

Murder on the *‘Izbah*

*Spectral Legality and Egyptian Sensation Fiction,
Yusuf Idris to Yusuf al-Qa‘id*

Your laws are but of two classes; the one makes criminals, the other punishes them . . . Let those whom the law protects consider it a protector; when did it ever protect *me*? When did it ever protect the poor man?

—EDWARD BULWER LYTTON, *PAUL CLIFFORD*

Hunger is a nonbeliever.

—ARABIC PROVERB

Both Tawfiq al-Hakim and Driss Chraïbi borrowed the conventions of detective fiction—already familiar to reading publics in 1980s Morocco and 1930s Egypt—to dramatize the contradictory web of affiliations in which the colonized legal officer finds himself. Neither the mystery of Qamar al-Din’s murder, in al-Hakim’s novel, nor that of the antigovernment rebel’s return from Algeria, in Chraïbi’s, is solved, yet each book in its own way reveals the disconnect between the investigator and the rural populace he has been charged with investigating. The peasants and the Aït Yafelman resist the modern state systems that attempt to render them legible, and they do so not by forging political or militant collectivities, but simply by refusing to recognize the authority of any legal doctrine or officer of the law. Whereas this nonrecognition frustrates the chief in Chraïbi’s novel and the judges in al-Hakim’s, causing them to view the rural subalterns as uncivilized, backward others, Ali and the prosecutor remain ambivalent, incompletely severed from their rural, popular roots. They not only recognize but are affectively moved by their countrymen’s protests against the state’s incursion into their lives, and these recognitions destabilize their highly cultivated status as knowing, investigating subjects. For all their social critique, however, both *Diary* and *Enquête* ultimately withhold the possibility of transforming this relationship of power between the narrating self and the

objectified, rural other. Their detectives only end up reconfirming their status as *vrais chefs* (true chiefs).

Other Arab authors, by contrast, turned to crime fiction for a very different purpose: as a public forum in which to simultaneously expose the injustice of the law and to advocate for specific social, political, and economic reforms—to “invite real, or realistically squalid, crime into the house of fiction,” as Martin Priestman puts it, thereby creating “a new kind of scandal within the walls of literature itself: the scandal of indifference.”¹ This was an especially common use of the genre in mid-twentieth-century Egypt, following the Free Officers’ Coup of 1952, which brought with it dreams not only of economic and political restructuring but also of attendant transformations to the nation’s social order. The divide between Egypt’s metropolitan elite and its rural underclass of landless farmworkers was arguably felt more acutely than ever in this historical moment,² as reflected in cultural productions from the period. The Egyptian countryside, once romanticized as a space of timeless continuance, was now opened up and revealed as a space of exploitation and corruption, on the one hand, and popular resistance and struggle, on the other.³ The classed dynamics of rural labor in particular became the topic of many authors’ explorations. The peasants were no longer a teeming, indistinguishable, timeless mass, but were woven into a complex web of socioeconomic relations involving small landowners, permanent and seasonal wage laborers, sharecroppers, small-time estate officials, and others.

Murder in particular—as a plot conceit and narrative structure—offered many authors precisely the level of scandal, horror, and outrage they wished to incite in their readers. By promising the drama of a murder plot, authors like Yusuf Idris and Yusuf al-Qa‘id—whose crime novels are the focus of this chapter—used the shock of peasant murder to open up a space that had been closed off from the public and the law for nearly a century, a space where the coercion and exploitation of peasant labor had long escaped regulation and become an unspoken, accepted matter of course: the *‘izbah*.

A specifically Egyptian political, economic, and social formation, the *‘izbah* (pl. *‘izab*) is a “country estate consisting of a manor house and laborers’ dwellings surrounded by farmland,” or else, in more recent times, a “hamlet which was formerly such an estate and which is under the jurisdiction of the *‘umdah* [local mayor] of a village.”⁴ Often described by historians as a quasi-private, quasi-public “realm of exception,”⁵ the *‘izbah*, in twentieth-century Egyptian cultural production, was a palimpsest-like space in which traces of both Ottoman and British colonial power persisted despite the changes brought by postcolonial nationalist rule. The agricultural regulations, managerial staff, and relations of production on the *‘izbah*, first designed to shift Egypt’s agrarian economy from subsistence to cotton and sugar monoculture farming in the nineteenth century, would persist well into the twentieth, even after the nominal implementation of land reform laws under Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1952.⁶ In this sense, the *‘izbah* was a zone of what

Samera Esmeir calls “spectral legality,” a space in which arbitrary, sovereign power persisted despite its supposed eradication through the colonial implementation of the rule of law.⁷ Far from regulating the use of violence and forced labor on the ‘izbah, colonial law instead privatized this violence, selling off lands owned by the Khedive and his family members to pay European creditors, and thereby placing these lands outside “the reach of the law’s regulatory powers” and “purify[ing] the *concept* of the law from the business of labor management on the estates.”⁸ Esmeir reveals the sovereign rule persisting on the ‘izbah less as an “exception” to the law and more as the manifestation of “multiple zones of spectral legality” continuing on within the regime of modern law.⁹ Yet, as Esmeir also points out, there were two areas in which state law *did* intervene in the affairs of the otherwise exceptional, private ‘izbah during the colonial period. The first was agricultural inspection and regulation, to ensure that farmers were producing and laboring at maximum capacity. The second—appropriately—was murder.¹⁰ Since the colonial period, cases of murder and violent crime had invited the Egyptian public eye into the silenced realm of the ‘izbah, providing the pretext for an investigation of the otherwise unchecked corporal punishment, political imprisonment, labor exploitation, poverty, starvation, and disease that characterized peasant life in this space.¹¹ It is fitting, then, that murder on the ‘izbah should also serve as a premise for the reform-minded fictions of the post-1952 period.

This chapter focuses on two Egyptian crime novels set in the contested rural territory of the ‘izbah. The first, Yusuf Idris’s *The Sinners* (*al-Ḥarām*, 1959), though written and published after the Free Officers’ Coup, is set just before it, while the second, Yusuf al-Qa’id’s *Yahduth fī Miṣr al-Ān* (It’s happening now in Egypt, 1974), is set in the very different historical conjuncture of Anwar Sadat’s presidency (1970–81). During this time, the implementation of an “open-door” trade policy or Infitah (*infitāḥ*) and capitulation to American financial and military interests brought about the effective demise of Nasserist étatism and the deepening of social inequalities, particularly in the countryside.¹² This political, economic, and social shift was epitomized, for many Egyptians, in the triumphalist rhetoric surrounding President Richard Nixon’s visit to the country in June of 1974, only one month after the House Judiciary Committee had begun impeachment proceedings against him. Nixon’s visit forms the background of al-Qa’id’s *Yahduth*, and it is to this event that the “it” of the novel’s title partly refers. Although these novels are normally read as belonging to discrete eras of Egyptian history—the first a novel of Nasserism, the second a work of Infitah-era protest—I argue that there is a continuity, rather than a rupture, between Idris’s and al-Qa’id’s projects (and indeed, between both novels and al-Hakim’s *Diary*). Like the authors of Victorian Newgate fictions before them, both Idris and al-Qa’id wager that scandalous, shocking events, if innovatively (and, in Idris’s case, viscerally) narrated, can alter a reader’s way of seeing, jolting her out of complacency and into a state of agitation that (the authors hope) can be turned to political purpose. Al-Qa’id and

Idris transform fiction into a form of incitement, and they do so through a very specific narrative structure.

Initially, in both novels, the reader is forced into what I call “seeing like an effendi”: the portrait we receive of the countryside is focalized through the eyes of landowning, upper-class characters, and it thus offers an exaggeratedly dehumanized portrait of the ‘izbah’s laboring underclasses, from its landed fellahin to its landless day laborers and seasonal migrant workers. Through this initial narrative positioning, both novels subtly accuse the reader of complicity with (or, at least, tacit consent to) the exploitative and immiserating relations of production on the ‘izbah. With the revelation of a scandalous murder, however, the reader is invited to view things differently, this time from the point of view of the supposed criminal, who is, in both cases, a poor and landless farmworker. This process of narration and renarration construes crime not as an innate proclivity of rural peasants (a notion common in the field of Egyptian criminology at the time)¹³ but as a social construction, the product of long-standing but ultimately mutable material and cultural conditions. Peasants become criminals, Idris and al-Qa‘id wager, not through inherent vice, but rather—as both Paul Clifford and the Arabic adage have it—because they have been impoverished by man-made laws governing social policy, because poverty makes people hungry, and because hunger will drive people to do anything, even beg, steal, or kill, to survive. For characters like Idris’s Aziza and al-Qa‘id’s al-Dubbaysh ‘Arayis, “sin is not a moral, but a social phenomenon,” and “being honorable is not a matter of choice.”¹⁴

In lifting the silence on the ‘izbah and exposing it as the local Egyptian space where global social and economic inequalities play out, Idris and al-Qa‘id delve into a previously unexamined “criminal” underworld to cultivate popular sympathy for the peasant victims of private greed. Yet, unlike their Victorian counterparts in “sensation fiction,” these Egyptian authors’ purpose is not to shore up the necessity of the detective police force at home and a corps of colonial administrators abroad;¹⁵ instead, it is to dispel what I am calling the rhetoric of the ‘*ādī*, the language of “ordinariness” or “normality” that surrounds peasant immiseration on the ‘izbah. In their fictions, “investigation” (*baḥṭh*) is not only a compelling narrative structure that creates suspense through the promise of a clarifying ending; it is also an imperative, a necessity incumbent on any cultural producer to break the national silence surrounding the conditions of peasant life on the estates. While Idris’s agricultural inspector-*cum*-detective works to uncover the true story behind the mysterious murder of a newborn baby, Idris himself, through a series of intertwined plots, shows how cultural concepts like “the forbidden” (*al-ḥarām*), “shame” (*al-‘ib*), and “honor” (*al-sharaf*) allow the upper classes to shore up the social order by equating poverty with immorality, making dishonor the exclusive province of the poor. As the novel’s Arabic title—*al-Ḥarām*—indicates, Idris’s aim is to “expose the real meaning of ‘the forbidden,’ ‘shame,’ and ‘honor’ in the Egyptian countryside,”¹⁶ showing how “those who fling these words at others are also

those who sin the most.”¹⁷ Through a similar technique of narration and renarration, in which investigation becomes a gradual exposure of class-based hypocrisy, al-Qa'id, too, “brings out what is silenced and absented from Arab reality more generally,” revealing how even the Nasser-era socialist organizations designed to support migrant laborers on the estates (e.g., the Arab Socialist Union, the Organization for the Protection of Migrant Workers, etc.) began betraying their public function for private gain in the neoliberal era of Anwar Sadat.¹⁸ Writing their murder mysteries with a social purpose, both Idris and al-Qa'id, while responding to different moments in modern Egyptian history, use scandal and sensation to take on the rhetoric of the 'ādī and the specter of sovereignty on the 'izbah. By thematizing investigation and, by extension, reading itself, each novel—in its very narrative form—compelled its Egyptian readers to reconsider what they thought they knew about the *rīf* and the people who live, toil, and die there.

HISTORIES AND FICTIONS OF THE 'IZBAH

To understand the social relations governing peasant life on the 'izbah, readers would do just as well consulting Egyptian film and fiction as they would turning to historical accounts. Indeed, because official archives tend to focus on the testimonies of the estates' managers rather than those of its laboring underclasses,¹⁹ Egyptian fiction has served as a vital alternative record of peasant life and experience in this space. Writing of legal reforms throughout the nineteenth century and how they shaped life on the 'izbah, Timothy Mitchell describes “acts of confinement, regulation, and supervision of the population” instituted by the governments of Muhammad 'Ali and, later, Khedive Isma'il,²⁰ disciplinary measures aimed at “putting villagers in their place,” “fixing the rural population” onto the 'izab and “inducing them to begin producing cotton and other commodities for European consumption.”²¹ This “fixing” of the peasants in place had long-lasting effects, which are reflected even in late twentieth-century Egyptian fiction. The narrator of al-Qa'id's 1971 novel *News from the Meneisi Farm* (*Akhbār 'Izbat al-Manīsī*), for example, describes how the estate's small-time farmers “belong to the land in one way or another, and remain on it regardless of changes in its ownership.”²²

The dynamics of sovereign power on the estates are likewise as central to Egyptian 'izbah fictions as they are to historical accounts of this space. Samera Esmeir describes how, by the early twentieth century, “under the private legalities governing the estates, the landowner was the sovereign king of the island,” giving “a sense that the peasants were totally abandoned by the world outside.”²³ Timothy Mitchell also describes the proprietor of the 'izbah as “an absolute master . . . accountable to no one . . . [who] could imprison, expel, starve, exploit, and exercise many other forms of arbitrary, exceptional, and if necessary, violent powers.”²⁴ Compare these historical accounts with Idris's fictional description of Fikri Effendi, the “agricultural commissioner” (*ma'mūr al-zirā'ah*) of the estate farm in *The Sinners*:

He was the master of all this property and the absolute ruler of everything it held. This *ab 'ādiyyah* or *taftīsh*—or, as it was sometimes called, this *dāyirah*²⁵—comprised more than two thousand acres of the finest soil, and everything on it—people, houses, machines, livestock, and crops—was under his control. He was the sovereign lord of all this . . . He could even slap, punch or kick, if he wished . . . and no one could challenge his rulings.²⁶

Where the English translation might bring to mind Esmeir's "sovereign king" ("master," "absolute ruler"), the Arabic—*huwwa mālik hādhā al-mulk wa-l-āmīr al-nāhī fih*—resonates with the oft-repeated Qur'anic phrase regarding those who "encourage what is good and forbid what is evil" (*al-āmīr bi-l-ma'rūf wa-l-nāhī bi-l-munkir*), suggesting that the workers on Idris's farm estate perceive Fikri Effendi's authority to be as unshakeable as divine law. In the absence of official records documenting the unregulated violence against peasants on the estates throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, fictions like *The Sinners* offer unofficial substitutes.

Finally, in *News from the Meneisi Farm*, al-Qa'id's detailed description of farm estate administration closely parallels Esmeir's account of the 'izbah's exemption from state oversight. In Esmeir's words, the sale of the Khedive's estates to private, often European, owners at the end of the nineteenth century "also resulted in releasing the central authorities of the state from the administration of vast areas of land" such that "the estate community interacted with market and state actors [solely] through the mediation of estate management."²⁷ Although it is set nearly fifty years after the period Esmeir examines, *News from the Meneisi Farm* gives a similar sense of the peasants' abandonment to the sovereign will of estate management. A section titled "Concerning Hajj al-Meneisi, the Elder," the owner of the estate, notes that "this land belongs to him. Each individual cultivates a piece of land, [but] they do not deal with the Cooperative Agricultural Association. [The Hajj] deals with it on his own . . . He sells the crops and settles their accounts . . . They do not appeal to their Member of Parliament or to the village Chief for assistance, because the Hajj takes care of everything . . . Throughout the farm's history, no outsider has ever been acquainted with its interior affairs."²⁸ Likewise, although the farm in *News from the Meneisi Farm* is said to "lie within the boundaries of Demisna village," still it "is totally independent from it . . . [The 'izbah] has its own, private watchman who reports neither to the Mayor, nor to the Chief Watchman, nor to the police headquarters at Niklat al-'Inab . . . Indeed, they do not follow Demisna in any way, and the Governor has no authority over them."²⁹ Given the secrecy and sovereignty that had governed life on the 'izbah for so long, the task for mid-century authors like Idris and al-Qa'id was to work as social historians, to expose this space by laying out the specifics of its social organization and its exemption, as privatized land, from government regulation.

Here a word about that social organization might be helpful, as the names and titles of the managerial class on the 'izbah have imprecise English translations yet

important implications. Although the estate owners were the ultimate authorities on these lands, they often did not live on the premises and only visited infrequently. In their absence, the *ma'mūr*—in my rendering, the “commissioner”—occupied the topmost level of estate management, alongside the *bāshkātib* or “secretary,” who recorded and controlled the estate’s finances with the help of a cadre of “undersecretaries” or *katabah* (sing. *kātib*). Beneath this class of administrators was a second tier of *khiwālah* (sing. *khūlī*), “overseers” who coerced peasant labor in the fields with canes, whips, and sticks. On Idris’s twentieth-century farm estate, there is a further “middle class” of *uṣṭawāt* (sing. *uṣṭā*, a word borrowed from Turkish), of what we may call “drivers” or, more generally, “skilled laborers,” those who can supervise the use of agricultural machinery. The stratum immediately beneath these skilled laborers is occupied by the *fellahin*, the farmers who live on the estate and either own or rent their portion of land from the owner himself. Lowest of all in this class system are the migrant or seasonal laborers (*ummāl al-tarahīl* or *tarhīlah*), who are brought in for the most menial and pains-taking task on the farm estate: extracting cotton worms and their eggs from freshly sprouted cotton plants. These seasonal laborers are at the heart of Idris’s novel.

After immersing the reader in the nightmarish world of landowners, clerks, and agricultural overseers—with depictions of the farmworkers as a teeming, animalistic herd—both Idris’s *The Sinners* and al-Qa’id’s *Yahduth* turn around a crucial, hinge-like shift in narrative perspective designed to incite the reader’s shock and indignation at a social system that impoverishes rural farmworkers and then criminalizes them for the poverty it itself has caused. Each novel creates this shock in a different way. Idris holds the reader suspended in the mind of the effendi class for the first half of *The Sinners*, only to reveal—in a shocking, graphic scene that tears through the text’s midpoint—the kind of pain, shame, and suffering endured by the ‘izbah’s lowest classes, its seasonal migrant laborers. Al-Qa’id, meanwhile, confronts and accuses the reader from the very beginning of the novel by addressing her in the second person, on the one hand, and by refusing to play by the conventional rules of detective fiction, on the other. The Egyptian critic Ghali Shukri has thus referred to Idris’s novel as “the second daughter of al-Hakim’s *Diary of a Country Prosecutor*” (after ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Sharqawi’s *Egyptian Earth [al-Ard]*). He argues that Idris transforms al-Hakim’s “critical realism,” which “condemns the constitutional laws that allow [an] unjust form of social organization to persist,” into “revolutionary realism,” which moves beyond mere representation “to explanation and analysis,” and which “doesn’t merely express a desire for change, but also lays out the path toward that change.”³⁰

If Idris’s text narrates “murder on the ‘izbah” as a way of subtly implicating and then confronting the reader with the unchecked violence committed against migrant laborers, al-Qa’id’s does so as an insistent reminder of the desperately precarious lives of Egypt’s poor and landless despite the triumphalist rhetoric surrounding Richard Nixon’s 1974 visit and the Infitah more generally. Their fictions

of baḥṭh, far from offering a pleasurable escape, challenge their readers to confront the rural realities so often silenced in colonial and nationalist discourse alike—realities in what al-Qa'id calls "the *other* Egypt, the Egypt of the countryside and the teeming fellahin."³¹

SEEING LIKE AN EFFENDI

Like any good detective novel, *The Sinners* begins with the discovery of a body. After performing his early morning ablutions, one of the 'izbah's night watchmen spots a small white bundle on the banks of an irrigation canal. On closer examination, the bundle turns out to be the corpse of a newborn baby. Shocked and appalled, the guard reports his discovery to the estate commissioner, Fikri Effendi, who proceeds to investigate, thereby becoming the "internal focalizer" of this first half of the novel—that is, in Gérard Genette's terms, the narrator of the novel's first half says only what Fikri Effendi knows (with a few exceptions or "paralepses").³² The commissioner immediately suspects the Gharabwa, the migrant laborers brought to the estate during the cotton season to pick worms from the plants' freshly sprouted buds. "It must be one of them," he proclaims. "They're Gharabwa and sons of bitches" (S 10). Like most of the estate's residents, Fikri Effendi views the migrant workers as an unclean, immoral, even inhuman, mass—"wretched people who wear ragged clothing and have a strange smell." Their existence is quite different from that of the "respected farmers" (fellahin) who live and work on the estate year-round. Though only slightly better off than the Gharabwa, these farmers—like the estate's managerial class—nevertheless deride the migrant workers as "miserable human refuse" (S 11–12).³³

The movements of these seasonal laborers and their presence on the estate are determined by the specifics of cotton planting and harvesting. To bring them in at the appropriate time of year, Fikri Effendi must work with labor contractors in the western delta provinces of Tanta, Monufia, and Gharbia ("which one does not matter since Fikri Effendi is acquainted with many villages and many contractors"). He refers to these interchangeable, impoverished towns as "anthills" (*'ishsh al-naml*, literally "ants' nests") because they are so densely populated, and because, as soon as he arrives with the promise of semisteady work, however scantily remunerated, "the numerous ants emerge from their holes," ecstatic at the possibility of earning a few piasters (S 12–13; H 19).³⁴ The metaphor of the ants is only one in a series of figures the narrator uses in this first half of the novel to describe the Gharabwa, all of which equate them with animals or commodities to be transported and exchanged. The trucks specially licensed for transporting the Gharabwa, for example, are "just like the special licenses for transporting bags of rice and live-stock" (S 13), and they carry hundreds of Gharabwa men, women, and children with their overflowing foodstuffs "in a solid, teeming mass, so tightly packed you can hardly tell a man from a woman or a boy from an earthenware jar" (S 14).

Even after they arrive on the farm, the Gharabwa continue to be described as “a single, dense, dark-colored mass.” The smells in their camp are indistinguishable from one another, and smells of cooking (frying oil, fish, matured white cheese, lentils, and onions) blend with smells of cleaning (soap, phenol) “in a strange and pungent whole, to create a distinctive odor which . . . the peasants call ‘the migrant workers’ smell.” (S 15). In the eyes of the fellahin, as with Fikri Effendi, the Gharabwa are without distinguishable features, without gender, without humanity. “The gray-haired old man was a laborer, and so was the little boy. You couldn’t see the difference between a man and a woman among them” (S 22). The third-person narrator of *The Sinners* thus presents the migrant workers to the reader through the eyes of the fellahin and the effendi alike. The descriptions are exaggerated, designed to shock and scandalize a Cairene reading public unfamiliar with working conditions on the rural ‘izab. Idris makes clever use of internal focalization, forcing readers to confront their own preconceptions about migrant workers. Readers become commissioners themselves, simply in the act of reading.

Accustomed to viewing the Gharabwa as an animalistic herd, Fikri Effendi is disturbed by the notion that one of these nameless, faceless laborers is, in fact, the murderer of a newborn infant. He cannot believe that in order to sniff out this criminal, he is going to have to look at the migrant laborers differently. “Normally, he thought about them only as hired laborers, farmhands who picked off worms, harvested cotton, and dredged drainage ditches . . . They were all the same: feet cracked from hunger and walking barefoot, calloused by the unyielding earth; thin, sunburned hands; and grim faces whose sorrow you couldn’t tell from joy.” Although he is certain that the murderer is among them, he still has trouble believing that in this “human herd,” there are “Gharabwa women capable of having babies, legitimately or otherwise.” To conduct his investigation, “he was compelled . . . to start looking at the migrant workers from a different angle” (S 22; H 37).

The important thing here is that we, too, as readers of *The Sinners*, are being “compelled to look at the migrant workers from a different angle.” Through his narration—and through the Egyptian national silence surrounding the “spectral” space of the ‘izbah—Idris’s readers have also “gotten used to seeing” the Gharabwa as an amorphous heap of human refuse. Now, however, alongside Fikri Effendi, they are being forced to consider these seasonal laborers “from a different angle.” Idris places his educated readers in the mind of the effendi-detective, subtly accusing them of having similarly dehumanized and neglected the nation’s migrant workers. His storytelling, however, will soon retrain us in a new way of seeing—one shaped not by the prejudices and obsessions of the ‘izbah’s managerial class, but by dense, visceral descriptions of the everyday realities and sufferings of the migrant worker. Before we can get there, however, Fikri Effendi must solve the crime that served as the novel’s original premise.

Ironically, it is only when he gives up his criminal investigation and reassumes his position as the estate's chief cotton commissioner that Fikri Effendi manages to sniff out the woman responsible for the infant's death. As it turns out, this otherwise "sovereign lord" of the estate farm lives in mortal fear not only of his human superiors—the "agricultural inspector," or *mufattish*, and the estate's owner—but also of the seemingly divine force of a natural enemy: the cotton worm. Every year, when the season comes to "combat the worm while still in the egg," Fikri Effendi—like all commissioners on large Egyptian 'izab—goes through a time of "terrible testing" and "wears himself to the bone" in the fields, "leaving before sunrise to scout all the cotton fields, sniffing the air and fearing that, God forbid, his senses would pick up the scent of worms." "What he feared most," we are told, "was a lull in the battle" (S 57).³⁵ He has a lot at stake in the worm's eradication: if the eggs hatch and ruin the cotton crop, he will lose not only his job, but his entire life, since, "like most estate commissioners and managers, Fikri Effendi . . . had no house, no community, and no place to call his own" (S 57–58). Where conventional methods of detection like the police lineup fail Fikri Effendi elsewhere in the novel (as they failed al-Hakim's narrator before him),³⁶ his enduring fear of the cotton worm and the methods he has developed to combat its spread all arrive to help him solve the mystery. As he himself says early on, "all he had to do was look [the laborers] over and try to pick out the worm from their midst" (S 28). His most effective investigative tools are not those of the police detective, in other words, but those of the cotton worm detector in chief.

After a spike in worm eggs is reported midway through the novel, Fikri Effendi goes to inspect the fields on foot, to ensure that all the Gharabwa are working at maximum capacity. On his mission, he discovers a small shelter among the stalks, with a woman lying beneath it. The commissioner thinks he has sniffed out the culprit behind the cotton worm's rise: a lazy migrant worker. But he is actually on the brink of solving the novel's original crime—the case of the dead newborn on the canal bank. He interrogates one of his overseers, Arafa, about the woman's identity, and why she is sleeping instead of working. Arafa can only reply with a colloquial expression meant to shield the effendi's ears from such a gruesome story: "This is Aziza, Mr. Commissioner, sir . . . The tale's not fit for your excellency's ears [*'ism-alla 'alaa maqaamak yaa sa'aadat al-beeh*]" (S 61; *H* 85).

If, as readers of *The Sinners*, we spend the entire first half of the novel discovering the social order of the 'izbah through the eyes of its managerial class, Arafa's aphoristic reply announces—both to the bey and to the reader—that we are about to rediscover the Gharabwa through their own eyes. *'Ism-alla 'alaa maqaamak* thus functions as the colloquial hinge around which the entire novel turns.³⁷ The case of the dead newborn is now narrated to us from a new perspective—that of its mother and its murderer, a seasonal farmworker named Aziza. Back in her home village, Aziza lived with her husband Abdallah and their three children. With "no land to farm and no land to rent," Aziza and Abdallah "depended for their livelihood on seasonal migrant work." Describing their impoverished life,

Idris's language also takes on a tone of bare subsistence, as if in imitation of the sparseness it describes: "They got by [*'āshā*] . . . They collected their wages from Hagg Abd al-Rahim the contractor in the cotton season and lived on it for the rest of the year. They got by through force and trickery, sometimes on cheese, other times on dry bread and salt, but they got by, and that's all there was to it [*was-salaam*]" (S 66–67; H 92–93). Not only does the third-person narrative voice veer into colloquial Egyptian in this passage—for example, in the line "he worked for a daily wage . . . one day there was work, the next ten there wasn't" (*yawm fiḥ, wa 'ashara maa-fiish*); the repetition of the one-word sentence "*'āshā*" (they got by), the subsequent zeugma ("they got by through force and trickery, sometimes on cheese and other times on dry bread and salt"), the bare simplicity of the final "*was-salaam*"—all of these syntactic elements combined represent a major shift in tone, language, style and perspective from the earlier chapters in the novel focalized through Fikri Effendi and other members of estate management.

Yet, because Aziza and her husband live in such abject conditions, it is "inevitable" that Abdallah will get sick (S 67; H 93). Like many rural Egyptians living near standing water, he contracts the parasitic disease bilharzia, which leaves him unable to work and Aziza in charge of caring for him and feeding their three children. Thus, when Abdallah one day requests a sweet potato, Aziza does everything in her power to track one down for him, thinking it a kind of medicinal craving. As she trespasses on the field of a local farmer, she comes across the landowner's son. Although the man initially helps her track down a few remnants of sweet potato in the dirt, he ultimately assaults her, confining her to one of the holes they have dug and raping her. Not wanting to "drag her name through the mud" with the revelation of this scandal as it is happening, Aziza freezes in the ditch, unable to act or even cry for help. More than anything, what she feels, and fears, is *faḍḥ*—that is, causing a scandal, or making a scene. "You knew it was wrong and shameful [*ḥarām wa 'ib*]," she chides herself later, referencing the titles of two Idris novels, "but you didn't resist him as you should have, fearing scandal [*al-faḍiḥah*]" (S 73; H 205). Here, as elsewhere in his work, Idris illustrates how thoroughly cultural conventions of morality are transformed into socioeconomic cudgels to keep the poor in their place. Aziza spends very little time fretting over her violated body; her concern is primarily with what people will think.

Although memory of the rape initially plagues her, Aziza is soon able to push it from her mind, since, in Idris's colloquial phrasing, "nothing erases a person's memory so much as the persistent search for something to eat [*lu'mat il-'eesh*]" (S 71; H 98). And yet, despite the persistent call of hunger—both her own and that of her family—Aziza soon realizes that she has become pregnant from the rape. She tries to terminate the pregnancy the only way she knows how, with "stalks of Jew's mallow, turning the handmill on her stomach, jumping from the roof," even "beseeching God to save her," but, as Idris's wry narrator puts it, "none of her prayers was answered, and what happened instead was something even more bitter: the cotton season arrived" (S 72; H 99). Note that the Arabic for "the

cotton season arrived," *jā'a al-mawsim*, includes no mention of "cotton." Idris knows what his readers know: that, as another Idrisian title has it, "cotton is king" in Egypt.³⁸ The pregnant Aziza ships off to the 'izbah.

At first, the demanding physical labor of the fields helps Aziza forget about the rape and the pregnancy both. In another Idrisian zeugma: "Forgetting and remembering were but a small part of the many things that beat upon her in successive waves: the sun . . . the day with its summer heat, sweat, and thin bamboo switches whose blows were felt clear to the bone" (S 72). Soon, however, one form of labor must give way to another. The contractions begin while she is still at work in the fields, and she struggles to conceal the pain. She manages to finish out the day's work and make it back to the Gharabwa camp, but at night the contractions increase in frequency and intensity. She sneaks away to give birth by the side of the canal, making sure not to forget "the egg she had borrowed or the half-burned piece of dry willow stick." It is here that Idris segues into the novel's most graphic and sensational scene, which is worth quoting at length:

Putting the dry willow stick between her teeth, she squatted on the ground. As each successive wave of pain surged within her, she sank her teeth to their roots in the dry wood and squeezed a handful of moist earth from the canal until, its moisture gone, it became hard, and she flung it aside.

Nor did she forget what she must do. As soon as the baby's head appeared, she broke the egg, and smeared herself with its slippery contents in the hope of helping the head to slide out.

And finally the baby came . . .

It slipped out all at once, and as though her soul flowed out with it, she grew a little dizzy, and then lost consciousness for a moment. It was only a short moment, but when she came to, she heard, she truly heard, a soft cooing sound. It was the baby, without a doubt. Then, all of a sudden, it cried. A cry that seemed to her as if it filled the whole world and could be heard by everyone.

She had not prepared herself for that moment. She had thought only about riding herself of the evil swelling that had exhausted her for so long . . . Now that she had freed herself from it, it was crying and threatening her with a bigger scandal than ever . . . She reached out a trembling, unsteady hand, and it fumbled with the living, human mass until a finger, automatically, found the mouth . . . mouth . . . the real mouth of a suckling infant . . . The child suckled her finger for a moment. A brief moment, but it electrified her. A strange, violent feeling flowed from that small fleshy cave to her finger, her arm, and then her whole body . . .

But all this took no more than a moment. Afterwards the child cried. Her hand went swiftly back to close its mouth. The small opening tried to free itself from the fingers laid across it, and their pressure increased . . .

All at once, Aziza came to herself and found her hand pressed tightly over the baby's mouth. At the same moment, she sensed that the child was still, too still. And in a hoarse, frightened, trembling voice, she cried:

"Oh my God" [*yaa lahwii*]. (S 74-75; H 102-3, translation modified)

Idris doubtless drew on his professional training as a medical doctor to conjure this scene.³⁹ He is known in Arabic letters as a master of defamiliarizing description, particularly in graphic scenes involving sex and the body. Indeed, as Ghali Shukri notes, sex, gender, and politics are almost always linked in Idris's work.⁴⁰ Aziza's story is likewise constructed to create shock. Teeth sunk to their roots in a willow stick, handfuls of mud squeezed dry and flung aside, a hand pressed over the newborn's "fleshy cave" (*jahr laḥmī*) of a mouth—we are clearly meant to taste, feel, touch, and sense this scene. Idris spares no taboo around birth as a physical process, as *labor*.⁴¹ All of a sudden, we have been jolted from the effendi's detached, dehumanizing perspective to Aziza's visceral, all too human one. Fikri Effendi, our stand-in detective, has solved the case of the newborn's murder, yet the truth turns out to be even more unsettling than the mystery. To cover up the scandal, and to continue earning six piasters a day, Aziza has endured rape, virtual enslavement, birth, infanticide, and puerperal fever, all alone and in secret, in a desperate effort to survive. Idris's description of this reality is nothing less than a confrontation. We may no longer see like an effendi. We must now feel like a laborer.

In this way, *The Sinners* explores the possibilities of storytelling as a social tool, and it does so both formally and thematically. Just as it invites the reader to view the Gharabwa "from a different angle" by eclipsing Fikri Effendi's voice in the second half of the novel, so too Aziza's tale functions thematically as the catalyst for an unprecedented mixing between the 'izbah's landed fellahin and its landless migrant workers. This mixing begins with the farm children who, after playing with the Gharabwa, discover that "the other boys' faces were all different from one another's and they did not all look alike as they had thought before" (S 85). The change then spreads to the adults as they congregate around Aziza, who has become violently feverish after her ordeal—a puerperal fever that eventually kills her. "It was around the shelter and Aziza's sick bed that the farm people and the migrant workers became acquainted . . . The farm people discovered that the migrant workers had villages too, and that like them they knew about farming and worked the land . . . Likewise, they . . . had complaints about their boss, and reasons to complain about the commissioner, the administration, and the estate ['izbah]" (S 100). Aziza's story has shown the fellahin that the Gharabwa are not simply a dark, teeming, animalistic mass, but a collection of individuals, each with their own story. At the same time, the story has also built class solidarity between both groups, forming them into a class-conscious collectivity numerous enough to challenge the sovereign rule of estate management. The story of Aziza thus forges a common struggle, both within the diegesis of *The Sinners* (between the fellahin and Gharabwa) and beyond the pages of the novel (between the implied metropolitan reader and the laboring rural underclasses).

Yet the hope is short-lived. When the novel was first published in 1959, the coming of "revolution" and the "Agricultural Reform Law," narrated in its "Epilogue," were said to fulfill in material form the class-bridging promise offered in

Aziza's story. The landowner sells the estate land and everything that goes with it to the farmworkers, and he "even razed the mansion," effacing the last traces of the previous regime (S 113). With the novel's republication in 1977, however, Idris made several revisions to the text's original parable-like ending. In this new version, the narrator notes that the landowner only sold the land "so that the [land reform] law would not apply to him," and he describes the "new landowners" as merely "nominal," placing the word "landowners" itself in parentheses.⁴² These changes certainly reflect Idris's disillusionment with the actual results of Nasser's 1952 land reform laws, which were, as Timothy Mitchell argues, less a flagship project of the new regime than a ruse to secure popular support for its takeover.⁴³ Reading according to the conventional narrative of the Arabic novel's "development," therefore, we might interpret Idris's edits as yet another instance of post-1967 disillusionment and "self-criticism," a cynical reflection on the naïveté of Nasserism and pan-Arabism following the crushing defeat of the Arab forces in the June War.⁴⁴

I would argue, however, that even the 1959 edition of *The Sinners*—the one without Idris's disillusioned revisions—ends ambivalently, with no sure promise that either Aziza's story or the agricultural reform law have indeed brought justice to the 'izbah. Even as land reform does away with the estate's mansion, stables, administration, commissioner, inspector, workmen, guards, and day laborers, still, we are told, "some" of these new landowners "began to grow bigger, become rich, and hire laborers," while others "grew smaller, became poorer, and put themselves out for hire" (S 113). It is as though a natural process is resuming, revolution being supplanted with counterrevolution. And even before this description, which comes from the novel's rather pat "Epilogue," one wonders whether Aziza's story has really made such a difference to life on the 'izbah, when the sounds of the truck carrying her corpse away in secret are said to be "borne on the winds and slowly absorbed into the huge masses of darkness crouching on the breast of creation," replaced by the voices of the estate's overseers yet again, shouting at the line of toiling migrant laborers: "Get down lower, boy . . . lower, girl" (waṭṭī yā walad . . . waṭṭī yā bint) (S 109; *H* 149). Far from unifying the Gharabwa with the fellahin in the common cause of demanding justice, Aziza, her body, and her tale have been reabsorbed into the darkness and the night, and the Gharabwa have returned to the cotton plants, their backs stooped over in nameless, faceless lines. What kind of change have Aziza's life, death, and posthumous story actually wrought in this novel? And what, following Idris's implicit metafiction in this text, can *The Sinners* itself hope to accomplish?

The novel is not unambiguously hopeful; nor does it view political or legal solutions as the most effective agents of social transformation. Land reform, after all, will not affect the culture of shame and scandal that hushed Aziza into silence and suffering. It is only by interrogating these cultural concepts and practices, relativizing them through new representations, as Idris does here and throughout his work, that revolution can reach the level of the social. Narrative structure, then,

is not merely a choice designed to achieve a particular artistic effect, but a social act in *The Sinners*. Having been forced to confront their effendi-like sensibilities in the first half of the novel, Egyptian readers are subsequently thrust into the “undignified,” “scandalous,” *ḥarām* life of the migrant worker, compelled—by the novel’s form itself—to feel the pain of rape and forced birth. It is not Aziza who has sinned, but the “heretical class society” that is at fault, and thus, “there is nothing to save the poor from the forbidden, shame, and sin except the eradication of poverty.”⁴⁵

SEEING LIKE A DEVELOPER

Like *The Sinners*, Yusuf al-Qa‘id’s *Yahduth* concerns a murder on the ‘izbah, and, like Idris, al-Qa‘id exposes the exploitative social relations in this realm of “spectral legality.” Yet, unlike Idris, al-Qa‘id never allows his readers to fully occupy the mind of the effendi class. There is little in the way of free indirect discourse in his novel. Instead, the author enters into a direct, explicitly metafictional relationship with readers from the very beginning, addressing them in the second person and presenting them with a series of primary documents (testimonies, interviews, and reports), which come to form the text of the novel itself. The narrator of *Yahduth* is thus also an author, and he frequently intervenes in the narration to jolt the reader out of complacency, preventing her from fully subscribing to the village officials’ views by exaggerating them, on the one hand, and by pointing out, in copious footnotes, their numerous lies and falsifications, on the other. Instead of saving the surprise of the murder’s explanation for the end of his detective novel, al-Qa‘id reveals it in the book’s first several pages, thus initiating what I call his poetics of confrontation. He refuses to offer readers the entertainment and escape of a detective novel. Instead, he explicitly tells them that he wants to “torture [their] consciences” by exposing them to the scandalous cheapness with which officials treat peasant life in the provinces (YMA 174). He will do this through multiple exaggerated and parodic stylizations of official speech and of the Infitah-era rhetoric of economic and social “development.” Finally, where Idris’s critique of the social system that enables peasant misery on the ‘izbah extends only to the officials who manage the estates (and, metafictionally, to the readers themselves), al-Qa‘id also implicates another figure from the Egyptian social order in this shared guilt—none other than the author himself.

Before examining the finer points of al-Qa‘id’s poetics of confrontation, a brief summary of this complexly constructed novel is in order.⁴⁶ Set in a number of villages and towns in the Egyptian province of Beheira (in the western Nile delta just south of Alexandria), the events recounted in *It’s Happening Now* take place in June 1974, on the eve of President Richard Nixon’s visit to Egypt and tour of the countryside by train. In conjunction with this visit, a shipment containing large quantities of food aid from the United States arrives in the village of

al-Dahriyyah. The chairman of the village council (who remains nameless throughout the novel) is instructed not only to distribute the aid, but also to ensure that each recipient understands their portion as “a personal gift . . . sent by President Richard Nixon, international man of peace” (YMA 23).⁴⁷ But the chairman soon finds himself unsure of how to distribute the aid most equitably. He consults his “lifelong friend” the doctor, who suggests it should be given only to the pregnant women in al-Dahriyyah—not because this seems fairest, but because it will put the doctor in control of the food and allow him to distribute it only to his best-paying clients, pregnant or not. In exchange, he hopes these clients will lend him enough money to build a private clinic for himself, even though, as a footnote from the author-narrator informs us, his contract as a public servant in the nationalized Egyptian health system strictly forbids such an enterprise (YMA 31).⁴⁸ The chairman, meanwhile, sees himself in a dream catapulted into the prestigious position of governor of nearby Alexandria, thanks to the overwhelming success of the welcoming celebration he is about to organize for Nixon. Blinded by a combination of ambition and superstition, he agrees to the distribution plan proposed by the doctor, and they push it through an easily manipulated village council meeting.

Meanwhile, the landless “agricultural workers” (*ummāl zirā'īyyūn*, sing. *āmīl zirā'ī*) of al-Dahriyyah soon hear about the arrival of the food aid, and one man in particular—his name, we later learn, is al-Dubbaysh 'Arayis—comes up with a plan to trick the authorities and secure food for his impoverished family, even though his wife Sudfah is not pregnant. (The names are significant here: *dubbaysh* means “rough-cut,” as a stone, or “crass,” as a person, and *şudfah* is “coincidence,” “happenstance.”) He straps some old bits of rag and hay to her belly, covers her in a long robe, takes her in to the doctor's office, and is immediately given a portion of the aid. However, word of the trick soon reaches the doctor, and, together with a battalion of police officers, he storms al-Dubbaysh's house to take back the food. In retaliation, al-Dubbaysh confronts the doctor in his office, screaming at him and eventually knocking him unconscious. He is arrested shortly thereafter, and the chairman transfers him to the prison in the regional capital, al-Tawfiqiyyah, under the care of another “lifelong friend,” the “respected officer.” In the middle of the night, al-Dubbaysh suffers a severe beating at the hands (it is implied) of the police. The officer quickly has him transferred to the regional hospital, but al-Dubbaysh dies almost immediately. Not wanting to shoulder the blame for the farmworker's death, the officer ensures that he is buried in an unmarked grave, and the doctor, chairman, and officer then meet to decide how to handle the case. Either they can assert that al-Dubbaysh was an enemy of the state organizing a protest of Nixon's visit and thereby threatening national security (a plan they refer to as “D.E.,” or “Dubbaysh Existed”), or they can attempt to prove that al-Dubbaysh never existed at all, and thus avoid the possibility that authorities above them will continue to investigate the case (a plan they refer to as “D.N.,” for “Dubbaysh Never Existed”) (YMA 123). In the

end, they decide to follow the latter plan, which only works because the farmworker was so poor he lacked even the most basic documentation to prove his existence. Soon after, a mysterious visitor arrives in al-Dahriyyah from the regional capital (it turns out he was a nurse at the hospital where al-Dubbaysh died), and it seems for a moment as if plan "D.N." will be foiled: the visitor informs al-Ghilban 'Abd Allah, a friend and fellow worker of al-Dubbaysh's, that there has been a conspiracy to cover up al-Dubbaysh's death. Al-Ghilban subsequently informs Sudfah, then gathers a group of farmworkers who vow to obtain justice for their friend. Yet because they cannot produce any written documentation definitively attesting to al-Dubbaysh's existence, their efforts to avenge him, find his grave, and obtain state compensation for his family ultimately prove fruitless.

These events, however, are not revealed to the reader in the neat, chronological manner in which I have narrated them here. Rather, they are disclosed gradually, through citations from the various primary documents collected in al-Dubbaysh's case file. Furthermore, al-Qa'id purposefully spoils the ending of the "mystery of the dead farmworker" in a passage of explicit metafiction from the novel's very first pages.

Normally, the conventions of the profession would dictate that I should conceal the fact of the farmworker's death from you. It would be much more interesting if I told you about his mysterious nocturnal disappearance and we followed the adventures of the Officer's search [baḥṡh] for him everywhere, only to discover in the end that he had died . . . But I've disclosed my secret and exposed my plan. Still, I don't want you to forget about the farmworker's death. In fact, I'll remind you of it every step of the way throughout this novel. (YMA 16)

The author-narrator "Yusuf al-Qa'id" is more interested in confronting readers with the violent realities continually transpiring outside the text than allowing them to escape within it. Meanwhile, the biographical author Yusuf al-Qa'id refuses to turn the reading of crime fiction into a pleasurable parlor game of decipherment. Unlike the conventional mystery author, he refuses to maintain a monopoly on knowledge, judiciously disclosing only fragmentary bits in order to "secure the reader's interest in [the] novel and ensure that he runs along breathlessly behind the words" (YMA 15). On the contrary, al-Qa'id refers to these narrative strategies as "weapons" and vows to relinquish them in the title to the novel's second chapter, "The Author Surrenders his Most Important Weapons to the Reader" (YMA 15). Like al-Qa'id's other novels, then, *Yahduth* "makes the novel itself into an object of narrative contemplation."⁴⁹

By spoiling the mystery in advance, al-Qa'id frees readers from the task of decipherment and forces them to confront instead the exaggeratedly dehumanizing rhetoric used by the village officials, on the one hand, and its large landowners, on the other. This rhetoric is readily apparent in the primary documents collected in al-Dubbaysh's case file, which comprise the novel's first several chapters.

The doctor, for example, frequently refers to the farmworkers for whom he is supposed to care as “half-human, half-animal creatures” who are hardly worth his time (YMA 20, 38). The testimony given by the estate owner on whose land al-Dubbaysh was working the day of his death goes even further. In a chapter sardonically titled “A Feudal Lord of the 1975 Variety Wonders, Why do the Poor Covet What the Rich Have?” this landowner affirms that on the day al-Dubbaysh “disappeared,” he had “twenty-three and a half laborers” working his lands, and then explains this rather odd calculus thus: “Well, there were twenty men, two old men, and five children. Old men and children are paid half-wages. So the total was twenty-three and a half” (YMA 66).

Littered throughout the first half of *Yahduth*, the exploitative, dehumanizing language of officialdom and the landed upper classes reaches its apex in the final chapter of book 2, “The Lifelong Friends’ Last Meeting.” The officer, doctor, and chairman get together at the doctor’s villa to decide what they will do about the al-Dubbaysh Affair, now that the officer’s investigation is over. “Thanks to the officer’s cunning,” the narrator notes, “the whole issue [of al-Dubbaysh’s death] had passed them by without doing any harm, and it was in fact transformed into a rare moment of human friendship among three men whose bad luck and empty pockets . . . had thrown them into a hell called the countryside [*al-rif*]” (YMA 121). It is here that these “lifelong friends” will decide to claim that al-Dubbaysh never existed (plan D.N.). Although the chairman expresses some initial reservations—“What will people say?”—the officer reassures him as follows: “What people? Al-Dubbaysh was born to die. He’s been dead since the day he was born . . .” The three then proceed to toast “the living dead man, al-Dubbaysh ‘Arayis” (YMA 124, 128). What concerns the officer, however, is that some “revolutionary agitators” in the village will discover the case and cause a ruckus. Now it is the doctor’s turn to reply, which he does while laughing: “You’re in the Egyptian countryside in 1975. Political acts? Nooo [*nūūūū*] . . . Objective understanding? Nooo . . . Freedom of assembly? Nooo . . . Class consciousness? Nooo . . .” (YMA 125).⁵⁰ Given how severely the farmworkers have been treated at the hands of the state, the officials need not fear any collective action or revolutionary agitation from them. What Timothy Mitchell calls a “culture of fear” has subdued them into silence.⁵¹

The doctor, officer, and chairman, in their last meeting, are banking on the hope that the villagers of al-Dahriyyah will turn al-Dubbaysh into a legendary figure like al-Zanati Khalifah, Abu Zayd al-Hilali, or al-Adham al-Sharqawi—the popular heroes of famous Egyptian narrative ballads—rather than view him as the victim of official state violence.⁵² As it turns out, the officials’ hopes are fulfilled, for as the narrator informs us in the novel’s first chapter, “with the coming of night, al-Dahriyyah forgot the story of the farmworker . . . Some said he was a poor man and a victim, while others said he deserved what happened to him and more, that water will never flow uphill, and that not even al-Adham al-Sharqawi or al-Zanati Khalifah could have gotten away with saying that the mule was in the

pitcher, as the saying goes" (YMA 12).⁵³ Here al-Qa'id's narrator does not applaud but overtly criticizes the oral narrative forms and languages proper to the countryside and the fellahin. The peasants absolve themselves from taking any action against their daily oppression by continuing to believe in such heroes' future arrival.⁵⁴ In al-Qa'id's satire, colloquial Arabic and popular narrative forms like the *mawwāl* and the *sīrah* are not necessarily a subversive or subaltern language that, simply by virtue of being unofficial, challenges or disrupts the formal Arabic of state discourse. Folk narrative forms do not contrapuntally contest; rather, they only reinforce discourses of power, transforming murder into a timeless tall tale.⁵⁵

There is one character, however, who will go on to seek justice and retribution for al-Dubbaysh 'Arayis's death. Fellow farmworker al-Ghilban 'Abd Allah assembles a group of landless laborers who turn to a series of official organizations seeking acknowledgment of al-Dubbaysh's murder and compensation for his wife and children. (Like the name "al-Dubbaysh," which means "rough-cut," the name "al-Ghilban 'Abd Allah" can be translated—tragically—as "the poor man who worships God.") Yet al-Ghilban and his band will only be disappointed by the various institutional representatives they consult, from the secretary general of the Arab Socialist Union (ASU) and chair of the "Office for the Protection and Care of Migrant and Day Laborers' Rights," to the "basic unit" (*wihdah asāsiyyah*) of their local union. The narrator of *Yahduth* knowingly casts al-Ghilban and the reader into this nightmarish world of nameless bureaucrats, affirming that "because the majority of characters you've met in this novel have been nameless, we'll finish out the few remaining pages in the same vein" (YMA 143). Since the readers already know the circumstances surrounding al-Dubbaysh's arrest, disappearance, and death, they are once again freed from the task of decryption and forced to confront the dismissive language used by these officials, even those who, as professed socialists and labor union leaders, are supposedly on the workers' side. This time, however, al-Qa'id takes aim not at the landowners and *effendiyya* who were also the target of Idris's satire in *The Sinners* but at the triumphalist rhetoric of "development" surrounding Sadat's economic reforms and Nixon's visit to Egypt in 1974.

This satire culminates in a chapter titled "When al-Dubbaysh was Turned into an Investment Project," in which al-Ghilban and his band pay a visit to the town's 'ardaḥālji, a "professional self-employed writer of applications and petitions" to the central government.⁵⁶ This particular public scribe, however, "travels to America every summer, and thus has a more realistic viewpoint on things" (YMA 160). Rather than lodge the farmworkers' complaint against the government in writing, thus serving his traditional role as helpful intermediary, the 'ardaḥālji suggests instead that they file a lawsuit against President Nixon himself, since "he's the one who caused this whole thing, from 'knock-knock' to 'see ya later'" (YMA 159).⁵⁷ When al-Ghilban protests that he, his group, and al-Dubbaysh's family combined couldn't come up with the money for such a lawsuit, the 'ardaḥālji suggests they

bring in a rich financial backer for the project, who, in exchange for his investment, will receive three quarters of the total profits. If they succeed in making ten thousand Egyptian pounds off the lawsuit,

“you could turn al-Dahriyyah into a touristic village . . . We'll turn the age of the free market to our benefit and find an American investor to supply 49% of the project's capital. After that there are thousands of things we could do. Al-Dahriyya is a treasure. We could start a cannery, look for oil, or extract mineral water from the earth. We could start a carpet factory in cooperation with Iran and sell the products to Europe, or we could build cabins and chalets on the riverbanks for tourists to spend their vacations near the mighty Nile River.”

The young man spent a long time discussing ways to profit off of al-Dubbaysh 'Arayis's murder. (YMA 161)

In the simultaneously dystopian and all too real world of *It's Happening Now*, the 'ardahālji is seeing not “like an effendi” but “like a developer.” He is selling the landless farmworkers precisely the same kinds of projects that American development agencies like the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank sold to the Sadat regime starting in the mid-1970s. In theory, these projects of “decentralization” and “privatization” were meant to democratize government by empowering local, provincial, and village officials and thereby—it was assumed—increasing the economic opportunities available to small farmers.⁵⁸ In practice, however, these kinds of projects—canneries, tourist villages, petroleum extraction, and so on—merely entrenched (and, in many cases, increased) preexisting inequalities between the rural upper classes and the working poor, who, “in the absence of a minimum wage, and under a system of patronage, policing, and surveillance in rural Egypt that prevented [them] from protesting against or organizing to change their condition,” had been left “with no resources but their labor.”⁵⁹ Al-Qa'id's character al-Dubbaysh is the quintessential product of this new social order. His “main distinguishing feature, from the moment he was born, was that he was one of those men who doesn't own an inch of land.” His only real possessions were “his two arms and his strength” (YMA 96).

Al-Qa'id's critique of US-financed development projects specifically and of the era's neoliberal ethos more generally are woven throughout this third and final book of *Yahduth*. Even before introducing readers to the 'ardahālji, the author-narrator parodies the rhetoric of American consumerism saturating Egyptian media at this time—only one year, it should be noted, after the United States had backed Israel against Egypt in the 1973 October War, which killed between five and ten thousand Egyptians. “Witnesses sold [al-Dubbaysh's life] as cheap as dirt,” the author-narrator writes, “in exchange for promises that would never be kept . . . The American president, come from across the Atlantic! He is the only man in our world capable of solving all the problems of the Middle East . . . Cairo will become

a city of canned beef [*biloobiif*], Alexandria hills of fine white flour, Port Said will be filled with mountains of televisions, cars, tape recorders, refrigerators, washing machines, and water heaters" (YMA 155). The landless peasant's life, it is implied, might have been spared, if only local officials and villagers had not been so preoccupied with preparations for Nixon's visit and all the private profit it was meant to signify: for the officials, ambitions of promotion; for the villagers, an open market for new, imported commodities. "The seventies," as al-Qa'id once said in an interview, "only offered individualistic solutions that did not create opportunities for communal development or national projects to improve society in general. They essentially killed off the notion of civil society."⁶⁰

Alongside washing machines, televisions, and tape recorders, "peace" was another commodity sold to Egyptians on the pages of the national newspapers and in speeches made by both presidents throughout their tour. In a speech given at the presidential palace in Cairo on June 13, 1974, for example, Nixon affirmed that the goal of his visit was twofold: "to achieve economic advancement in all areas, for the good of your people . . . and to achieve a true, just, and lasting peace." According to Nixon, each of these goals was dependent on the other. "We cannot achieve advancement without achieving peace, and without advancement and hope, there can be no peace."⁶¹ Both the speeches and the newspapers that reproduced them contributed to this association between Nixon, US capital, "development," and peace, and the promises of privatization drew massive crowds of supporters, both on the pages of the newspapers (where various government agencies and private corporations paid for advertisements in support of Nixon and Sadat, as in figures 1 and 2) and in the streets of Cairo and Alexandria (figures 3 and 4). One enterprising television shop in the well-to-do Cairo suburb of Heliopolis even offered a discounted rate on "American-made" RCA televisions "in honor of President Nixon's visit to Cairo" (figure 5).

The promise of peace was thus made contingent on Egypt's consumption of American products and its implementation of economic policies favorable to American business. By contrast, in al-Qa'id's studied satire of capitalist triumphalism, and in his 'arḍaḥālji's method for transforming violent death into private profit, there is a combination of despair and outrage at the idea that murder could be so thoroughly swept under the rug without popular protest. At the end of the chapter, al-Ghilban quietly withdraws from the scene, "leaving [the farmworkers] to build the palaces of their hopes and dreams from the blood of al-Dubbaysh, whose location was still unknown to anyone in al-Dahriyyah." Arriving at home, he asks himself: "What's happened to this country ['il-balad garaa-l-haa 'eeh]?" (YMA 161). Al-Ghilban is not the courageous hero who will lead the farmworkers in an uprising against their capitalistic masters but the victim of a nightmarish bureaucracy. What he offers is only a gesture of indignation; yet, for the first time in the novel, the everyday colloquial language in which it is uttered stands in sharp relief against the public scribe's and the two presidents' overweening, dehumanizing language of profit.



في ٦ أكتوبر ٧٣، العاشر من رمضان ، ومع القرار التاريخي للرئيس المؤمن
محمد أنور السادات

ومع كل القصة بالفضائل والإيمان، عبرت الجيوش العربية وحسرت وعثرت وهم الخبايا، وبدأ مع هذا عهد جديد استعاد به الشعب العربي والمقاتل العربي نفسه بنفسه في
الحاضر والمستقبل، وبدأ العالم كله يشهد بالعلم العربي والإرادة العربية في استرداد الأرض وتقوية شعب فلسطين. ومن هذا المنطلق ومن أجل السلام ومن أجل الحق والعري

يرحب
شعب الإسكندرية

وربما يعطي المنبر القادر المؤمن من الرئيس
محمد أنور السادات

بالرئيس الأمريكي
ريشارد نيكسون

واعيا الله أن الحق على يديه آيات شعبنا ، والله ولي التوفيق ،

محافظة الإسكندرية
عبد التواب أحمد هديب

أمينة الاتحاد الاشتراكي
المهندس عيسى شاهين

FIGURE 1. Full-page statement of support for Nixon by the "people of Alexandria," signed by the city's mayor, 'Abd al-Tawwab Ahmad Hudayb, and the chair of the Arab Socialist Union (ASU), 'Isa Shahin, *al-Ahrām*, June 13, 1974.



FIGURE 2. Full-page statement of support for Nixon and al-Sadat from the Cairo Ministry of Housing and Reconstruction, *al-Ahrām*, June 13, 1974.



FIGURE 5. Advertisement for a sale on American RCA televisions. "On the occasion of President Nixon's visit to Cairo, the al-Nasr Television Company announces its production of a quantity of American R.C.A. televisions, from 19–23 inches. Now sold at the Najmat Ramses Shops in Roxy Square (Heliopolis), 188 Ramses St. (Ghamra), 86 Sikkat al-Wayili St. (al-Qubba Bridge), and the Ramses Building in Ramses Square," *al-Ahrām*, June 13, 1974.

Al-Qa'id's satire also extends to another, unlikely suspect in the case of al-Dubbaysh 'Arayis, however—the author Yusuf al-Qa'id himself. Al-Qa'id acknowledges that in transforming al-Dubbaysh's story into a mystery novel, he runs the risk of exploiting the farmworker in much the same way as the feudal landowner, corrupt officials, and 'ardahālji do elsewhere in the text. It would be, as he writes in the last chapter of *Yahduth*, "to transform the corpses of the destitute into cars and bottles of whiskey"—to turn a profit from the suffering of the poor by transforming their stories into village fiction, by now a well-established, if not the premier, form of Egyptian cultural production (YMA 170). At one point in the novel, al-Qa'id even stages himself realizing this conundrum, when the author-narrator—now a character in the novel named "Yusuf al-Qa'id"—enters Sudfah and al-Dubbaysh's house for the first time. "I laughed at myself in bitter mockery [*sukhriyyatan*]," the narrator notes (echoing Tawfiq al-Hakim's "bitter mockery" in *Diary*), "as I realized that I am one of those people who earn their livelihoods from other people's pain" (YMA 88). Like Idris's tale of "murder on the 'izbah," *Yahduth* also teeters between hope and despair, clinging to the ideals and intentions of Nasser-era social reforms while exposing the violent rural realities of their merely nominal implementation.

In the end, as in Idris's *The Sinners*, it is unclear whether either the biographical author Yusuf al-Qa'id or the fictional character "Yusuf al-Qa'id" effects change merely through the narration of murder on the 'izbah. In the chapter chronicling the "lifelong friends' last meeting," the doctor reminds the officer and the chairman that "there is a man from the village who writes novels and works in journalism," and he worries that this author will spoil their plan. The chairman, however, quickly brushes this worry off: "I don't think his presence in the village poses any danger. He's come here like a tourist, wearing tinted glasses and dressed in pants like an effendi. What can he really do anyway? Even if he were the editor of a newspaper, writing about the death of al-Dubbaysh would spoil coverage of Nixon's visit in a way that would anger the authorities in Cairo" (YMA 126). Raised in the village but educated and acculturated in the city, al-Qa'id, like Idris, places his own anxieties about his ambivalent social position in the mouths of these fictional officials. Has he really been transformed into an unthinking, unseeing effendi, a narrative subject turning the suffering of his countrymen into the object of a representation, rather than doing anything to change it? Or can literary representation contribute to social change, if only by focusing on exposure, scandal, and sensation?

These questions crystallize in the final passage of *It's Happening Now*, when the narrator breaks the novel's frame to address the reader directly yet again:

Let me remind you, and it won't be the last time, that al-Dubbaysh 'Arayis was killed. All I ask is that you recognize that there are many more people dying every moment. But at the same time, I beg you not to see al-Dubbaysh 'Arayis' murder as something ordinary [*amran 'ādiyyan*] . . . What happened is not ordinary, and its transformation into something normal, recurrent, and everyday reiterates a treachery that must be confronted (YMA 174).

Like Idris, al-Qa'id recognizes that the "culture of fear" in which most Egyptian farmworkers live depends on the *normalization* of violence, its transformation into something ordinary, *'ādī*, everyday. And, like his predecessor, al-Qa'id wagers that shock may be the only way to dispel this resigned acceptance. His poetics of confrontation thus extends beyond the (semi)fictional world of *It's Happening Now* and onto the pages of the novel's paratexts, specifically the critical introduction he wrote for the book's fourth edition (and the first to be published by an Egyptian press) in 1986. There, al-Qa'id describes some of the questions he faced from friends and colleagues before bringing out this new edition: What would he do about the word "now" in the title? And the verb "it's happening" in the present tense? Why not rename the book "*It Happened in Egypt in 1974*"? To justify his retention of the original title, al-Qa'id returns to the rhetoric of the *'ādī*:

I looked around me, reviving the eyes of my distant childhood in order to see with the greatest possible degree of shock and contemplate everything we have come to

understand as customary in an unaccustomed way. I tried to look at my country as though I were seeing it for the first time . . . and I discovered that the “now” of 1974 is the same “now” of 1986, that the age of American domination is long, and that the American sideshow continues in Egypt even today. The twelve years that have passed in my country [since the original publication of *Yahduth*] have made the exceptional into the ordinary, the temporary into the permanent, and the unacceptable into something that not only remains but . . . is very close to being accepted, so accustomed have we grown to it.⁶²

Al-Qa'id's poetics of investigation thus falls somewhere in between socialist-realist commitment and modernist formal experimentation. Like the committed realists, al-Qa'id wants to “shock” his readers into outrage, portraying “everything we have come to see as customary” (*al-umūr al-‘ādiyyah*) in an “unaccustomed way” (*bi-šūrah ghayr ‘ādiyyah*), and thereby dispelling the facility with which the oppressed internalize their oppression as a “normal” (‘ādī), phenomenon. But, like his contemporaries in the 1970s, al-Qa'id is also wary of all the “readymade,” “worn-out” words saturating Egyptian media at the time of his writing (YMA 87).

Like other writers responding to the hypocrisies of Sadat's presidency, al-Qa'id's work seethes with outrage yet recoils from triumphalism and fabrication. He refuses to tell a pat story of collective protest and triumph over the rich, not because he wouldn't support such an event but simply because “this isn't what happened,” and it's not “what's happening now” in Egypt. “The most salient feature of Yusuf al-Qa'id's testimony,” the Egyptian novelist and literary critic Mustafa Bayyumi writes, “is that it distances itself equally as much from superficial, Romantic visions and dreams as it does from readymade Leftist doctrines and sayings.”⁶³ Somewhere in between the effendi and the farmworker, the international developer and the migrant laborer, al-Qa'id—like Idris before him—crafts a form of detective fiction in which even the reader, even the author himself is shown to be a kind of criminal. In both novels, the reader is invited to look again, with different eyes, at the criminality and inherent vice of the poor. The very structure of the novels invites this reexamination of the ordinary, this training in learning how to look, then look again. It is, in fact, a lesson in historical materialism, in learning to view the given world as mutable rather than inevitable, the contingent product of human actions rather than the necessary outcome of incomprehensible forces, and thereby open to change. The result is a pair of Egyptian crime novels that question the very premises of “investigation,” “truth-seeking” (*taḥqīq*), and “realism” presumed by effendi, developer, police officer, and author alike. They do not confuse writing fiction with social transformation, but they implicitly believe in narrative's ability to transform the nature of knowledge, as well as how—and by whom—it is used.

CONCLUSION

I have dwelled at length on these two understudied novels to illustrate how their continuity of purpose gives the lie to the conventional narrative of political event leading to aesthetic rupture in Arabic fiction. Both Idris and al-Qa'id are concerned with offering, in fiction, a previously unwritten social history of the 'izbah, exposing the continued immiseration of the migrant workers, small farmers, and wage laborers who live there despite successive waves of national reform, from the social-scientific boom of the interwar period all the way through the "structural readjustments" of the 1970s and 1980s. Idris makes use of his medical training, rural upbringing, and penchant for shocking description to scandalize his readers, jolting them out of the effendi's subjective position and into the viscerally embodied, violent reality of the migrant laborers' experience. He transforms the rural objects of the national gaze into subjects of intensely felt sufferings. Al-Qa'id, meanwhile, "tortures the reader's conscience" by spoiling the mystery in advance, exaggerating the dehumanizing rhetoric of the 'izbah's managerial class and satirizing the triumphalism of the Infitah. In both cases, crime is the occasion for exposure, for a reexamination of accepted, normalized realities and conventional definitions. The criminals and perpetrators in both texts turn out to be the victims of much larger crimes, perpetrated by police officers, landowners, union leaders, agricultural inspectors, and others at the regional, national, and international levels—extending even to Richard Nixon himself.

On yet another level, however, readers of these texts are also forced to confront the "effendi-like" sensibilities that tend to govern the practice of literary critical reading itself. Both authors deny their readers the position of the detached, all-seeing subject who transforms the countryside into either an "object of development" or a source of thrilling, scandalous entertainment.⁶⁴ These novels, in other words, demand a different reading practice from their readers, one in which reading about the Egyptian countryside is no longer an act of quiet reflection on the simple, earth-bound lives of rural others. It is, rather, a confrontation with the bare, sparse, hungry realities of the 'izbah laborer and an exposure of the poverty at the root of crime in the countryside. This new poetics of prose yields ambivalent outcomes in both texts: the prison guards responsible for al-Dubbaysh's murder are never prosecuted, and the Gharabwa go back to laboring in the fields as Aziza's body, and story, are reabsorbed into the night. Still, in both novels, crime and its investigation (*baḥṭh*) become the occasion for uncovering and exposing the interconnected forces maintaining the current social order on the 'izbah. Crime creates a rupture, a scandal, a temporary disturbance in the functioning of power. Idris and al-Qa'id capitalize on this disturbance, this small rent in the fabric of the Egyptian social order, to hint at power's instability, its susceptibility to change.