DOUBLENESS AND DUALITY: JURJĪ ZAYDĀN’S
AL-MAMLŪK AL-SHĀRĪD AND ALLEGORIES OF BECOMING

Preface

While now virtually ignored by scholars, the historical novels of Jurji Zaydān maintained popularity for some time and, consequently, have been noted as significant, if not formative, in the growth of renowned literary figures of the Arab world. Ṭaha Ḥusayn includes Zaydān’s stories and articles on history and literature among what he read during his youth. Najib Maḥfūz, himself a one time historical novelist, specifically names Zaydān’s novels among his early influences.1 The Palestinian poet Fadwa Ṭuqān, in fact, writes that her “Father and Mother, addicted to the historical novels of Jurjy Zaidan, fell in love with the heroine of Aseerat al-Mutamahdi (Prisoner of the Mahdi Pretender), and kept her name in mind to give to the first girl born to them afterwards.”2

During his life time, several articles appeared, many in his own literary-scientific journal, al-Hilāl, discussing the merits and problems of his fiction.3 Zaydān’s Islamic histories and fiction elicited discussion from some of the most prominent intellectuals of the early twentieth century, among them Rashīd Riḍā (1865-1935), Muhammad Kurd ‘Alī (1876-1953), Père Louis Cheikho (1859-1927), and Husayn Haykal (1888-1956).4

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3 Zaydān himself wrote in the introduction to Fatāt al-Ghassān that he had received encouraging comments regarding his novels after the publication of Armanusa al-misriyah in 1896 (al-Hilāl, V 1896, 24). Rafiq al-‘Azm also praised his fiction but criticized its lack of objectivity (al-Hilāl, VII 1898, 489-92). Rashīd Riḍā wrote a review of Fath al-Andalus criticizing the book for not properly representing Muslims (al-Manār, VI 1903, 391-98). Likewise, Yaʿqūb Ṣarrūf, Zaydān’s former teacher at the Syrian Protestant College of Beirut, wrote an extensive critique of al-Mamlūk al-shārīd, see al-Muqtaṭaf (v. 16, 1892), pp. 345-49.
4 Riḍā attacked Zaydān’s histories in Intitqād kitāb “Tarīkh al-tamaddun al-islāmi” (Cairo: s.n., 1912) stating that he lacked the legitimate training in al-ʿilm al-islāmī (Islamic science) to comment on Islamic history. Elsewhere, he states that Zaydān relies on Western Orientalist scholarship, neglecting Arab-Islamic sources (al-Manār, XVII 1914; 636-40). Riḍā’s
“National allegory” as an analytical concept has been commented on significantly as a result of Fredric Jameson’s now infamous article. By employing the notion of national allegory tactically supported by close readings, this article will examine the representation of an “ideal” Arab subject explicit in Zaydān’s didacticism and, in doing so, will recenter the author’s otherwise dismissed “popular” novels as foundational to modern Arab subjectivity. That is, Zaydān’s literary exercise was more profound than strict didacticism; it was an attempt to create a popular Arab readership as much as to educate them about their political, cultural, and social history. For example, in his introduction to the historical novel al-Hajjāj ibn Yūsuf, he explicitly affirms that relationship between desire, knowledge, and reform:

We have seen from experience that the dissemination of history via the novel is the best means for arousing the desire for history, a desire that will make them ask for more. We maintain that history dominates the story (riwāyah), not the other way around as some European books have done. . . . This, the story, guides the reader and facilitates the narration (sard) of historical event.

Clearly, the didacticism of novels articulated a rhetorical-national representation that extends itself simultaneously to public (history) and private (desire) levels of subjectivity, tying the two spheres together.

In Zaydān’s historical romances, these two spheres correspond to two character topoi or what Paul De Man might call “semiological and rhetorical” patterns: the fictional, romance protagonists and the supporting historical comments are interesting because they are often explicitly confessional in content. For example, as Ware has also noticed, Riḍā refers to Zaydān as representative of the resurgence of “shu‘ā‘ıbi beliefs among the Christian intelligentsia” (Lewis Ware, “Jurji Zaydān: The Role of Popular History in the Formation of a New Arab World View”, Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton University, 1973), p. 199; also, the original, al-Manār (XVII, 1914), pp. 636-40. Some years later, M. Ḥusayn Haykal provides an extended discussion of Zaydān’s Tarīkh ʿādāb al-lughah al-ʿarabiyyah, asserting that Zaydān over-emphasized the pre-Islamic literary influences on Arabic literature and failed to discuss Arabic literature critically. See M. Ḥusayn Haykal, Fi awqāt al-farāgh (Cairo: al-Matba‘ah al-ʿAṣriyya, 1925), pp. 221-47. Elsewhere, however, he does praise Zaydān’s clarity of language (al-Hilāl, Aug. 1939, 963-5).

5 See Fredrick Jameson, “World Literature in the Age of Multinational Capitalism” in Social Text 15 (Fall, 1986); and Aijaz Ahmad’s insufficient response “Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness and ‘National Allegory’” in Social Text 17 (Fall, 1987). Among the plethora of articles discussing the debate on allegory, Madhava Prasad’s “A Theory of Third World Literature” in Social Text 31/32 (Fall, 1992); and Craig Owen’s “The Allegorical Impulse” in Hal Wallis ed., Art after Modernism (Boston: Godine, 1984), pp. 203-235, are the most insightful.