

16 From the discovery of the “independent self” to its crisis

A condensed literary history of the agency of the subject in Middle Eastern modernity

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This chapter focuses, again, one aspect of emerging/emerged subjectivity: its independence from others. The independence of the self seems to be one of its indispensable features, which is without doubt the reason why it forms an essential dimension in this subject’s discourses from early on. The chapter attempts to give a historical overview over the evolution and the development of the concept in the Middle East, covering its ups and downs and its many modifications and mutations in fictional texts over a period of, roughly, one and a half centuries, from the mid-nineteenth to the end of the twentieth century. ‘Up’-phases (in which the subject feels that it can reach, or has already attained, independence) alternate almost regularly with ‘down’-phases (in which independence seems to be lost, or unachievable), and in each of them one may, from a long-term historical perspective, already discern the germs of the next, though contemporaries typically were unaware of the other side of the coin.

Thus, the first call for, or announcement of, an “independence of the self” at the turn of the 1860s was paralleled by the almost simultaneous emergence of a literary character – a European! – on whom the indigenous subject conferred the last judgement in all kinds of affairs, thereby conceding the independence of the critically thinking indigenous self to the western Other. In a similar vein, shortly after the ‘up’-phase of ‘yes, we can!’ nationalism, and sometimes still concomitant with it, many pioneers of nation-building fell into deep depression, losing all hope in the project of an independent nation, when they became aware of the apparently unbridgeable gap between their lofty ideals and the political, social, economic and cultural realities of the interwar period. The ensuing paralysis, however, generated hope again – a rather desperate, almost tragically ridiculous hope at first, though. But soon the enthusiastic belief in the actual possibility of true independence was renewed during the heyday of Nasserism, especially after the Suez crisis... – only to sink back into deep despair again when the June war of 1967 was lost and the faith in the power of the independent self (now the nation) was brutally destroyed, as

this power turned out to have been nothing but a nice, rhetorically embellished illusion. A few years earlier, the very project of modernity itself had already been called into question by authors like Nagīb Maḥfūz or Ahmed Hamdi Tanpınar, and almost simultaneously with the catastrophe (*naksa*) of 1967, al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ had come with his sharp diagnosis, in his *Season of migration to the North* (1965/66), of a huge split running through the allegedly independent Arab self. It took many years for the Arab world to recover from this shock and start reconstructing a new self. While one may doubt whether or not they succeeded in their various efforts to reinvent their selves and independence, Orhan Pamuk came (for Turkey, but in principle also valid for the Arab world) with his postmodern ‘solution’, showing that originality, authenticity, and genuineness, independence, etc. all were vain delusions, as there can be no Self without the Other. Since then, only few authors seem to have taken up the self/other, independence/dependence question again. But have the last words about it been said already?

A question that could be interesting to look into in this context (but has not been followed in the article/chapter below for reasons of conciseness) is: Does the development described here correspond to Walter Falk’s *Potentialgeschichte*? Would it be possible to read the stages, sketched below, of the Middle Eastern independent self’s journey through the past one and a half centuries as specifications of more general processes of ‘global’ history? We have already become acquainted with two of Falk’s periods – “Reproductionism” and “Creativism” – and seen that there are strong indications pointing to a simultaneity of what at first sight may appear non-simultaneous (cf. Chapter 2). We have also seen that many of the earlier texts discussed in the preceding chapters (al-Khūrī’s *Way, idhan lastu bi-Ifranji*, al-Shidyāq’s *al-Sāq ‘alā l-sāq*, al-Marṣafī’s *al-Kalim al-thamān*, etc.) do indeed reflect a “reproductionist” spirit, while later ones are perhaps attributable to the ‘global’ “creativist” period. Given that the present book is about the ‘long nineteenth century’ I will not elaborate on the belonging, or non-belonging, of twentieth century texts now but will rather leave it to the reader or future researcher to try a parallel reading of the stages described below with Falk’s model, also for the post-Nahḍa / post-WW II periods. I will confine myself, therefore, to supplying Falk’s basic characterisations of the five ‘global’ periods of his *Potentialgeschichte* in which these stages might fall, and then simply leave it at this. Note, however, that a parallel reading is very likely to be feasible, given that an overlapping of the last stage discussed below – that of Orhan Pamuk’s postmodernist reversal of the old ‘East vs. West’ narrative (see section 16.8, below) – has already been shown to match the categories of Falk’s “Malistic” period very nicely (cf. Guth 1997a).

Reproductionism (c. 1820–80) ¹	AC – The general and lawful, prevailing in space [The old order of things, experienced as dated and governed by destructive forces of Nature]
	PC – The particular and unique, tending towards renewal [The subjective will to renewal in the spiritual and human(e)]
	RC – The individualising reproduction of the general [The new order of things, consisting of the absolute power of the forces of Nature and the destruction of all that is otherwise human. (Formally reinforced Actuality)]
Creativism (c. 1880–1920) ²	AC – The finite character of Life, due to its being a life in Time
	PC – The creativity of the subject, nourished by Nature- and space-related forces
	RC – The Transnatural, not subject to the laws of Time
Spatism (c. 1920–50) ³	AC – The objectification of life within/through temporal processes
	PC – The subject’s ability to exist other than as a thing/object
	RC – The timeless structures in their discoverability
Tempism (c. 1950–80) ⁴	AC – Life turning around itself in Space
	PC – The pre-subjective power of renewal, acting outside Space but in Time
	RC – The qualitatively new condition/state, produced/created/generated in/through Time

1 Original German: “[AC:] Das Allgemeine und Gesetzhafte, herrschend im Raum [Die veraltete Ordnung zerstörerischer Naturkräfte]; [PC:] Das Besondere und Einzigartige, tendierend zur Erneuerung [Der subjektive Wille zur Erneuerung im Geistigen, im Menschlichen]; [RC:] Die individualisierende Reproduktion des Allgemeinen [Neuartige Ordnung der Dinge, bestehend aus der absoluten Macht der Naturkräfte und der Zerstörung alles wesentlich Menschlichen. (Formal gesteigerte Aktualität)]” – Falk 1984, 31. Component titles given in square brackets reflect earlier terminology as in Falk 1983, 206.

2 German: “AK: Der durch die Zeitlichkeit bedingte endliche Charakter des Lebens | PK: Die Kreativität des Subjekts, getragen von naturhaft-raumbezogenen Kräften; | RK: Das Transnaturale als das Zeitenthobene” – Falk 1984, 34.

3 German: “[AC:] Die Dinghaftigkeit des Lebens innerhalb zeitlicher Abläufe; | [PC:] Die Fähigkeit zur außerordentlichen Existenz des Subjekts; | [RC:] Die zeitlosen Strukturen in ihrer Entdeckbarkeit” – Falk 1984, 71.

4 German: “[AC:] Das räumliche, in sich selbst kreisende Leben; | [PC:] Die präsubjektive Erneuerungskraft, wirkend auf raumlos-zeithafte Weise; | [RC:] Das Gezeitigte als qualitativ neuartiger Zustand” – Falk 1984, 35 and 71.

Malism
(c. 1880-2010)⁵

AC – The ‘destroyed house’ or ‘lost home’, Life in ruins, destroyed by the forces of Evil

PC – The discovery of a hidden ‘treasure’, remained undamaged by destruction

RC – Results of efforts to raise the ‘treasure’ from the ‘ruins’

* * *

As a key concept of modernity, closely linked to the that of “freedom” and political sovereignty, the term “independence” has undoubtedly played a prominent role not only in the West (especially since the American independence movement) but has also been of paramount importance in formerly colonised countries, including larger parts of the Middle East and North Africa. When did it make its first appearance in the region? In which context(s) was it used then, and which native terminology was used to introduce it and make it attractive? And what happened to the ideal of “independence” over time? – Drawing on works of fiction (which in general is a rich and giving source for such investigations), this essay attempts to outline the history of the idea for the first hundred and fifty years or so, a development that, as we will see, is closely linked to the project of a Middle Eastern modernity and will lead from the discovery of the independence of the subject to its deep crisis. The focus is on Arabic texts and the Arab world, but evidence from Turkish novels and novellas is also repeatedly evaluated.

16.1 Background

The verbal noun *istiqlāl*, which is commonly understood as “independence” nowadays, has a long history. According to the *Doha Historical Dictionary of Arabic* (DHDA), it can be traced back to the early Islamic era.⁶ However, the original meaning of *istiqlāl* at its first mention is quite different; it signifies a “holding in little esteem” or “treating as insignificant” (cf. the adjective *qalil* “little”), often

⁵ Discussed in some detail in Guth 2007a. – No original German formulaic terms provided for this period, as W. Falk passed away before he was able to elaborate on the “Malistic” period in a follow-up study to his descriptions of earlier periods.

⁶ DHDA mentions as first attestation a saying dated <75 AH / 694 CE, attributed to the Umayyad ruler ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwān; see DHDA, s.v. استقلال .

associated with “contempt”.⁷ This initial meaning makes it challenging to establish a direct semantic connection between the early and later usages of the term. It is quite likely, therefore, that the latter meaning evolved from another concept connected to the Arabic root *vQLL*, namely, **“to separate oneself, become isolated, act alone”*. Reflexes of this basic idea can be found, for example, in the pre-Islamic *istaqalla* “to depart, set out” (*DHDA*: –108 AH / 517 CE⁸) and especially in two meanings already attested in verses by the poet Imru’ al-Qays: *istaqalla* “to rise, be high in the sky (stars, etc.)” and *mustaqill* “elevated, sublime” (*DHDA*: –80 AH / 544 AD).⁹

16.2 Semantic transformation

The semantic spectrum covered by the term *istiqlāl* seems to have been quite varied from early on,¹⁰ and it remained largely unchanged, apparently, until the nineteenth century when additional meanings began to emerge. Unfortunately, due to the limited digitization of Arabic texts from the Nahḍa, it is still challenging to provide reliable and lexically-grounded information about the first usage of modern terms or the adoption of old lexemes with new and modern meanings. Therefore, our understanding is based on a somewhat impressionistic approach, although the insights and findings of scholars who have extensively studied

7 To the same semantic complex “little” – attested also in other Semitic languages (Bergsträsser 1928 reconstructs the basic meaning **“light, little, fast”*) – belong also the active participle *mustaqill* “taking little” (opposite: *mustakthir*) (according to *DHDA* attested already c. 60 years earlier, <11 AH / 632 CE) and the corresponding verb *istaqalla* “to do little (*min al-shay’* of s.th.)” (e.g., to pray little) (opposite: *istakthara*), see *DHDA*, s.v. *استقلّ* , *استقلّ* .

8 Cf. *DHDA*, s.v. *استقلّ* .

9 It is still unclear how (and if at all) the complex “little” may (or may not) be etymologically related to that of “to separate o.s., stay apart” as well as to that of “take up, lift”; cf. my entry on the root *vQL*: (*QLL*) in *EtymArab* (see Bibliography).

10 De Biberstein Kazimirski’s *Dictionnaire* (1860), which is based on Firūzābādī’s *Qāmūs* (14th c.), lists 13 ‘classical’ meanings for the verb *istaqalla* alone: “1 trouver, estimer qu’il y a peu; trouver que le nombre de personnes est petit; *de là*: 2 regarder avec dédain, tenir peu compte de...; 3 partir, s’en aller (se dit des hommes); 4 hisser sur ses épaules ou sur sa tête et porter (*p.ex.*, une cruche); 5 être haut, sublime, bien haut au-dessus de nos têtes (en parlant de la voûte des cieux, etc.); 6 grandir (se dit des plantes); 7 s’élever très-haut (*fī* dans les airs, se dit d’un oiseau); 8 s’enorgueillir, s’élever au-dessus de ses semblables (se dit d’un homme fier); 9 se rétablir et se lever (se dit d’un malade); 10 être saisi d’un tremblement; 11 se mettre en colère; 12 saisir qn (se dit d’un tremblement); 13 s’emparer exclusivement de qc (*p.ex.* du pouvoir), *et de là*: être souverain indépendant. – Au passif, *ustuqilla nawman*: être plongé dans un profond sommeil” – Kazimirski 1860, s.r. *QLL*.

Nahḍa texts should not be underestimated. With the caveat that future adjustments may be necessary, based on computer-assisted analysis of larger and representative data sets, the current state of research suggests that *istiqlāl* first appeared in the late 1850s with the modern meaning of “independence”, serving as an equivalent to the French term *indépendance*. The choice of the Arabic word was likely influenced by its previous usage in Ottoman administrative language where it denoted the independent or unrestricted decision-making authority of higher-ranking officials, particularly military commanders or provincial governors.¹¹ At that time, the meaning of *istiqlāl* still bore some resemblance to that of *istibdād*, which would later come to signify “absolutism, autocracy”, and even “despotism, tyranny”.¹² However, starting from the mid-nineteenth century, there are indications that

the new meaning of “sovereign independence” was becoming known, and it is specifically cited in a British consular dispatch of 1858 from Jerusalem.¹³ By the late nineteenth century, the use of *istiqlāl* in the sense of “political sovereignty” or “independence” was general in both Turkish and Arabic. Together with “freedom”, it came to express the ultimate objective of political struggle against oppressive rule in the period of European imperial domination, and the somewhat longer period of European intellectual influence.

(Lewis 1988/1991, 112; my quotation marks – S.G.)

From almost the same year of Lewis’s diplomatic note stems the (to my best knowledge) first recorded instance of the phrase *istiqlāl dhātī*, meaning “personal independence” or “independence of the self”. The phrase appears in the programmatic preface (*muqaddima*) to Khalīl al-Khūrī’s novel *Way, idhan lastu bi-*

¹¹ Lewis (1988) 1991, 112, with endnote 44 (referring to “Meninski, p. 199” and “Clodius, p. 558”, where Ottoman Turkish *istiqlāl* is rendered as “absolute authority, full power”). – Cf. also Kazimirski 1860: *istiqlāl* “indépendance, pouvoir indépendant d’un souverain”; and Zenker 1866: *istiqlāl* “action de s’emparer exclusivement de qc, pouvoir absolu [...] | das [A]usschliesslich[-H]aben, ungetheilt mit anderen, Machtvollkommenheit, unumschränkte Macht [...]”. – Three decades earlier (1828), Bocthor included *indépendance* as a lemma in his dictionary, but suggested *hurriyya* “freedom”, *‘adam al-‘alāqa bi-* „non-relation to” as its Arabic counterpart, not *istiqlāl*; for *indépendant* in the sense of “qui ne dépend de personne” he did give *mustaqill*, but only as one of several other alternatives, among which also *khālīṣ* and *qā’im bi-dhātih*. Bocthor’s Arabic terms do not reflect use in actual language, but have to be seen as the author’s own suggestions.

¹² Lewis (1988) 1991, 112, gives an Ottoman attestation from 1834 where *istiqlāl* still contrasts with *serbestī* “freedom”. – Cf. also al-Bustānī 1869 (s.v. QLL): „*istaqalla bi-ra’yih* = *istabadda bih*, [ruler, governor:] *tafarrada bi-l-wilāya*, *lam yushrik-hu fihā gayruh* (to exercise sovereign power alone, not sharing it with anyone)”.

¹³ Lewis (1988) 1991, 158, n. 46: “Cited by A. L. Tibawi, *British Interests in Palestine 1800–1901* (Oxford, 1961), pp. 147–48”.

Ifrañjī (“Woe, so I am not a European after all!”), initially published in 1859 in *Hadiqat al-Akhbār* and subsequently as a stand-alone book in 1860.¹⁴ The context there is a literary-theoretical discourse, wherein the author critically examines two poems about Aleppo – one in Arabic by al-Mutanabbī and another in French by Lamartine. This analysis culminates in a plea for realism and a credible portrayal of reality as well as for a more passionate writing. Furthermore, al-Khūrī emphasizes that the contemporary poet should consider it among his foremost responsibilities/duties (*wājibāt*) to

always remain aware of the independence of his self and his freedom (*an yash'ura bi-istiqlālihi l-dhātī wa-ḥurriyyatih*)¹⁵ and not allow his works to be used as tools for the execution of the wishes and goals of others. He must act according to the principle of the wise philosopher Socrates, who believed that the truth that inspires his noble intellect cannot be sold.¹⁶

Only in this way can the most important mission of poetry be fulfilled, that is, to “make an impression on the soul [of the readership, of fellow human beings]”. This, however, can only be achieved by a poet who is capable of “making people feel what he feels”, and for this, the consciousness and “feeling” of freedom and *istiqlāl dhātī* are essential.¹⁷

As we can see, the political dimension that the term *istiqlāl* could already take a little earlier (as Lewis demonstrated) and which would become prominent in the following years, is initially absent from al-Khūrī’s literary-theoretical discussion on poetic authenticity. Nevertheless, his concept of “personal independence” is definitively a modern concept as well. Al-Khūrī’s *istiqlāl* no longer refers to the undivided power and unrestricted decision-making authority of a ruler. Instead, the author combines *istiqlāl* with the nisba adjective *dhātī* and in this way

¹⁴ I have worked extensively on the novel myself, first in my habilitation thesis (Guth 2003b), where I relied heavily on R. Wielandt’s (1980) analysis, then in a more detailed article (Guth 2019/20). In both studies the reader will find references to relevant secondary literature.

¹⁵ The original (journal) version of the novel (1859) still has *ḥurriyyat al-inshā’* “writerly freedom” instead of the more general *ḥurriyya* “freedom” of the book edition (1860), see ed. Dāḡir 2009, 64, note 7. From one year to the next, the author has thus made a huge generalisation – an indication that it had now become important for al-Khūrī to understand literary activity as just one of many other areas in which independence and freedom could be restricted. It makes sense to see this expansion in connection with the increased politicisation of the situation in the year of the ‘first Lebanese civil war’.

¹⁶ ومن أهم واجباته أن يشعر باستقلاله الذاتي وحرية. وأن لا يكون آلة لتنفيذ مآرب الناس وغايتهم. وأن يسلك على مبدأ – سقراط الحكيم في عدم بيع الحقيقة التي ينزلها الإلهام على قريحته الفاضلة – al-Khūrī 1860, 20–21; orthography and punctuation follows ed. Dāḡir 2009, 64.

¹⁷ Ibid.

with the “self”, *dhāt*, interpreting the phrase *istiqlāl dhātī* here specifically as the freedom and autonomy of the poetic subject. In the context of the discussion on authenticity and passion in poetry, this independent-creative subject not only observes and critically evaluates its environment but is also a feeling, sensitive self. At the same time, a critical perspective and emotional sensibility are also expected from the readership.

Other passages in al-Khūrī’s *muqaddima*, as well as the novel itself, further expand the scope of the term *istiqlāl*. Set in the 1850s, the story is about a case of “Euromania”, Arabic *tafarnuj* (“to act/ behave like a ‘Frank’, i.e., a European”), a phenomenon that was apparently spreading rapidly in Middle Eastern societies at the time. The novel not only highlights the embarrassing absurdities of ignorant imitation of Western fashions but also vividly portrays the potentially tragic consequences of a careless abandonment or denial of one’s own “Eastern/Oriental” identity – the “indigenous/native way of existence” (*wujūd ahlī*¹⁸), as al-Khūrī calls it: the anti-hero falls into the clutches of a fraudster; an engagement is broken; an upright young Arab ends up in depression and leaves the country; out of shame and remorse, a young woman becomes a nun, etc. It is evident, therefore, that al-Khūrī’s admonition to preserve the “independence of the self” is not only of poetological relevance but also concerns cultural identity per se. In his opinion, contemporaries should have every reason to be proud of their identity. Unfortunately, however, not everybody was aware of this – a situation that was all the more deplorable since nothing less than the upswing (*nahḍa*) of the nation (*umma*) was at stake (al-Khūrī 1860, 58, where *umma* is understood primarily as a cultural, not yet a political entity).

16.3 A hidden crack in self-confidence

In *Way*, *idhan lastu bi-Ifranji*, we encounter a “self” that exhibits the features of modern subjectivity in several respects. The subject-object divide, a key indicator of modernity,¹⁹ is clearly completed – the author-narrator’s “I” as the subject is facing the world as its object –, and this “I” is asserting the “independence” of its self by critically observing, rationally analysing and evaluating the objective

¹⁸ My translation follows Wielandt’s rendering as “einheimische Art der Existenz” (see above, note 14). For detailed textual references, cf. *ibid.*

¹⁹ See entries “Subjekt” (W. Mesch), “Subjekt-Objekt-Spaltung” (*id.*), and “Subjektivität” (M. Esfeld) in Prechtel and Burkard, eds, 1999.

world.²⁰ The subject, conscious of its “independence” and its identity as a rational and moral authority, is further characterised by its creativity and emotionality: it is a poetic “I”, capable of talking about the world in symbolic representations, as well as a feeling, sensitive “I”.

Recent research suggests that there may be indicators of an earlier emergence of the type of subject that is speaking from al-Khūrī’s text.²¹ As far as I know, however, it is only here that the new “independence of the self” makes itself *explicit* for the first time. Al-Khūrī’s “independent self” not only displays self-awareness, but also a corresponding feeling of self-confidence and superiority. In particular, his subject marks its agency by criticising society, often in form of biting satire. Accordingly, al-Khūrī describes his anti-hero Mikhālī’s ignorant Euromania from the position of the sharp observer and superior critic, who himself has the sovereign overview and therefore can ridicule the widespread vice of his contemporaries using Mikhālī as an example.

In contrast to the anti-hero, al-Khūrī’s narrator – who may be largely equated with the author²² and stands for the emerging *efendiyya* elite – apparently considers himself immune to the challenges of his time. Nowhere does he doubt himself or the modern ideal of the “independent self” as such. His self-confidence and superiority bear traits of elitism and arrogance – in this respect, one could recognise in his *istiqlāl* not only the new “independence” but perhaps also remnants of the older meaning as quasi-self-rule “autocracy” (see above).

Thus convinced of himself, the narrator-author does not realise that his own self is in fact not as independent as he apparently assumes. Rotraud Wielandt has identified a typical figure in the literature of the time, which she calls the “European confirmer-on-duty” (German: *Bestätiger vom Dienst* – Wielandt 1980, 57). According to Wielandt, this figure first appeared in ‘pure’ form in 1882, the year of the British occupation of Egypt, in ‘Alī Mubārak’s *‘Alam al-Dīn*. In essence,

²⁰ As I argued in Guth 2021a [Chapter 3], self-reference is, in my view, reflected also in the many verbs, verbal nouns and participles containing the *t*-morpheme that seem to become typical of modern Arabic morpho-semantics since the Nahḍa. As a verbal noun of form X, *istiqlāl* too belongs to this group, given that form X is the self-reflexive *t*-form of form IV, signifying, etymologically, a “raising/exposing, separating (*aqalla*, *iqāl*) oneself”. (The first component of the *-st*-prefix of form X, *-s-*, is a ‘remnant’ of the old Semitic causative morpheme **-š-*, which in the Arabic form IV surfaces as *-ʔ-* but has been preserved in combination with the reflexive *-t-* as *-st-*.)

²¹ Cf. Guth 2021b.

²² At various points in the preface, the author emphasizes that the events to be recounted below occurred only recently, at a time when he himself was in Aleppo. In the subsequent main part of the book, the novel, the narrating “I” cannot be distinguished from the “I” of the (non-fictional) preface.

however, it is already found in al-Khūrī’s *Way*, albeit only indirectly and to a certain extent *ex negativo*, i.e., in the figure of the French “Comte” Edmond (who is in fact a crook). For it is him who, in the novel as a whole, ultimately plays “the role of the one who has to confirm and certify to the author’s [...] reference group [...] that they are, after all, the superior ones in everything that matters” (ibid.).²³ “Comte” Edmond does so by repeatedly exposing the ignorance of the would-be European Mikhālī and also by ultimately proving right the narrator-author’s analysis and critique of society. It seems legitimate to evaluate, with Wielandt, “the appearance of such a figure [...] as an indication of an already broken cultural self-confidence” (ibid.).²⁴ – the author needs a European even to support his *warning against* Euromania!

As we shall see, the propagation of independence without having made one’s inner self truly free was to have fatal consequences in the future. At the time, however, the subject had only recently become aware of its “independence” and was only gradually becoming fully aware of its new agency. As full awareness was reached only later, in the course of becoming a nation, and as the first priority for the subject then was to exercise its newly gained *political* freedom and independence, it took no less than about a century until it became truly aware of the ‘split’ in its self and of its *de facto* dependence. Only then was the subject to understand that things had to go differently.

16.4 The “independent self” affirming and establishing itself

Now that a subjectivity with the aforementioned facets has emerged in the Middle East, the actors, and in particular the *efendiyya* group, are mainly concerned with further expanding and consolidating the many different aspects of their strengthened selves. The subject is now increasingly an acting subject, acting above all in public, a subject that not only performs its agency as a social analyst and critic, but also participates actively in reforming the community and works towards “modernisation” and “progress”. With the Ottoman Empire gradually falling apart, it does so increasingly within a discourse of nation-statehood, where the independent nation takes the place of the individual “independent self” at the political level. As already mentioned above, the term *istaqlāl* is therefore from now on predominantly used in the context of nation-building and the shaking off

23 German: „die Rolle desjenigen, der der [...] Bezugsgruppe des Autors [...] zu bescheinigen hat, daß sie im Entscheidenden doch die Überlegenen sind”.

24 German: “Indiz für ein bereits gebrochenes kulturelles Selbstbewußtsein”.

of the colonial (or quasi-colonial) yoke, and cultural dominance in general.²⁵ The personal “independent self” continues to unfold as a thinking, contemplating, analysing, critically commenting and evaluating agent, but now mostly with reference to the “national cause” – it is the time of the *literati* who distinguish themselves as intellectuals and commit themselves to reform and progress of the community in the sense of a “modern” nation-state with a “modern” society. Once the political foundations for establishing this goal are laid, such as in Turkey after the proclamation of the Republic in 1923, or in Egypt after the country’s release into (formal) independence the year before, optimism spreads. Confirmed in everything it has stood for so far, the “independent self” sees no reason to doubt itself and its agency. When it had seen little hope for political development and felt rather powerless, especially before the First World War, it had often sought compensatory affirmation – through eloquent castigation of the sultan’s despotism²⁶ or the corruption at his court,²⁷ through ‘philosophical’ contemplation,²⁸ or through an aesthetics of tearful (self-) pity and sentimentalism that staged its own powerlessness as tragedy and/or stylised its sensitivity and morality as a ‘nobility of the heart’.²⁹ The self-confident subject had, however, repeatedly drafted utopias of political and cultural sovereignty even before this, as is evidenced, e.g., by al-Kawākibī’s *Umm al-Qurā* (“Mother of all Cities”, i.e., Mecca, 1899). In this work, the author imagined an Arab caliphate in the Prophet’s hometown that was to be independent of the sultanate in Istanbul, thereby reclaiming at least spiritual supremacy over the Islamic world. In a similar vein, Ömer Seyfeddin’s *Gizli Ma’bed* (“The Secret Temple”, ca. 1919) told the story of the triumph of an enlightened native intellectual (the author’s alter ego) over

25 Significantly, Vincent Monteil listed *istiqlāl* among those *mots-clefs* that came to complement, towards the end of the century, the “Eight (Key) Concepts” of Ḥ. al-Marṣafī’s famous treatise (*al-Kalim al-thamān*, 1880) on a political level and to which Monteil assigned a high degree of “expressivity” and “explosive” potential, due to their “affectivité vague et violente” (*mots-clefs expressifs, vocabulaire ‘explosif’*) – Monteil 1960, 213–14. – For al-Marṣafī’s treatise in general, and his understanding of *waṭan* “fatherland” in particular, see above, Chapter 5.

26 See, e.g., ‘A. al-Kawākibī’s *Ṭabā’i’ al-istibdād* (“The Nature of Despotism”, 1900), or J. Kh. Jubrān’s novella *Ṣurākh al-qubūr* (“The Cry of the Graves”, in *al-Arwāḥ al-mutamarrida*, 1908).

27 See, e.g., Ibrāhīm al-Muwayliḥī’s *Mā hunālik* (1895–96; English translation by Roger Allen as *Over Yonder*, in id., *Spies, Scandals & Sultans: Istanbul in the Twilight of the Ottoman Empire*, 2007).

28 See, e.g., M. L. al-Manfalūṭī’s *Nazarāt* (“Contemplations”, as book 1910), J. Kh. Jubrān’s *The Prophet / al-Nabiyy* (1923).

29 See, e.g., al-Manfalūṭī’s *‘Abarāt* (“The Tears”, 1910) or Jubrān’s *al-Ajniḥa al-mutakassira* (“The Broken Wings”, 1912). – On the “flood of tears” in early modern Arabic literature, see above, Chapter 11, with further references.

the ignorance of an Orient-loving Frenchman, thereby reclaiming from the non-natives the hegemony of discourse over his country’s affairs.

While the personal self now seems to be largely established, intellectuals continue working on the profile of the independent *national* self. This is reflected in many areas, for example in literary theory, where programmes for an independent “national literature” (*adab qawmī, millī edebiyât*) are being drafted and an author and member of the “Modern School” movement (*al-Madrasa al-Ḥadītha*) such as ʿĪsà ʿUbayd calls his colleagues to study in detail all the factors that form the “national character”, the “Egyptian personality” (*al-shakḥsiyya al-miṣriyya*), and to portray it realistically in stories with plenty of “typical Egyptian” local colour.³⁰ There is a lot to do: the national temperament (*mazāj*) has to be understood as a product of ‘mixing’ (*m-z-j*) genetic predispositions and various external influences, such as social milieu (*wasat*) and climate, and one has to capture the “genuine” and “authentic” in its “national” typicality and with all its manifold shades.³¹ Underlying such drafts of a national identity is the idea that progress and modernity as observed in the West are ideals to strive for, ideals that can become real also in one’s own country if only the “independence of the (national) self” is truly achieved. This idea was to shape the thinking and actions of intellectuals and other patriotic agents and kept motivating them to work towards this goal for decades to come. An example of the enthusiasm with which this project initially is approached is the new Turkish national anthem, composed by Mehmet Âkif (Ersoy) and officially published in the “Official Gazette” (*Cerîde-i Resmîyye*) as *İstiklâl Marşı* (“Independence March”) as early as 1921.³²

16.5 Doubts and paralysing setbacks

What is overlooked in the process is a tragic paradox: the pursuit, out of a feeling of inferiority, of independence from Western domination runs parallel to the project of becoming *like* the Western nations; in other words, an independence in dependence, or a dependence in independence. Admitting this is, of course, very difficult for a self that has only recently begun to feel itself and exercise its

³⁰ For a commented English translation of this preface, cf. above, Chapter 12.

³¹ The example of ʿĪsà ʿUbayd’s foreword clearly shows how much such constructions of the “independent national self” are influenced by contemporary ideas of positivism, philosophy of life, psychoanalysis, etc.

³² “İstiklâl Marşı’nın millî marş olarak kabulünden sonra, TBMM Hükümeti’nin resmî gazetesini *Cerîde-i Resmîyye*’nin 21 Mart 1337 [1921] tarihli 7. sayısında yayımlanmış halî” (Beyazıt Devlet Kütüphanesi Arşivi) – Okay 2001/2021.

agency. For some time, intellectuals therefore typically do not blame themselves for the failure of their reform efforts; instead, they seek the fault in the broad masses, in their attachment to traditional ways of thinking and social structures, their superstition, their “backwardness”, their passive obedience and submissiveness, and so on. The fact that large parts of the population, i.e., those who actually make up the “nation”, often do not want to know anything about the “civilisation” and “progress” that the secular educated elite has planned for them and that they are, to a certain extent, resistant to “modernity”, is generally experienced by the intellectuals as a deep crisis of their own agency. But this does not, or only very gradually, lead them to doubt the project of an independent “modern” nation state *as such*.

Modern Middle Eastern literature knows several highly impressive examples of such crises of subjects engaged in nation-building. One of the earliest was penned by a member of the above-mentioned “Modern School”, Maḥmūd Ṭāhir Lāshīn (1894–1954). In his novella *Ḥadīth al-qarya* (“Village Small Talk”, 1929),³³ an urban intellectual and his friend enter into conversation with a group of villagers, representatives of the rural population, i.e., genuine members of the Egyptian nation-to-be. The conversation takes place at the friend’s country estate. The first-person narrator’s passionate appeal to his listeners to free themselves from self-inflicted misery through education – self-awareness and action determined by free will could, he tells them, work miracles³⁴ – is countered by the village sheikh with the cautionary example of a peasant who had moved to the city “of his own free will” for a better and easier job. In the city, however, his wife had soon cheated on him with his employer. The man had ended up brutally slaying them both. The urban intellectual has no chance against the rhetoric of the sheikh who speaks “to the hearts” of the villagers. As if to laugh at him, the frogs croak incessantly in the background. While he and his friend remain sitting around the dim light (!) of a paraffin lamp, the villagers follow their sheikh into the darkness (!) – the project of enlightenment has failed.

Five years later, Lāshīn goes still a step further. In the novel *Ḥawwā’ bi-lā Ādam* (“Eve without Adam”, 1934),³⁵ the heroine, a young, ambitious teacher from the lower class, ends up taking her own life when she realises that although she was able to free herself from the circumstances of her background through

³³ English translation by Sabry Hafez, in id. 1993, 262–268. On the novella itself, cf. *ibid.*, esp. chapter 7 (“The Culmination of a Sophisticated Discourse”, 233–261).

³⁴ Note the narrator’s argument with core elements of the “independent self”!

³⁵ English translation by Saad El-Gabalawy, in id. 1986, 49–94.

diligence, hard work and education, this resulted in her double isolation and deprived her of the chance to find personal happiness. She feels alienated from the world she comes from, but also finds no acceptance in the one she wants to be accepted by: for the son of a notable family whom she teaches as a private tutor and with whom she falls in love, she is at no time a possible partner because of her lowly origins, as the upper classes do not care about the educational efforts of the lower classes and the class barriers remain insurmountable. Like in “Village Small Talk”, the author stages the failure of the basically laudable pioneering efforts of an “independent self” to reform the nation as a bitter, tragic-ironic ending: On the heroine’s deathbed, her old grandmother, representative of the ‘imprisonment’ of larger parts of the population in ignorance and superstitious tradition, performs an exorcistic ritual on her granddaughter, representative of progressive enlightenment and emancipation. In other words: The very forces against which Ḥawwā’/Eve had fought all her life (and with whose description the novel began) emerge victorious in the end – all her efforts were in vain.

Significantly, Lāshīn gave up his writing career after Ḥawwā’ *bi-lā Ādam*, drawing the consequence from the experience that the majority of the nation was apparently not yet ready to keep up with the emancipation of the “independent self” that he and his peers had already accomplished on an individual, personal level.

Similar to Lāshīn’s *Ḥadīth al-qarya*, also Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu’s *Yaban* (1932) and Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm’s *Yawmiyyāt nā’ib fi l-aryāf* (1937)³⁶ show an unbridgeable gap between the modern urban intellectual and the ‘traditional’ rural population. In all these texts, the narrators turn out to be unable to communicate with the rural population, the true, genuine representatives of the nation-to-be; the ‘people’ meet them with mistrust and hostility, and this experience deeply shatters their “independent selves” and their sense of agency. Significantly, all but Ḥawwā’ *bi-lā Ādam* are written from the first-person perspective of the experiencing subject, and in Ḥawwā’, too, the narrator largely adopts the point of view of his (female) protagonist.³⁷ Despite everything, however, the narrator-authors hardly have any real doubts about the meaningfulness of the project of modernisation *as such*. Their failure plunges them into deep crises, but they mainly seek the cause for this in *the others’* attachment to tradition and *their*

³⁶ English translation by Abba Eban as *Maze of Justice: Diary of a Country Prosecutor; an Egyptian novel* (1947). – For the novel, see Kilpatrick 1974 and ead. 1974, passim; Wielandt, “Yawmiyyāt...”, in *KnLL* (1988–92), vii:182; Guth 2003b, 116–135 and passim (compared to Yakup Kadri’s *Yaban*).

³⁷ For the question of gendering cf. below, Chapter 15.

backwardness, which they themselves (their own “independent selves”) can no longer comprehend. Like the philosopher of German Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant, in whose intellectual footsteps they implicitly follow, they are convinced of the “self-inflicted immaturity and irresponsibility”³⁸ of their environment.

16.6 Ideologisation is no solution either

This fundamental conviction does not change even in those cases in which the intellectuals end up concluding that a solution to the conflict might be that it is not the “people” who should meet *their* expectations, but they themselves who should make a step in the “*people*”’s direction. In Yaḥyà Ḥaqqī’s short novel *Qindil Umm Hāshim*,³⁹ written in 1939/40 (and published in 1944), the protagonist, who like Ḥawwā’ in Lāshīn’s novel, has a lower class background, encounters similar difficulties on his return to Egypt after having received training as an ophthalmologist in Britain: Since the broad masses do not trust in the ‘blessings’ of Western medicine, he initially fails in his attempt to treat his compatriots according to the latest findings of modern ophthalmology. In despair, he considers returning to Europe, but on a Ramadan night he suddenly has an epiphany that shows him the way out of the crisis: since there can be “no knowledge without faith” (*lā ‘ilm^a bi-lā imān*), he must combine modern medicine with traditional practices. From then on, he treats his patients’ eye ailments using both the modern methods he learned in England and the sooty oil from a lamp in the nearby mosque, whose healing power people believe in because the lamp hangs above the tomb of the saint-like Umm Hāshim. The combination turns out to be successful – how exactly, the text leaves open. Is the holy oil only applied externally? Then one could infer that the intellectual’s approach to the unenlightened masses is only pro forma, in a sense by means of a trick that leaves them in the old faith/superstition, but in reality only trusts in the efficiency of modern medicine.

On the other hand, the text also describes an inner change in the protagonist: after he has already moved out of his parents’ house and has long considered emigrating altogether, from a certain point on he begins to feel attracted by the

³⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?* (1784). The German term is “selbstverschuldete Unmündigkeit”.

³⁹ Plot summary in Wielandt, “Qindil Umm Hāshim”, in *KnLL* (1988–92), vii:282–283, as well as Wielandt 1980, 386 ff. (both with further references).

crowds surging in the large square in front of the Holy Mosque and, when immersed in them, to feel a quasi-mystical fusion with “the people”. Since this fusion in the novel prepares the way for the protagonist’s subsequent enlightenment, it can be assumed that the author saw a solution to the problem not only in a purely external combination of modernity and tradition, but also wanted the approach of the “independent self” to the collective to be understood here as a necessary – and possible – genuine becoming-one. Wielandt rightly assesses this as a “return” (German: *Rückwendung*) of the meanwhile Westernised Egyptian to his “original cultural identity” and – particularly interesting in our context – as an irrational “act of faith, a mystical surrender of the hero’s new self, which he had built up in Europe on his own, without authorisation, to a numinous authority, behind which nothing else is concealed but the ultimately unbroken power of the native cultural tradition to determine Ismā’il in his self-awareness even after his studies abroad” (Wielandt 1980, 396–397).⁴⁰ In other words: Yaḥyà Ḥaqqī here proposes as a solution to the gap between the “independent self” of the intellectual and the population at large, the absorption of the former into the collective, constructing the native communal spirit as “a collective attitude of a quasi-religious character, inherited through long historical experience”⁴¹ (and thereby become part of the individual’s genetic constitution) (*ibid.*, 392).

The fact that “solutions” such as this are basically ridiculous, though *tragicomic*, ideologisations was already seen through a little later by A.H. Tanpınar in his famous key novel, *Saatleri Ayarlama Enstitüsü* (1954–, as a book in 1961/62⁴²). The titular “clock-setting/time regulation institute”, which progressive Turks (“independent subjects”!) have been running for years as a large-scale project and which has taken upon itself the task of synchronising Turkish clocks with Western time (!), proves in the end to be completely superfluous, since, as American (!) visitors quickly demonstrate, one can in the meantime quite simply make use of the electronic time announcement by telephone – with all their efforts for modernisation, the administrators of East-West synchronisation have in the end

⁴⁰ German: “ein mystisches Sichaufgeben des in Europa eigenmächtig aufgebauten neuen Selbst des Helden vor einer numinosen Instanz, hinter der sich nichts anderes verbirgt als die im letzten ungebrochene Kraft der heimischen Kulturtradition, Ismā’il in seinem Selbstbewußtsein auch noch nach dem Auslandsstudium zu bestimmen”.

⁴¹ German: “eine durch lange historische Erfahrungen in die Erbmasse eingegangene kollektive Haltung mit quasireligiösem Charakter”.

⁴² Translated into English by Ender Gürol as *The Time Regulation Institute* (2001).

simply slept through it, the modernity they have created is nothing but an inauthentic *caricature* of modernity!⁴³

Sharp and sarcastic-critical analyses such as Tanpınar's showed that an awareness of being on a *tragi(comi)*cal wrong track had occasionally already emerged early on, and a crack in the "subject of history" had thus become visible in some places in the Middle East. However, it was to take another decade or so before this awareness gained broader momentum. A further breakthrough of such insights was hampered, at least in the Arab world, since the beginning of the 1950s, by the high spirits that spread with the rise of Gamāl 'Abd an-Nāṣir (Nasser). During the first years of the Egyptian president's rule, the "independent self" that had emerged as an idea in the nineteenth century appeared to receive renewed confirmation that it was on the right path. Comprehensive modernisation projects, in particular large-scale agricultural and educational reforms as well as massive industrialisation promoted optimism about the future and spread confidence in the possibility of national independence. This is evidenced not only by statements such as those of Moroccan Prime Minister 'Abdallāh Ibrāhīm, who in 1959 commented on the introduction of mechanised agriculture in his country – the king himself symbolically drove the first tractor – with the words: "It's here that independence begins!" (*al-istiqlāl min hunā yabda'* – quoted in Monteil 1960, 360–61), but also, for example, a Turkish novel like Talip Apaydın's *Sarı Traktör* ("The Yellow Tractor", 1958), in which the arrival of the tractor in a village is celebrated with similar enthusiasm because it promises rapid economic and social progress.⁴⁴ In such high spirits, everything seemed feasible to many. Moreover, writers now increasingly came from lower classes and adhered to "popular" ideologies, so that the deep gulf between the "independent self" of the intellectuals and the broad masses, which had been so paralysing before, seemed to be overcome.

Such naïve optimism was, of course, rather suspect to more perceptive and sensitive contemporaries, as the example of Tanpınar already showed. At about the same time when Tanpınar smiled sadly-critically at the paradox of a subject imagining itself independent while ultimately remaining dependent, Nagīb Maḥfūz pointed out another problem. In his famous novel *Awlād ḥāritnā*,⁴⁵ the first instalments of which appeared in 1959, he made the protagonist 'Arafa – representing modern science and thus the modern subject – indirectly guilty of the

⁴³ C.K. Neumann, "Saatleri Ayarlama Enstitüsü", in *KnLL* (1988–92), xvi:337; revised by id. and A. Menz, in *KLL* (print version 2009, updated Jan. 2010). See also Moran 2004, 297–322.

⁴⁴ For the novel cf. my entry "Sarı Traktör", in *KLL* (2009).

⁴⁵ English translation (as *Children of Gebelawi*) by Philip Stewart (1981).

death of the old patriarch Gabalāwī (= God), whose house he had invaded. The hubris of the modern subject thus becomes the reason why the traditional belief in God is deprived of its foundations. Interestingly, the author nevertheless lets Gabalāwī look with benevolence on ‘Arafa, in this way ultimately bestowing divine blessing on the replacement of the belief in God by science⁴⁶ – a solution that may seem paradoxical⁴⁷ but is certainly less ideological-mystical than Yaḥyà Ḥaqqī’s in *Qindīl Umm Hāshim*, even though it is a clear indication of the fact that the “independent subject” still needs confirmation by religious authority.

This is expressed even more clearly in the short story *Za‘balāwī* from Nagīb Maḥfūẓ’s pen, published two years later (1961).⁴⁸ The protagonist in this story is an anonymous first-person narrator who suffers from an unspecified serious disease – it is the “independent self”, fallen ill due to modernity. Significantly, the protagonist believes that healing can only come from a wise old man, a saint named Za‘balāwī. The similarity of the latter’s name to the name of God, Gabalāwī, in *Awlād ḥāritnā* is certainly not coincidental. Everyone the hero meets assures him that Za‘balāwī does indeed exist and that he was sighted only a short time ago, only now he is once again somewhere else. Towards the end of the narrative, after a long and unsuccessful search, the protagonist falls asleep in a state of intoxication (after having drunk a lot in a bar). In a dream, he experiences a paradise-like ambience, a blissful state of complete relaxation (*ḡāya min al-irtiyāḥ*) and ecstatic serenity, in which there is “a marvelous harmony between me and my inner self (*baynī wa-bayna nafsī*) and between both of us and the world (*wa-baynanā wa-bayna l-dunyā*)”. When he wakes up, he learns that Za‘balāwī, the saint he had been looking for all the time, had visited the place while he was sleeping. Now, however, he has disappeared again, and the narrator realises that his search for the “doctor” who might be able to heal the deep rupture in his self will have to continue indefinitely. As in Tanpınar’s novel, a central problem of Middle Eastern modernity is turned into a tragicomic here, too: In modern times, the “independent self” can experience the reality/presence of God only in a state of intoxication!

⁴⁶ R. Wielandt and A. Pflitsch, “Aulād Ḥāritnā”, in *KLL* (2009).

⁴⁷ Wielandt/Pflitsch, *ibid.*, call it a „Paradoxon“.

⁴⁸ Translated into English by Denys Johnson-Davies as “Zaabalawi”, in *id.*, ed./tr., *Modern Arabic Short Stories* (1967). – On the story, cf., among others, especially Gordon 1990 and Elad 1994 (with further references, among which also Somekh 1970).

16.7 The peak of the crisis

The protagonist's dream in Maḥfūẓ's *Za'balāwī* makes explicit for the first time what was to become the main theme a few years later in al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ's *Mawsim al-hijra ilā l-shamāl* ("Season of Migration to the North", 1965/66):⁴⁹ A deep rift runs through the modern Middle Eastern ego, the supposedly "independent" self, a rift that one could already suspect since the second half of the nineteenth century, but which had always been covered up. Now, however, in *Mawsim al-hijra*, it is reflected deeply in the novel's structure and symbolism. Significantly, the narrative has not only one but two protagonists. It begins with the return of an unnamed first-person narrator from studies in England, immediately after his homeland, Sudan, has gained political independence. The young man is of good cheer and full of hope for the future, animated by that naïve optimism which, as we saw, was still widespread in much of the Arab world in the late 1950s/early 1960s. But he soon meets a compatriot named Muṣṭafā Sa'īd, in many ways a mirror image of himself, who had studied in England like himself, but a generation earlier, still in the days of colonialism. As it turns out, Muṣṭafā was not only an outstanding student, but also served a long prison sentence as a murderer. For in a desire to take revenge for all the humiliations that the colonial masters had inflicted on his homeland, he had systematically seduced young English women and driven them to suicide; when one of the women had resisted him, he had strangled her. When Muṣṭafā mysteriously disappears one day – probably having taken his own life – the first-person narrator becomes the administrator of his estate. The legacy (!) consists, among other things, of Muṣṭafā's house, including the key (!) to a room,

which no one but he [Muṣṭafā] himself had ever been allowed to enter during his lifetime. When the narrator opens the room, it turns out to be a temple of European culture, filled with books brought from England and decorated with all kinds of memorabilia, including a portrait of Jean Morris [i.e., the woman Muṣṭafā had killed]. The room symbolises how much Muṣṭafā Sa'īd's inner self was torn apart: even after his return to the Sudanese countryside, he could no longer live without the culture of his former colonial master.

(Wielandt and Pflitsch, "Mawsim al-hijra ilā š-šamāl", in *KLL*
2009 – my translation, S.G.)

This triggers a deep crisis in the first-person narrator, because the view into Muṣṭafā's secret room is at the same time a view into his own inner self: he be-

⁴⁹ English translation by Denys Johnson-Davies (1969).

comes “aware that his [own] sense of cultural belonging has also been irrevocably broken by the profound assimilation to the former colonial power” (ibid.). During his stay in England, he has absorbed and “internalised” the former colonial master’s culture, to the effect that it now “perpetuates” European dominance in his own psyche, a dominance that his country had struggled hard and fought to get rid of on the political level, so that the attainment of *political* independence has basically not changed anything about the fact of inner, *cultural* dependence – the outwardly “independent self” has taken on the legacy of a split personality. Significantly, the novel ends with the narrator’s cry for help, as he almost drowns while bathing in the Nile (= in the stream of time).

Just one year after the novel’s publication, the entire Arab world was to experience an analogous collapse and crisis: With the defeat of the Arab armies in the June War of 1967, the Nasserist dream of a great independent Arab nation turned out to be nothing but a beautiful bubble, the project of an independent Arab modernity a failure.

16.8 After the breakdown

As in Šālih’s novel, the trauma shattered life in the Middle East to its deepest existential foundations. And it lasted for a long time. It found immediate literary expression, for example, in the completely incomprehensible absurdity of the ‘meaningless’ plot of Maḥfūz’s short story *Taḥt al-miẓalla* (“Under the Bus Shelter”, written in 1967).⁵⁰ After that, the shock was followed by a phase in which authors tried to find new sustainable foundations on which to (re-)build one’s view of the world and one’s self. A main idea here was that the catastrophe had happened because modernity was not genuine and independence only imagined and that, therefore, the main task now was to find the *true*, genuine, authentic self. This is why the movement that sought to develop a “new sensibility” (*ḥassāsiyya jadida*)⁵¹ for this purpose, was primarily concerned with *ta’šīl*, i.e., “making authentic” or “rooting” things in trustworthy, reliable ground (the verbal noun *ta’šīl* is derived from *’ašl* “root, trunk, foundation, origin”). (The massive strengthening of “fundamentalist” Islamist currents can, by the way, be seen in the same context.)

⁵⁰ English translation by Roger Allen, in Kassem and Hashem, eds. 1996, 85–92. – For an analysis of the story, cf., e.g., Fāhndrich 1991, 119–23.

⁵¹ After having been introduced by Šabīrī Ḥāfiẓ, the term gained currency through the analyses of Egyptian author and literary critic Edward al-Kharraṭ.

But did this not ultimately mean that one was going round in circles? In all the efforts to radically re-found thinking “from below”, it was overlooked that the idea of an authentic identity was basically no different from the “independence of the self” that thinkers like Khalīl al-Khūrī had called for a hundred years earlier, and that the real problem could lie in the modern idea of independence and authenticity itself. It was to take another generation for a Middle Eastern author to realise this, ushering in an era that was not only a new version of modernity, but truly postmodern. In works such as *Beyaz Kale* (“The White Castle”, 1985)⁵² or *Kara Kitap* (“Black Book”, 1990),⁵³ Orhan Pamuk came up with a surprising solution: Identities build on each other like palimpsests, East and West are mirror images of each other; so, trying to find a “pure, true, genuine, independent” self was futile because, simply, there is no such independence, purity, or genuineness.⁵⁴

⁵² English translation by Victoria Holbrook (1991).

⁵³ English translation by Maureen Freely (1990).

⁵⁴ On postmodernism in modern Arabic and Turkish fiction in general, cf. my study “Individuality lost, fun gained” (Guth 2007a); on Pamuk’s *Kara Kitap*, cf. Guth 1996.