italics added]. (McLarney 2009:189)

Thus *al-Bāb al-maftūh*, as Mara Naaman (2008:327) puts it, "functions both as romance and as a founding fiction for an independent Egypt". She continues,

Both intrigues then—that is, heteronormative love for another and love for country (and in this case also self-love)—facilitate the tension that escalates through the novel, making each of their purposes codependent on the outcome of the other. (*ibid.*)

The timeline on the next page presents an overall view of the novel's allegoric structure.

Figure 1.



4.2 In-Depth Analysis

4.2.1 Suppressed Layla - Colonized Egypt

The nationalist movement in Egypt did not suddenly emerge in 1946; broad-based nationalist resistance to British control had existed throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Similarly, Layla was born 11 years before the first real expression of public protest against the British (and the king), and her first menstruation. Marilyn Booth (2002:xxiii) parallels Layla's growth with that of the nationalist movement. However, her sexual—and simultaneous political—awareness starts in 1946, when Maḥmūd is shot in the demonstrations and her own private sphere becomes increasingly limited due to her sexual maturity. Thus, the novel takes its start at this point.

When Layla demonstrates against the British, she physically responds to the crowd's communal motion; she feels that she is melting into the whole, she speaks with a voice stronger than her own. This feeling of lightness and strength contrasts her initial shyness and perception of herself and her body as a sex object.¹⁴

[...] والخجل من جسمها الممتلىء الذي خيل اليها أن كل العيون تتركز عليه [...] وتصفيق
وزغاريد وأيدي تلوح وعيون تلمع وأجسام ترتفع وتتنخفض في قفزات مجنونة، وأفواه
مفتوحة وحببات من العرق تلتصق على جبين عريض، وأقدام تدق، وأعلام تخفق، ودموع تنهمر
واندفاع...
واندفاع الدم في رأس ليلي، انتشيت، وشعرت أنها قوية وخفيفة كالطير. وشقت الصفوف إلى
الأمم وارتفعت على أكتاف الطالبات وهتفت لحظة بصوت غير صوتها، صوت اجتمع فيه
كيانها الذي مضى وكيانها الآتي وكيان هذه الآلاف.. [٤٤-٤٥]

This intense feeling of aliveness and bodily unity becomes a changing experience as she tries to recreate the same emotion in other human relationships. Immediately after the demonstration, Layla finds this kind of stimulation when she falls in love with °Iṣām. This romantic spark gives her a feeling *bi-nūr t̄āqib yaḥtariq ḡasadhā wa yastaqirr fī ḥanāyāhā*¹⁵ (54) and *yuṣī^c al-nūr min °aynayhā wa min ṣafatīyhā wa min ḥaddīyhā*¹⁶ (55). As Ellen McLarney (2009:189) mentions, this “sense of vital connection becomes an intuitive compass as Layla navigates her nascent passions”.

In contrast, rules of propriety restrain this desire for transformative experiences of human—sometimes, intimate—connection. The Arabic word *°uṣūl* refers to both conservative rules of behavior (especially between the sexes), and to property and financial assets.¹⁷ Al-Zayyāt shows how propriety becomes intertwined with ideas of patriarchal ownership communicated in the marriage contract. She also shows how class—in addition to patriarchal—concerns influence ideas about social manners, and

¹⁴ For translations of all longer Arabic quotations, see Appendix B: *English Translations*

¹⁵ [that an intense, concentrated beam of light pierced her body to settle inside]

¹⁶ [a light shone from her eyes, lips and cheeks]

¹⁷ *°uṣūl*, plural of *°aṣl*, “principles, fundamentals, rudiments, elements [...] code of conduct; guidelines; ancestors [...] real estate, landed property; assets (financial) [...] capital assets” (Wehr 1994:23)

control the mating process. After all, the aristocracy believes that *qīmat al-ʿinsān fī ʿimtilāk al-ḥaġāt dī, ʿan al-ʿinsān mā yakūnš muḥtaram ʿilla ʿidā kān ġaniyy*¹⁸ (70).

Layla comes to understand *al-ʿuṣūl* when she enters the marriage market at puberty. Her aristocratic aunts inspect her physical features and assess her value on this market as if she was a goods at auction. One of them emphasizes that beauty is a selling point, which value can be increased through suitable clothes.

البنات لازمها فستان كويس يبرز كسمها، ولازمها كورسيه يرفع صدرها ويشد وسطها [...] البنات
النهارده على وش جواز، والبنات ان ماكنتش تلبس مايققلهاش سعر في السوق. [٣٦]

Layla later compares herself, as a girl, to a slave in a slave market¹⁹, dressed up to attract the highest bidding customer. Clothes—as well as imported cloth and expensive textiles—play a crucial role in the courtship process, essentially linked not only to propriety but also to the politics of British textile manufacturing. Through the emphasis on clothes and exclusive (British) textiles in the novel, al-Zayyāt touches upon a key nerve in Egypt’s political economy: British control of textile industry, textile manufactured with Egyptian cotton (Rizk 2004; cf. 3.1: *Historical Developments*)

Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt describes how the Egyptian aristocracy has “imported” not only British quality textile to its *ʿuṣūl*, but also other European commodities as cars, jewelry and technical equipment. By interspersing the novel with foreign words as *Ford*, *Frigidaire*, *villa*, *chiffon* and *Gibere* written in original Arabic, the author underscores the invasion of foreign commodities and vocabulary in Egyptian (bourgeoisie) culture and propriety. McLarney (2009:190) mentions how the infusion and use of words related to *ʿuṣūl*—such as *ʿaṣl* (origin), *ʿaṣāla* (authenticity) and *ʿaṣīl* (being native, indigenous, or genuine)—illustrate that the reigning propriety is imported, that it is constructed out of imported goods. For example, when Layla and Ğamīla go shopping for a wedding dress, a couple discusses the authenticity of some expensive cloth. The man says: *Dā miš al-ʿaṣliyy, dā taqlīd...*²⁰ and the woman whispers back: *Hišš.. Balāš dawša, ana šāīfa al-mārka biʿaynī, qumāš ʿinġlīziyy ʿaṣliyy..*²¹ (103) Here, the valuable original—*al-ʿaṣl*—is the English; and the (cheap) imitation, the Egyptian.

In the same scene al-Zayyāt makes another political play on words when one of the shopping customers jokingly compares sale to a war: *Dā miš ʿawkāzītūn, dah yā ḥabibatī, dā ḥarb, wallahi ʿihna fidāʿiyyīn ṣaḥīḥ!*²² (*ibid.*) At the time this scene occurs (late 1951) the reference is to the nationalist guerillas fighting in the Canal Zone, and somehow, it foreshadows the defeat there, which leads to the Cairo Fire. To further darken the novel’s mood—and reiterate criticism of British controlling interests in the Egyptian textile industry—this fire breaks out as Ğamīla tries on her wedding dress.

¹⁸ [a person’s value is the things he owns, that you’re not respectable unless you’re rich]

¹⁹ *Ĝāriyya! ġāriyya fī sūq al-raġiq..* (36)

²⁰ [That’s not the original, that’s imitation...]

²¹ [Shh.. don’t make such a fuss, I saw the label with my own eyes, original English cotton..]

²² [This is no sale, my dear, this is war, I swear, we are real guerillas!]

تقف مولية ظهرها الى السماء، مسمرة كالمثال في ثوبها الأبيض، وكتل الدخان الكثيفة
الكريهة تحيط بها كالإطار. [١٥.]

Layla and Ġamīla stand on the roof, overlooking the burning city, when Layla perceives the black smoke as the frame of her cousin's wedding photo in the above quotation. This image is later evoked in her mind as she prepares for her own engagement with Dr. Ramzī.²³

For the Egyptian aristocracy, which Ġamīla and Layla's aunts belong to, love and passion are not the foundations of marriage. Desire is rather seen as something that threatens *al-ʿuṣūl*—since the choice of life partner may be chosen on feeling, and not on worth—something disgraceful, something “soiled”. When ʿIṣām falls in love with Layla and fantasizes sexually about her, he is torn by the principles of propriety and his own desire:

[المبادئ] الأخلاقية التي تعلمها والتي يؤمن بها تقول أن النساء نوعان، امرأة في الطريق
تشتهي وأم أو أخت أو زوجة، والمرأة التي تشتتهي شيء رخيص، يحاز وتنتهي قيمته بانتها
الشهوة، وهي صيد يصطاده الرجل، وينتصر عليه ويسببه كما تسبب النساء في الحروب
ويتفاخر بانتصاره أمام الآخرين. والإنسان لا يشتهي حتى أخت صديقه إذا كان مهذباً، لأن
الشهوة مرتبطة بالجسد والجسد قدر إلى أبعد حدود القذارة. [٦٣]

According to the moral values of the time, the attraction ʿIṣām feels for Layla makes her into “a cheap thing”; he associates her with a “cheap woman on the street”. In his world a woman's body is like a goods to be consumed; the lower the availability, the more it is worth. Therefore, ʿIṣām concentrates on Layla's body “as an object to be possessed” (McLarney 2009:191). The perception of a girl as an object, and not a human being, is further emphasized in the reference to her as *ṣayʿ* (thing), in masculine, neutral form. In the quotation above, al-Zayyāt also interweaves associations of property other than private that needs to be protected: that of territory and its borders.

Similar to a country's territorial borders, the space between a person's self and body must be jealously guarded and protected in order to maintain its worth. Already in Chapter One, when the limitations of *al-ʿuṣūl* are sketched out, these borders—*al-ḥudūd*²⁴—play a key role.

فهمت [ليلي] أنها ببلوغها دخلت سجنا ذا حدود مرسومة وعلى باب السجن وقف أبوها
وأخوها وأمها، وحياة مؤلة بالنسبة للسجان والسجينة، السجنان لا ينام الليل خشية أن
ينطلق السجنين، خشية أن يخرج على الحدود، والحدود محفورة حفرها الناس ووعوها
وأقاموا من أنفسهم حراسا عليها. والسجينة تستشعر قوي لا عهد لها بها قوي النمو
المفاجئ، قوي جارفة تسعى إلى الانطلاق، قوي في جسمها تطويقها الحدود، وقوي في
عقلها تشلها الحدود، حدود بلهاء عمياء صماء. [٢٦]

Here Layla speaks of womanhood as a prison—with clearly and decisively fixed restrictions—of which fathers and brothers (and similiarly ʿIṣām) are warders and women prisoners. This reference to prisoner, besides the obvious understanding of a girl

²³ See further next page.

²⁴ *ḥudūd*, plural of *ḥadd*, “edge, brink, brim; border (of a country), boundary, borderline; limit (fig.)” (Wehr 1994:187)

growing up in a patriarchal and traditional home similar to a prison, could infer the Egyptian people guarded by their British colonizers. Whatever the case, Layla/Egypt “knows the abrupt and shocking strength of her body developing, growing. She finds herself held by powers that sweep all before them, that impel her toward freedom.” (24)

Continuing to internally question and outwardly challenge these *ḥudūd* and *ʿuṣūl*, Layla rebels against the prison to which she has been assigned merely based on her gender, a random act of chance. These features of independent thinking and personal strength of hers naturally frustrate ʿIṣām; his desire to own Layla—and her body—increases radically. In his quest to protect her *ḥudūd*, he loses touch with his normal self and becomes aggressive. Layla confronts him: *al-nahārdah kunt bitbuṣṣ liy zay mā akūn ʿaduwwatak, zay mā takūn ʿaātz tantaṣir ʿaliyy. Līh?*²⁵ (113). At Ğamīla’s engagement party his jealousy reaches its peak when he tries to strangle her, shouting *inti bitāʿatī .. bitāʿatī ana .. milkī ana! Fāhima?*²⁶ (130).

The recurrence of the body/land image emphasizes the proper self as property to be guarded and defended. ʿIṣām’s final solution—which frees him from his (sexual) frustration—is to sexually exploit the servant girl. Since Sayyida is “cheap”, this act is justifiable according to the principles of *ʿuṣūl*, and it illustrates that the proper (sexual) relationship is one of ownership and inequality; master over maid, man over woman, and accordingly, colonizer over colonized.

In historically horizontal time with the acceptance of ʿIṣām’s solution, British troops and Egyptian commandos clash in the Canal Zone. Maḥmūd—who is fighting there—writes to Layla:

إن الخيانة الحقيقية هي خيانة هؤلاء الناس الذين يحبون مصر بقلوبهم و أفواههم، لا
بسواعدهم و دمائهم. [١٣٣]

This sentence equally reflects the Egyptian people’s betrayal of their nation and ʿIṣām’s personal unfaithfulness to Layla; he loves her with his heart, but not with his limbs and blood. Both disloyalties are finally discovered and visualized through the Cairo Fire.

As Layla begins her university studies, the physical borders of her “prison” are extended beyond the home, which supposedly increases her freedom. However, just as the British presence did not end with the *ancien régime* in 1952; the patriarchal, “rational” and traditional influence and control—now personified by her lecturer Dr. Ramzī, instead of her father or ʿIṣām—continues to hold a firm grip on Layla. Dr. Ramzī’s basic nature and attitude to life differ from hers in sharply defined ways. Layla initially refuses to give in and become “his parrot”²⁷, since she instinctively perceives that some sort of danger threatens from his direction. However, continuously “drinking her blood” Layla falls under Dr. Ramzī’s overarching authority, and finally his opinion is hers:

ظل الدكتور رمزي يشرب من دماها. وكلماته المطرقة في يد العامل تهدم يوما بعد يوم
مقاومتها، ووجوده يملؤها بخوف يشل حواسها، ويجذبها في ذات الوقت، فلا تستطيع أن
ترخي عنه عينيها.. [...] أمتدت سطوة الدكتور رمزي إلى ما اعتقدت ليلى من قبل أنه من

²⁵ [Today you were looking at me as if I was your enemy, as if you wanted to win some victory over me. Why?]

²⁶ [You belong to me .. You’re mine .. My property! Understand?]

²⁷ *baḡbaḡān* (222)

خصائص أمورها. [...] تتبعتها عيناه في كل مكان تذهب اليه. كان ينظر فجأة وكان الأرض انشقت عنه، وتطوف عيناه بها، وتتركزان عليها، وكأنهما تعابنانها، وكأنهما تزنانها، بلا رغبة بلا عاطفة، ببطء وعناية، كما يعاين الانسان قطعة من النقود في يده ليتأكد أنها ليست مزيفة. وكانت ليلى تنتفض تحت نظرة الدكتور رمزي [...] وتتنهد في إرتياح حين تنزاح عيناه عنها. ولكنه كان يملي وجوده عليها حتى وهو غير موجود. [٢٢٢-٢٢٥]

Similar to her first feelings towards ʿIṣām, Layla responds physically to Dr. Ramzī’s gaze and presence; even while she fears him, he attracts her. But realizing that he does not marry her because of love or desire, Layla knows that she has chosen the wrong life path. The knowledge that her engagement party is arranged in *exactly* the same way Ğamīla’s wedding had been, and that she catches her cousin being unfaithful, intensifies this feeling—a premonition that Layla is approaching a future that holds a similar marriage; “put in the deep freeze and locked up”²⁸, so to say. Ğamīla is not only the suppressed woman, her character serves as a symbol of the inferior future Egypt is approaching under British rule and traditional *ʿuṣūl*.

Through the characters of Ğamīla and her *nouveau riche* husband—who can satisfy all Ğamīla’s material wants, but is unable to offer her an affectionate, egalitarian relationship—al-Zayyāt criticizes the notion that wealth is the most desirable trait in a potential partner. She does this by showing how interwoven (imported) commodities as clothes are in the mating process, and especially by showing how the striving for material comfort increases power inequalities in the context of the couple. The dependence and inequalities created are similar to Egypt’s economic dependency on the British.

According to al-Zayyāt, this kind of loveless, status-searching relationship is traditional, and she simultaneously associates it—and the growing class-hierarchies—with foreign influence. Although this might seem contradictory, it is not. The traditional Egyptian ruling class—the monarchy and aristocracy—made key capitulations to the British, extending their presence long after independence was declared (both in 1919 and 1952). In addition, as McLarney (2009:192f) notes, “the industrial bourgeoisie often moved to thwart nationalist mobilization because it coincided with the workers movement and unionization”.

Layla’s father (but also her mother and ʿIṣām) personifies both the ruling class, the bourgeoisie and the male hegemony; opposing both Maḥmūd’s nationalist struggle and marriage out of love as well as Layla’s independence. He passively accepts the class system as well as the rule of the king and the British although he loves Egypt (and Layla, of course). Thus—by drawing close parallels between class and gender lines—al-Zayyāt’s criticism of male dominance simultaneously becomes a criticism not only of the British over the Egyptians, but also of the aristocracy over the middle-class.

4.2.2 Liberated Layla - Independent Egypt

Layla’s ultimate romance is in the end with Ḥussayn, who fights for national independence, believes in gender equality and truly loves Layla. He is a contradiction to

²⁸ *Hātathut fī talāġa wa yanqafīl ʿalayhā* (230)

Dr. Ramzī, °Iṣām, Layla's father and aunts, and the belief in traditional foundations of social interaction. The letter he writes to Layla from Germany clearly illustrates his standpoints:

عزيزتي ليلي ..

لم أكن أريد أن أستعمل كلمة "عزيزتي" بل أردت أن أستعمل كلمة أخرى، كلمة أقرب إلى الحقيقة وإلى شعوري نحوك ولكني خفت أن أخيفك وأنا أعرف أن من السهل إخافتك. من السهل بشكل مؤلم، مؤلم لي علي الأقل.

وهذا أيضا هو سبب ترددي في الكتابة إليك ولكن حنيني الجارف إلى الوطن لم يترك لي الإختيار فقد أصبحت أنت رمزا لكل ما أحبه في وطني وعندما أفكر في مصر أفكر فيك وعندما أحن إلى مصر أحن إليك وبصراحة أنا لا أنقطع عن الحنين إلى مصر.

أكاد أراك تبسمين، فأنت لا تصدقيني. أليس كذلك؟ .. أنت لا تثقين بي، أنت تقيمين بيني وبينك الحواجز، أنت لا تريدين أن تنطلق وأن تتركي نفسك على سجيبتها، لأنك تخشين أن تتعلق بي، أن تفني كيائك في كياني، أن تستمدي ثقتك في نفسك وفي الحياة مني، ثم تكتشفي كيائك مدلوقا - كالكهوة - في غرفتي.

وأنا أحبك وأريد منك أن تحبيني، لكني لا أريد منك أن تفني كيائك في كياني، ولا في كيان أي إنسان. ولا أريد لك أن تستمدي ثقتك في نفسك وفي الحياة، مني أو من أي إنسان. أريد لك كيائك الخاص المستقل، والثقة التي تنبعث من النفس لا من الآخرين.

وإذ ذاك - عندما يتحقق لك هذا - لن يستطيع أحد أن يحطمك لا أنا ولا أي مخلوق. إذ ذاك فقط، تستطيعين أن تلطمي من يلطمك وتستأنفي المسير. وإذ ذاك فقط، تستطيعين أن تربطي كيائك بكيان الآخرين، فيزدهر كيائك وينمو ويتجدد، وإذ ذاك فقط، تحققين السعادة فأنت تعيسة يا حبيبتني، وقد حاولت، ولم تستطعي، أن تخفي عني تعاستك..

لقد أنحبت في الدائرة التي ينحبس فيها أغلب أفراد طبقتنا، دائرة الأنا، دائرة التوجس والركود، دائرة الأصول، نفس الأصول التي جعلت عصام يخونك، وجعلت محمود يشعر بالعرلة في معركة القناة. وجعلت طبقتنا، كبقية، تقف طويلا موقف المنفرد من الحركة الوطنية، نفس الأصول التي تكرهينها أكرهها، ويكرهها كل من يتطلع إلى مستقبل أفضل لشعبنا ووطننا.

وفي دائرة الأنا، عشت تعيسة، لأنك في أعماقك تؤمنين بالتححرر، بالإنطلاق، بالفناء في المجموع، بالحب، بالحياة الخصبة المتجددة.

عشت تعيسة لأن تيار الحياة فيك لم يمت بل بقي حيا يصارع من أجل الانطلاق. فلا تنحيسي في الدائرة الضيقة، إنها ستضيق عليك حتى تخنقك أو تحولك إلى مخلوقة بليدة معدومة الحس والتفكير ..

انطلقني يا حبيبتني، صلي كيائك بالآخرين، بالأرض الطيبة أرضنا، وبالشعب الطيب شعبنا.

وستجدين حبا، أكبر مني ومنك، حبا كبيرا، حبا جميلا .. حبا لا يستطيع أحد أن يسلبك إياه، حبا تجدين دائما صداه يتردد في الأذن، وينعكس في القلب، ويكبر به الإنسان ويشهد: حب الوطن وحب الشعب ..

فانطلقني يا حبيبتني، افتحي الباب عريضا على مصراعية، واطرحيه مفتوحا ..

وفي الطريق المفتوح ستجدينني يا حبيبتني، أنتظرك، لأنني أثق بك، وأثق قدرتك على الإنطلاق، ولأنني لا أملك سوى الإنتظار .. أنتظرك ..

حسين أمير
[٢٧٥-٢٧٦]

Not only Hussayn's belief in egalitarianism is clear from the above, but also his own image of Layla as a symbol of Egypt; "When I think of Egypt, I think of you; when I long for Egypt, I long for you. And to be honest, I never stop longing for Egypt" (217). His struggle to free Layla from *al-ʿuṣūl* and to win her love is similar to—and indeed coincides with—his struggle for national liberation. That he is part of the engineering team assigned to design the Aswan High Dam—a symbol of Egyptian independence: withdrawal of foreign funding caused Egypt to nationalize the Suez Canal and use the ensuing revenue to build the dam—makes Hussayn an even stronger image of Egyptian resistance against the British. Moreover, he believes in true love and especially in the love for the nation and its people. In his letter above, he tells Layla to rejoin the collective; to open the door, cross *al-ḥudūd* and meet him on the other side as her independent self.

After a long period of emotional monotony, Layla's entire body starts trembling when she hears that Hussayn is back in Egypt (in 1956) and that he still loves her (Al-Zayyāt 2002:314) and this feeling intensifies when she takes part in the war in Port Said and in the end is reunited with Hussayn.

شيء ما بداخلها يستجيب للنداء، شيء ينتفض في داخلها كالعملاق، شيء جديد مثير لا يتخلى عنها أبداً، شيء أقوى من النار التي تحترق في صدرها ومن الثلج الذي يرتجف في أطرافها، أقوى من الإسترخاء، من التراب، من الموت... [٣٢٧-٣٢٨] وفي عينيها تفجرت العاطفة التي طال كبتها، والفرحة المزهوة بهذه العاطفة، وفي شفيتها، وفي وجنتيها، وفي أطرافها أصابعها وفي كل ذرة من جسدها. وكأنها نور شفاف ينساب مع الدم الذي يجري في عروقها. [٣٤٥]

In fact, this inner feeling is a power stronger than anything; Layla feels as if everything is possible. Her active participation in the war—which leads to Egypt's liberation—as a part of the whole (resistance), causes Layla to realize not only her undying commitment to the nation, but also the reality of her love for Hussayn.

وأمام عينيها إنبعثت صورتها وهي تندفع إلى أرض المعركة، والعدو يتراجع أمامها .. لا بد، لا بد وأن ترى العدو وهو يتراجع من بور سعيد وتستطيع .. كل شيء تستطيعه، ولا شيء أصبح مستحيلاً. [...] حسين كان معها كما لم يكن قط من قبل، وكأنه أصبح حقيقة تستطيع أن تمد يديها وتحتويها .. [٣٤٣]

As illustrated above, love becomes an erotic as well as patriotic and revolutionary impulse, and is heightened and more intensified due to this "doubling" (cf. Naaman 2008:326). Through this impulse Layla gains the power to free herself from her family, from Dr. Ramzī and by that from *al-ʿuṣūl*. Actually, in the paragraph that precedes the quotation above, Layla's image of Dr. Ramzī's face has completely been blotted out of her mind, "as if it had never been there. Of what had she been so afraid?" (354).

About Latin American romances that follow a similar pattern, Doris Sommer writes:

What I find ingenious, indeed brilliant, about this novel productivity is that one libidinal investment ups the ante for the other. And every obstacle that the lovers encounter heightens more than their mutual desire to (be a) couple, more than our voyeuristic but keenly felt passion; it also heightens their/our love for the possible nation in which the affair could be consummated. The two levels of desire are different, which allows us to remark on an allegorical structure; but they are not discrete. [...] The desire keeps weaving, or simply doubling itself at personal and

political levels, because the obstacles it encounters threaten both kinds of happiness.
(1990:127)

Hence, new, independent Egypt becomes the only site on which a relationship between Layla and Ḥussayn can be actualized. The novel concludes in their union under fire, surrounded by a series of committed couples joined by love, like Maḥmūd and Sanā. McLarney (2009:193) writes that these symbolize Egypt's new alliances of class and gender, as they join against British dominance and the hierarchies it has created in Egyptian society.

Paradoxically, it is °Adīla, Layla's working class friend, who most radically implements *al-ʿuṣūl* in the novel (cf. Plot). Her view of life contrasts with the materially well off and loving Sanā's. During different stages in Layla's liberation process, she alternately feels either more attached to Sanā or more attached to °Adīla, again illustrating her struggle between the values of secure *ʿuṣūl* and risky love. Layla's proper self feels more attached to Sanā, however, and offers criticism of °Adīla's backward traditional view of life:

المسألة مش هزار يا عديلة، إنت زي أمك؟ أفكارك زي أفكار أمك؟ أمك أتجوزت من غير حب
لأنها ما كانتش تقدر تعمل غير كده، ما كانتش تقدر تختار، وإن إختارت ما تقدرش تتجوز
إللي إختارته. أمهاتنا كانوا حريم، ملكية للأب بتنتقل للزوج، ولكن مالناش عذر، تعليم
واتعلمنا، وكل شيء فهمناه، وضروري نتحكم في مصيرنا، الحيوان نفسه بيختار! [٦٩]

In the final scene of *al-Bāb al-maftūḥ* only Sanā is present; both working class °Adīla and bourgeois Ḡamīla fade out of the narrative, as does °Iṣām, who becomes a victim of the war. Symbolically breaking with the past Layla joins the masses in the streets of Port Said and screams *al-ʿasās, al-muhimm al-ʿasās!*²⁹ (350) before the crowds destroy the headless statue of De Lesseps: “a symbol of the ages of slavery and colonialism that they had inherited, a symbol that pulled them back into a loathsome past, that put a barrier between them and a finer future” (362). At the same time the engagement ring disappears from her finger, and Ḥussayn screams to her *ʿinti ḥurra, yā ḥabibati!*³⁰ (350).

Layla again responds physically when she reunites with the whole, as she did while participating in the student demonstrations; while being pushed forward by the masses and smiling at Ḥussayn a light reappears to her. But this one is different, it comes from within; she has found herself.

لا، ليست نفس الإشراقة القديمة، إنها إشراقة جديدة، الأولى كانت فورة، لمعة تيرق
لتتطفئ، كالشمس في يوم ملى بالغيوم. أما هذه فنور هادئ دافئ متصل، نور ينبع من
الداخل. [٣٥.]

When Ḥussayn asks Layla for how long they have waited for that day, and she answers *al-ʿumr kullhu*³¹ (352), this is true both for her as a girl and for Egypt as a nation. This

²⁹ [The foundation, that is what is important!]

³⁰ [You are free, my love!]

³¹ [All our lives]

also counts for his comment: *dī al-bidāya, ya habibati!*³² (353). This day, when the ceasefire marked the end of the Tripartite Aggression on Egypt, is not only a defining moment for Layla—liberating and finding her real self as well as her love—but it is, above all, the first day of new, independent Egypt.

³² [This is the beginning, my love!]

5 Conclusion

Written in the wake of the Suez crisis, *al-Bāb al-maftūh* is a perfect example of the committed nationalist—even feminist—Egyptian novel of the time. Layla, in her role of protagonist, actively rebels against the patriarchy, the monarchy, the aristocracy, and the British; power figures that hamper Egypt’s development and independence in their attempts to retain the status-quo. But Layla is more than the traditional post-1952 heroine. This thesis’ analysis of *al-Bāb al-maftūh*, on both a structural and a more profound level, found strong evidence for the hypothesis that Layla—and her body—could be considered a symbol of Egypt. Both entities are bound by history and tradition and struggling to break free: Layla from woman’s traditional role of unquestioning, dutiful daughter and wife; Egypt from its subservience to a foreign power.

In terms of the plot and the structure of the novel, the analysis overview showed that from the beginning to the end, the private is linked to the public; linearly events occur on both levels, and Layla’s fate is closely connected to that of the nation. In fact, each phase in the national struggle—beginning with Evacuation Day in 1946 and ending with the popular resistance in Port Said to the Tripartite Aggression of Israel, Britain, and France against Egypt in 1956—represents a decisive moment for the heroine. That Layla’s struggle for independence so clearly parallels that of the nation—where an understanding of an event on the one timeline deepens the understanding of the parallel event on the other—makes the novel’s structure allegorical. Insights into Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt’s life and her nationalist, socialist and feminist commitment further support this double reading, since her belief was that the nation only comes into being in the area where the personal meets the collective.

There are many close connections between the creator, and her fictional work and female protagonist. Just as al-Zayyāt herself decided to commit her life to national causes at the age of 11, Layla is 11 years old when her journey toward political and sexual awareness and independence takes its start with the massive nationalist demonstration in 1946; the first expression of Egyptian resistance against the British.

It seems no coincidence that Layla likens the suppressive isolation that she as a young woman faces—and which she rebels against—to a prison. Al-Zayyāt’s experience as a political prisoner had a significant impact on her political work, since that was when it took on a double meaning. This fact encourages the interpretation that, for example, Layla’s condemnation of the idea of a woman’s body as an object to be possessed and used, relates to the criticism of British economic use and consumption of Egyptian interests (such as the Suez Canal) and materials (such as cotton).

The in-depth analysis showed how al-Zayyāt—through the use of the Arabic language: the colloquial Egyptian dialect and its “imported” foreign vocabulary—explains *al-ʿuṣūl* (the traditional principles that according to Layla constitute the main obstacle for female fulfillment and independence) as formed by foreign interests and maintained by the aristocracy. Furthermore, through the characters of Layla’s aristocratic cousin Ġamīla and her *nouveau riche* husband, and ʿIṣām’s sexual exploitation of the maid Sayyida, al-Zayyāt illustrates how *al-ʿuṣūl* increases

inequalities, along both class and gender lines. The social dependence and inequalities created are illustrated as similar to Egypt's economic dependency on the British. By associating representatives of the aristocracy with colonizers, depicting them as members of the colonial system, al-Zayyāt's criticism of male dominance simultaneously becomes a criticism of the British over the Egyptians, and the aristocracy over the middle-class.

Although Layla defies her destined role as wife and mother, the novel revolves around her and her friends' love interests. However, the notion that the private is closely intertwined with the public is further underpinned by the fact that Layla's sexual and emotional awakening is articulated with an intensity equal to that of her political awakening. The intense experience of bodily transformation that she felt (like Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt) as a political activist and as part of a greater whole in the beginning of the novel, becomes an emotion that the female protagonist seeks in her human relationships, for example, with her aristocratic cousin ʿIṣām, whom she falls in love with, and the rigid Dr. Ramzī.

Layla's active participation in the popular resistance in Port Said—which leads to Egyptian independence—awakens an inner physical strength that empowers Layla to do anything, even to conquer her family's norms and societal values of marriage as *the* vehicle for social mobility and, thus, to break with Dr. Ramzī. And at the same time as she realizes her undying love for Egypt, her love for Ḥussayn—who has lived through every stage of the nationalist struggle—becomes crystal clear. As a result, the power of this love is depicted as an erotic as well as libidinal and patriotic impulse that is heightened due to this “doubling”.

Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt's optimism infuses the novel, in which events progress logically and foreseeably toward completion and victory, on both personal and national levels. This thesis found that Egypt's struggle to resist the forces of imperialism parallels Layla's struggle to win her freedom as a woman. In the end, new alliances—with the masses, the workers, and the freedom fighters—replace the old admiration of wealth and the West. Here al-Zayyāt presents the vision of the alternative ideology that she fought for as a political activist; that of gender and class equality, and of true love. Thus, the union of Layla and Ḥussayn symbolizes the forming moment of an independent Egypt: as Layla regains her self-confidence and her ability to engage in a balanced, egalitarian relationship with Ḥussayn, so does Egypt attain independence and strive to develop a less class-defined social order under the banner of socialism. So *The Open Door* was Layla's door, and Egypt's door.

5.1 Final Remarks: “of no interest any longer”..?

Al-Bāb al-maftūḥ remains a timely literary work and is very much a product of its time. The revolutionary optimism that followed the years of struggle for national liberation imbues the novel. The common sentiment among Egyptians at that time allowed the ending of Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt's novel to offer a new beginning for Egypt and for Layla. Unfortunately, the door that opened in 1956, closed shortly afterwards.

The optimism of al-Zayyāt and writers like al-Ṣarqāwī could not be sustained after 1967. The Arab defeat was a defining moment not only for ʿAbd al-Nāṣir as leader of

the Arab world, but also for the canon of Arabic literature. Post-1967 writers turned their back on socialist realism and began to portray a more pessimistic view of their society and its future. This trend also occurs in al-Zayyāt's later works. Considering all the economic, political, and social changes that have taken place in Egypt since 1967, a novel like *al-Bāb al-maftūh* would now be an impossibility. The strong national unity and sense of belonging that existed 50 years ago has been marginalized and is today almost non-existent.

At the same time, many girls and women now enjoy the liberties that al-Zayyāt and others struggled to realize. Many may now be able to reach independence on their own, without a man like Ḥussayn by their side. To them, Layla's struggle might seem of another world. Yet, in an environment of increasing conservatism and elimination of opposition, "the social and political struggles that al-Zayyāt[, her fictional heroine Layla] and other independent-minded, courageous [women] have made [...] are indeed not entirely a thing of the past" (Booth 2002:xxx).

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Appendix A: The Novels of Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt

(1960) *al-Bāb al-maftūh*

Translated by Marilyn Booth: *The Open Door* (2002)

(1986) *al-Šayhūha: wa qiṣaṣ uhra*

(Old Age and Other Stories)

(1992) *Ḥamlat taftūš: awrāq šaḥṣiyya (sīra dātiyya)*

Translated by Sophie Bennett: *The Search: Personal Papers* (1996)

(1994) *Šāhib al-baīt*

Translated by Sophie Bennett: *The Owner of the House* (1997)

(1995) *al-Rağul alaḍī ʿarīf tuhmathu: riwāya qaṣīra*

(The Man Who Knew His Accusation)

Appendix B: English Translations

Translations taken from *The Open Door* (2002)

p. 16

[...] she felt an embarrassed shyness about her full body and was sure that every pair of eyes on the street was focusing on her. [...] Applause, the watching women's trilling *zagārīd*, all of those hands waving, hundreds of eyes sparkling, bodies everywhere, rising and falling in mad leaps. Mouths open wide to shout, drops of sweat glinting on a broad forehead, feet pounding, flags and banners fluttering, tears streaming down, and always the pushing, the pushing, on and on.

Blood pulsed into Layla's head and she felt a surge of energy. She felt alive, at once strong and weightless, as if she were one of those birds circling above. She pushed through the lines and found herself scrambling onto classmates' shoulders, heard herself calling out with a voice that was not her own. It seemed a voice that summoned her whole being, that united the old Layla with her future self and with the collective being of these thousands of people. (50f)

p. 17

The girl has to have a proper dress, one that reveals her shape, and she needs a corset to lift her breasts and keep her middle in. [...] This girl is on the brink of marriage now. And like any girl—if she doesn't dress right, she won't bring any sort of price in the market. (41)

p. 18

[She stands] motionless as a statue in her white dress, her back to the sky, a portrait framed in the ropy, ugly masses of smoke. (155)

p. 18

For the principles he had been taught—an in which he believed—decreed that two types of women existed in the world. There was the sort in the street, the sort that sparked desire, and there were mothers, sisters, wives. Any woman for whom he felt desire must be cheap, something to be had that lost its value as that desire vanished. Such a female was prey to be hunted, a thing that a man would pursue and triumph over, taking his booty as happened in any war and parading his pride before others. A man did not feel desire for his aunt's daughter, not even for a friend's sister, not if one was a proper, polite person. Desire was to do with the body, and bodies were soiled. Nothing, in fact, could be filthier or lower. (72)

p. 18

[Layla] grew to the realization that to reach womanhood was to enter a prison where the confines of one's life were clearly and decisively fixed. At its door stood her father, her brother, and her mother. Prison life, she discovered, is painful for both the warden and the woman he imprisons. The warden cannot sleep at night, fearful that the prisoner will fly, anxious lest that prisoner escapes the confines. Those prison limits are marked by trenches, deeply dredged by ordinary folk, by all of them; by people who heed the limits

and have made themselves sentries. Yet the prisoner feels in her bones that she is strong, that she has powers within her, ones she has never before sensed; she knows the abrupt and shocking strength of her body developing, growing. She finds herself held by powers that sweep all before them, that impel her toward freedom. She sees forces in her body that those border trenches work to enclose and contain; and she knows powers in her mind that the confines themselves work to impound. For they are insensible limits that neither hear, nor see, nor perceive. (24)

p. 19

The true betrayal is the betrayal of those folks who love Egypt with their hearts and mouths but not with their limbs and blood. (139)

pp. 19-20

Dr. Ramzī went on drinking her blood, his words like a hammer in a worker's fist, demolishing whatever existed, day after day. His presence filled her with a fear that paralyzed her senses and yet at the same time attracted her. [...] Dr. Ramzī's authority seemed to extend into areas she had considered her own personal province. [...] His eyes followed her everywhere. He would appear suddenly, as if the earth had split to let him emerge, and his eyes would rove across her before fixing intently on her, as if taking her measure, as if weighing her. There was no desire in his gaze; his calculation was slow and precise, an inspector evaluating a coin for possible forgery. Under Dr. Ramzī's gaze Layla shivered [...] and she always let out a sigh of relief the moment he pulled his eyes from her.

Even when he was not in sight his presence seemed to corral her. (231ff)

p. 21

Dear Layla,

I say "Dear Layla" even though I would rather use another word that better expresses the truth of my feelings for you. But I am afraid I might scare you; I know how easily you are frightened—painfully easily. It is painful to me, anyway.

For the same reason, I hesitated to write to you. But my overpowering longing for the homeland left me no choice. For you have become a symbol of everything I love in my nation. When I think of Egypt, I think of you; when I long for Egypt, I long for you. And to be honest, I never stop longing for Egypt.

I can almost picture you smiling. You do not believe me, do you? You do not trust me; you put up barriers between yourself and me. You are not willing to let go, to let your true nature have its way. You are afraid that you might really become attached to me—might lose yourself in me. You are afraid that from me you might develop some confidence in yourself and in life, and that then you might discover yourself spilled, like coffee, in my room.

I love you, and I want you to love me. But I do not want you to lose yourself in me, or in anyone. Nor do I want you to draw your self-confidence and your trust in life from me or from anyone else. I want you to have your own individual, independent self, and the confidence that can only spring from the self, not from others. Then—when you have achieved that—no one will ever be able to crush you. Not I, nor any creature. Only then will you be able to volley back whatever blows come to you, and go on your way. Only then will you be able to link your own existence, the core of yourself, to others, so that the real you will flourish and bloom and renew itself. Only then will you be happy. You are miserable now, my love. You tried to hide that from me, but I saw it. You have imprisoned yourself in the minute space within which most people of our class keep themselves: the the province of the "I," of apprehension and stagnation, of social rules, the same rules that made 'Iṣām betray you, and made Maḥmūd feel isolated in the struggle for the Canal, and has made our class, as a class, stand motionless for so long, on the

sidelines, merely observers to the nationalist movement. The very same rules that you despise and that I do too, and all who look toward a better future for our people and our nation.

In the space of the “I” you have been living, miserable, because deep down you do believe in liberation, in letting go, in sacrificing your selfish desires for a larger whole, in love, in an ever-renewing, fertile life. You have been miserable because the current of life inside you has not died but has remained alive, fighting to get out. Don’t let yourself stay imprisoned in that narrow sphere, my love; that small space will close in on you more and more until it either strangles you or transforms you into a completely unfeeling and unthinking creature. Let go, my love, run forward, connect yourself to others, to the millions of others, to that good land, our land, to the good people, ours. Then you will find love, a love bigger than you and me, a beautiful love that no one can ever steal from you. A love whose echo you will always find resounding in your ear, reflected in the heart. It is a love that makes one grow: love for the nation, love for its people.

So let go, my love, run forward, fling the door open wide, and leave it open. And on the open road you will find me, my love. I will be waiting for you, because I have confidence in you. I know you can get out. And because all I can hold onto is to wait, to wait for you.

Hussayn Amīr
(217ff)

p. 22

Something inside her was responding, [...] something new and powerful that would not leave her be, something stronger than the fire that burned in her chest, than the iciness that shuddered in her limbs, stronger than that overwhelming desire to let go, than the dirt, than death. (339) The affection she had buried for so long sailed from her eyes. She could show the proud delight she felt in those feelings now, and her joy burst from her eyes and showed on her lips, her cheeks, to the tips of her fingers, every atom in her body, as if those feelings composed a translucent light running with the blood in her veins. (356)

p. 22

Before her eyes flashed the image of herself pushing forward onto the battlefield, the enemy retreating in front of her. She must, she must see the enemy retreat from Port Said. And she could. She could do anything. Nothing seemed impossible now. [...] But Hūssayn was with her, as he had never before been, as if he had suddenly become a reality, a tangible presence to which she could extend her grasp, a presence she could embrace. (354)

p. 23

It’s no joke, °Adīla [...] are *you* just like your mother? Do you think exactly what she does? Your mother married without love because she could not do anything else. She wasn’t in a position to choose. And anyway, if she *had* chosen, she wouldn’t have been able to marry the man she chose. Our mothers were the [*harīm*]*—*things possessed by their fathers, who passed them on to husbands. But us?*—*we don’t have any excuses. Education*—*we’ve gotten that, and we understand everything, and we are the ones who have to decide our own futures. Even animals choose their mates! (77)

p. 23

No, it was not the same glow as before. It was new. There had been that flash of light that had gone out, the sun on an overcast day. This was quiet and warm and steady, a light that emanated from within. (364)