CHAPTER 11

Autofiction as a Lens for Reading Contemporary Egyptian Writing

Hala Kamal, Zainab Magdy, and Fatma Massoud

Autobiographical writing and life writing occupy a visible position in Arabic literary history, but they are conventionally situated within biographical and historical studies and sociological/anthropological research. Consequently, Arabic literary studies cannot boast of a critical theory developed around autofiction, which, to the best of our knowledge, has not yet been thoroughly explored as a critical approach to reading Arabic literature.[1] The term "autofiction" itself does not yet have an established equivalent in Arabic literary studies, though a few attempts have been made to translate the term into "al-takhyīl al- dhātî" and "riwāyat al-dhāt."[2] This chapter offers an original autofictional approach to three case studies

H. Kamal (✉)
Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Arts, Cairo University, Cairo, Egypt
e-mail: hala.kamal@cu.edu.eg

Z. Magdy
Cairo University, Cairo, Egypt

F. Massoud
The British University in Egypt, Cairo, Egypt

A. Effe, H. Lawlor (eds.), *The Autofictional*, Palgrave Studies in Life Writing, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-78440-9_11

of Arab writing, including one case of Arabic-Anglophone literature. In her study of the Egyptian blogosphere, Teresa Pepe reflects on the history of autobiographical writing in Arabic literature as being characterized by the "mixing of fiction and factual elements in life-writing" (Pepe 2019, 11), where she highlights the critical approaches to Arabic literature as being from an autobiographical rather than autofictional point of view. Pepe suggests using an autofictional lens in the study of Egyptian blogs, arguing that "Arab critics rely heavily on Western literary debate and have not tried to instigate their own critical debate on Arabic autofiction" (10–11). In this chapter, we intend to start this critical conversation, taking an autofictional approach to the work of three writers who have not been recognized as mainstream literary figures. Waguih Ghali is among the very few Egyptian writers of the 1960s generation who wrote and was published in English. It is only recently that his name has been revived through the publication of his diaries and the translation of his work into Arabic. On the other hand, Radwa Ashour's writings in Arabic (occasionally translated) have set her apart from the mainstream writers of her generation, primarily owing to her immense investment in (re)historicization, both in her autobiographical and fictional texts. In a different, but related, manner Miral al-Tahawy has established herself as a distinct voice among a rebellious and innovative new generation of Egyptian writers and artists. It is therefore perhaps only fitting that their three texts be read here from an emerging and original critical approach—namely, through the lens of the autofictional.

We discuss the work of three bicultural Egyptian writers: Waguih Ghali's *Beer in the Snooker Club* (1964), Radwa Ashour's *Specters* (1999), and Miral al-Tahawy's *Brooklyn Heights* (2010). The three authors have written other texts that have been classified as either novels or autobiographical texts, while these three texts have been categorized by publishers as novels, and read by critics as autobiographical novels. Here we read them instead through an autofictional lens and suggest that autofictionality can be identified in them in terms of not only genre but also technique. The first section, on "Autofictional Identity," focuses on the fictional and autobiographical personas in Waguih Ghali's *Beer in the Snooker Club*, which was mostly read as a fictional text until its recent republication and translation into Arabic, after which it has been received increasingly as a representation of its author's life. The second section, "Autofictional Threads," offers a reading of Radwa Ashour's *Atiaf* (published in Arabic in 1999 and translated into English as *Specters* in 2010), with a focus on

autofictional engagements with memory and experience. The third section, "Autofictionalizing Experience," addresses the use of personal memory in fictionalizing women's experiences in times of cultural displacement in Miral al-Tahawy's *Brooklyn Heights* (published in Arabic in 2010 and translated into English in 2011). Our reading of the three texts testifies to the affordance of an autofictional lens in reading Arabic literature. It allows new insights into these authors' constructions of identity, memory, and experience at the intersections of reality and the imagination, and in interaction with readers and critics.

Waguih Ghali's Autofictional Identity

Waguih Ghali (192?–1969) was an Egyptian Anglophone essayist and writer known for his one work of fiction, *Beer in the Snooker Club* ([1964] 2010). It was not until 2006 that the first translation of *Beer* appeared in Arabic, followed by another translation in 2012, while selections from his diaries were published still more recently in Cairo, with the title *The Diaries of Waguih Ghali: An Egyptian Writer in the Swinging Sixties* (2017). The online publication in 2013 of his diaries, personal papers, letters, and an unfinished manuscript of a second "novel" has drawn further attention to his work.[3]

We focus on Ghali's *Beer in the Snooker Club*, which tells the story of a young, upper-class, Christian Egyptian man, Ram, who returns to Cairo after having lived in London for a number of years, in the aftermath of the 1952 Egyptian Free Officers' Revolution against the British occupation. In love with a Jewish Egyptian woman and disillusioned with the "revolution" and his English education, while having no money of his own to keep up with his lifestyle or his class, Ram narrates a personal memoir-like story that moves between Cairo in the present and London in the past, creating an antihero with great appeal and charisma. Reading the text in its historical context brings to light the strikingly similar personal, social, and educational backgrounds, as well as the geographical associations, that Ghali and his protagonist share. Ghali chooses to write in English (reflecting his colonial education) about a period in the life of a young bicultural Egyptian man, making reference to real-life locations during a particular socio-historical moment contemporaneous with the author's life.

The autobiographical traces in this work emerge not only in the biographical details that Ghali and Ram share, but in Ghali's utilization of an intimate first-person narrator, in his sense of humor, which is

apparent in Ram's witty and cynical comments and reflections, and in the fact that the protagonist of the novel is known only through his nickname, Ram, thus allowing for a play on nomenclature. These three features create a verisimilitude of the autobiographical, as the first-person narration allows for the possibility of reading *Beer* as a memoir despite the genre label (a novel) provided on the back-cover blurb. The fact that the protagonist is known only by his nickname prevents an autobiographical pact from being established, yet allows for the possibility that the protagonist/narrator is the author, as his first name is never mentioned. This possibility is further enhanced by Ghali's humor, which is most apparent in *Beer* through Ram's reflections, commentary, and behavior, thus connecting the author with protagonist and narrator. This humor posits a voice that seems to speak simultaneously for Ram and Ghali as it ridicules both self and society.

Such elements led critics to read *Beer* as "autobiographical fiction" for many years. We propose, however, that *Beer* can be read more productively as an autofictional text. The comparison between autofiction and the autobiographical novel, in generic terms, is significant in this context, because "[a]utofiction follows the autobiographical novel, but transposed to our times in different ways partly because readers' text reception changed" (Shands et al. 2015, 8). Using an autofictional reading strategy makes it possible to move beyond genre labels when reading *Beer* and to closely examine how autobiographical markers pave the way for Ghali's autofictional identity. Reading Ghali via paratextual material serves as the foundation for this autofictional reading: it becomes clear that the reception of the text, when first published and then republished 50 years later, is premised on the playful convergences between Ghali's identity and that of Ram. This chapter shows how autofiction as a reading strategy allows us to see the book in relation to its textual and historical contexts but also to expand our understanding of it, seeing it as a novel about colonial reality for a Cairene of Ghali's/Ram's class. A focus on the autofictional in Ghali's book shows us how Ghali playfully creates dialogue between life and fiction, and between the personal and the general.

Auto/Fictional Gestures

Ghali's text occupies a space between fiction and memoir, manifesting what we call autofictional gestures: hints and clues that prevent the text from being read as just a novel or just a memoir. These autofictional gestures are present in Ghali's use of humor, certain nuances of the self that

are internalized in the first-person narrative, and most prominently from its very beginning, in *Beer*'s epigraph. The epigraph is a quote from Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1864): "Rather, we aim at being personalities of a general … a fictitious type" (Ghali 2010). Placed at the beginning of the text, the epigraph initiates the readers into a text that lies between the autobiographical and the fictional. The aim to be fictional characters sets the scene for the autofictional play that will take place in the text. The playfulness of Ghali's chosen epigraph gains a certain weight when his protagonist speaks of becoming a character in a book. When Ghali writes, and Ram states, "Gradually, I have lost my natural self. I have become a character in a book or in some other feat of the imagination; my own actor in my own theatre; my own spectator in my own improvised play. Both audience and participant in one—a fictitious character" (60)—the statement connects to and reinforces the epigraph's notion of a possible fictionalization of the self.

As the epigraph indicates the blurred boundaries between the autobiographical and the fictional, when Ram asserts that "[t]hat moment of putting on my coat was the very beginning—the first time in my life that I had felt myself cleave into two entities, the one participating and the other watching and judging" (68), a connection emerges between the "two entities" he describes and the roles of author/narrator and protagonist/character. The echoes of the fictionalized self are clear in the way in which Ram comes to observe himself and reflect on the self he witnesses, and then narrates these reflections. The interconnections between self and life in this act of reflection blend author with narrator and protagonist and thus feel like an echo of the epigraph as an autofictional gesture. Read in conjunction with the above quotation, the epigraph connects the "auto" and the "fictional." It pays homage to the world of fictional writing, to an imaginary world that Ghali is looking to create. The epigraph could refer, on a surface level, to the way Ram feels as he separates into "two entities," but it could also offer insight into how Ghali weaves himself into his own fictive narrative.

Contextual Identifications

Paratextual evidence points clearly to the way in which Ghali fictionalizes himself in the character of Ram. The text's socio-political context, historical background, geographical locations, as well as references to concrete events and places in both London and Cairo, all underline the

autofictional identification between author and protagonist. This connection is consolidated by readers, critics, and reviewers who have focused on drawing out the autobiographical in the fictional. In Helen Stuhr-Rommereim's review, for example, she writes that *Beer* "is so clearly autobiographical that not only do the details of Ram's life match Ghali's but the man that Diana Athill, Ghali's editor, describes in her introduction as 'gazelle-like' is immediately recognizable as the narrator who is so immediately disarming" (Stuhr-Rommereim 2011). Based on affective association and known facts about Ghali, the reading process that Stuhr-Rommereim proposes transcends clear-cut differences between text and paratextual material. Assuming that the boundaries between "auto" and "fiction" are being blurred, she writes, "Ghali himself committed suicide only a few years after completing the novel, and because it is so easy to conflate Ram with his creator, learning of Ghali's suicide becomes the novel's tragic epilogue" (Stuhr-Rommereim 2011). Thus, autofiction as a reading strategy shines a spotlight on the subtle convergence of life and fiction in the text.

While reviewers of Ghali's text, when it was published in 1964, read it within its assigned genre (the novel), these reviews nonetheless reveal an early awareness of the intersections of the autobiographical and the fictional in *Beer*. Irving Wardle begins his review with the text's biographical note: "A PUBLISHER'S note describes Waguih Ghali as a young Egyptian now exiled in Germany" (1964). Connecting Ghali's state of exile to Ram's complaints about the "aliens department" and being denied visas, Wardle adds: "Assuming the complaint to be autobiographical, Mr. Ghali seems from his book to have fully recovered from the English curse" (1964). Wardle here uses the publisher's biographical note on Ghali as the basis from which to make an autobiographical assumption that any critique of British racism stems from personal experience. Similarly, when another reviewer, W.L. Webb, writes that "Ram, one guesses, speaks with his master's voice" (Webb 1964), it is evident that he connects Ram to Ghali through the first-person narration. In this way, Webb and Wardle's readings of the text, which precede the development of theories of autofiction, managed to identify the autobiographical in Ghali's "very attractive comic style" (Webb 1964). Despite the lack of strong paratextual material with which to support their claims of the autobiographical, the two reviewers were able to touch upon the playfulness with which Ghali writes his text and allows his "self" to take a place in the narrative through autofictional gestures.

Epilogue of the Self; Epigraph of Fiction

Our reading of *Beer* through an autofictional lens goes beyond trying to find the autobiographical in the fictional. While part of this reading process involves cross-identifying the author with the narrator/protagonist against and/or in the absence of paratextual material, a reading of *Beer* as autofictional is rooted in the playful gesture of the epigraph. If Ghali's suicide is *Beer*'s "tragic epilogue" (Stuhr-Rommereim 2011), then it could be argued that the act of fictionalizing the self comes through in the grand gesture of playing with autofiction. Rather than taking Ghali's tragic suicide to be *Beer*'s epilogue, an autofictional reading allows for the self to exist in a text that resists generic limitations, so that the epigraph takes on full meaning when Ghali's suicide is contemplated, making *Beer* an epilogue to his suicide, as he lives on in his fiction. Reading *Beer* through the lens of autofiction thus intensifies the function of the epigraph as a paratexual interchange between Ram's life and Ghali's text.

Radwa Ashour's Autofictional Threads

Radwa Ashour's *Specters* (2010) is another example of a text situated at the generic crossroads of memoir and fiction. The autofictional as a critical lens through which to approach the text reveals a mediated space between generic intersections where the author weaves a narrative from threads of her life, intertwined with fictionalized versions of "reality" that she had witnessed. Ashour (1946–2014) was a professor of English language and literature at Ain Shams University in Egypt and an active advocate for academic freedom. In addition to her academic career, Ashour was a prominent writer of fictional and non-fictional works, including novels, short story collections, and autobiographical writings, in addition to her contribution as a literary critic. In most of her writing—both fictional and autobiographical—Ashour infuses layers of factuality and referentiality with imagined environments, settings, and situations, which encourages the reading of her work through an autofictional lens. Here, Pierre Nora's concept of the "site of memory" (1989, 7) will be used to highlight the way in which the autofictional is manifested in Ashour's text, especially with reference to the intersections between authorship, fictionality, and referentiality.

Specters is divided into two parallel lines of action involving two academics: Radwa, a professor of English literature (the author/narrator/protagonist), and Shagar, a professor in the History Department. The

story moves between Radwa and Shagar in alternate chapters, first recounting their childhoods, their social backgrounds, and their family histories, before continuing to narrate their interconnected lives as present-day academics. The story is set at Ain Shams University, which is also the place where Ashour herself worked.[4] The chapters in which Radwa is the protagonist are narrated in the first person, while the chapters focusing on Shagar feature an omniscient third-person narrator. Furthermore, Ashour herself remarks in one of her essays that she intended to write Shagar, the second protagonist, as a "Qareen or Ka" (2000, 91). "Qareen" is an Arabic word that means a companion—most likely an imaginary one—and *Ka* is a mythical Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphic syllable that refers to "the creative energy which accompanies a person from the moment of his or her birth to the afterlife," as Ashour explains (2000, 91). Shagar seems to serve as a complementary fictional creation to Ashour's first protagonist, Radwa, who bears the author's first name, perhaps offering more creative liberties of self-expression not available to the first protagonist (and, by extension, to the author).

Critic Marcia Lynx Qualey describes the text as a "twinned narrative" (2011, 31), one that displays two apparently separate structures which ultimately end up being interspersed and interlinked. Yet, on the whole, *Specters* has not received its due critical attention, mainly owing to its problematization of issues such as the lack of academic autonomy, university politics, and the exposure of corruption, issues that remain sensitive in most academic circles. In *Specters*, the relationship between the author, narrator, and protagonist is complex and layered. Ashour distances herself from her narrator's voice when she steps out of the narrative and enters a metanarrative space, addressing the reader directly in the authorial voice and reflecting self-consciously on the act of writing:

> What happened? Why did I leap so suddenly from Shagar the child to middle-aged Shagar? I reread what I have written, mull it over, stare at the lighted screen, and wonder whether I should continue the story of young Shagar, or return to her great grandmother, or trace the path of her descendants to arrive, once again, at the grandchild. And the ghosts—should I consign them to marginal obscurity, leaving them to hover on the periphery of the text, or admit them fully and elucidate some of their stories? (2010, 15–16)

Ashour's use of metanarration scrutinizes the process of writing Shagar's life, shifting between the narrative that we assume belongs to Ashour and the inner monologues of the protagonists Radwa and Shagar. Sometimes, the line between author and narrator is blurred to such an extent that it is difficult to distinguish who is who. For instance, Radwa refers to the dilemma of her constant immersion in literature and history, and the fact that on occasions she unknowingly interweaves the two, when she says, for example: "Aristotle said something regarding this. He distinguished literature from history, as I well know. I'd better refer to his book" (74), while the readers are left wondering whose voice this is: the author's, the narrator's, or both intertwined. In Chap. 8, Ashour incorporates a memoir of Shagar's grandfather, which he had left on her desk shortly before his death, into the seemingly autobiographical narrative. The chapter is divided into sections with subheadings, each recounting a specific episode in the imagined life of the fictional protagonist's grandfather, written in the first person. This generic interpolation allows Ashour to experiment with the kind of autofictional narrative strategies that are usually used as "a matter of introducing an unknown subject to the audience" (Dix 2018, 4), namely, the historical experiences or narratives presented through the lens of memoir writing.

The University as lieu de mémoire

The two parallel narratives constructed in *Specters* are situated in Ain Shams University, the physical campus where the author had built her own forty-year career. The prominent presence of the university in this text has even led to its classification as an academic novel (Morsy 2009; Zidan 2015). The setting of the university in its physical and metaphorical manifestations can be seen as a "site of memory" as Nora conceives of it, that is, "the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists" (1989, 7). While Nora does not include universities among his typical sites of memory (1989, 12), the campus in *Specters* seems to fit his description of these sites as being constructed by collective, not merely individual, memory. Representing an authoritarian location, it offers a subversive counter-narrative, where the two protagonists fight to create a better place that would conform to romanticized ideals of the university as a place for intellectual rigor, resistance to the status quo, and the exercise of academic and public freedoms. At the same time, it exposes the existing nationalistic and authoritarian narratives of power politics

prevalent within Egyptian academia. Ashour constructs the reality of the university as she lived it as an academic, and then complements the narrative with her own imagined alternative space (or site) of a better university, one which is actively engaged in social and political change. She establishes the university in this way as an extension, if not a microcosm, of society through Shagar's realization that "the university isn't outside society—what happens in society happens in the university, too!" (2010, 91).

Shagar also admits to facing challenges in her acts of remembering, challenges which might be interpreted as a dangerous obstacle to her position as a historian, and to the construction of her version of her life and struggles at the university. This, by extension, jeopardizes the legitimacy of the creation of a "truthful" subversive account of the established *lieu de mémoire* in the text. This process does not only rely on memory and reconstruction but also involves forgetting and states of forgetfulness. Shagar's reflections on forgetfulness are narrated in the third person, opening up a shared space in which the author seems to also reflect on her own fallibility and subjectivity:

> Forgetfulness is a dodgy thing. It seems to a person that she has forgotten: she thinks that some desire, some idea, some reality, has slipped away from her, gone missing; the evidence is its total absence from her consciousness, she gazes at that river and sees upon it a thousand things—[…]. Then one day she realizes that this thing has surfaced all of a sudden, as if it had been preserved there in the depths, submerged in the water, solid as a coral tree or a pearl resting in its oyster. Forgetfulness is a dodgy thing […]. (63)

Forgetfulness is presented as a potential threat to Shagar's existence, whose life and work, as a history professor, is founded on reviving and commemorating historical moments. Similarly, forgetfulness is an unacceptable loss to Radwa, as a professor of literature who is fascinated by historicization as a conscious process toward remembering and away from forgetting. Author and protagonist alike (re)historicize important eras of Egyptian modern history, while situating the university (both as a physical place and as a metaphor for academia) as a witness—and sometimes instigator and agent of change—to historical events. Ultimately, both protagonists (Radwa and Shagar) fail in enacting the idealized view of the university that they had envisioned. Ashour offers two parallel endings in the narrative: one where Shagar resigns and admits defeat in fighting a corrupt dean, and another where Radwa refuses to admit failure and preaches

optimism for a better university. Moreover, Ashour offers a critical reflection upon her own literary practice, highlighting the importance of seeking "originality" in one's writing, noting that "the 'experience of the Self' is a very important aspect in looking at any text […]. Historical reality and the specificity of the experience of the Self are two determinants of how *original* the work is" (2001, 97–98; emphasis added).[5] In relation to *Specters*, she implements her conception of originality in the text by drawing attention to the interaction between personal experience and the author's referentiality both to self and others—to real places, people, and events. She then moves beyond referentiality to depict the university as a physical and metaphorical site of memory, reinforcing remembering, and commemorating the university as a place that infuses reality with imagination, disappointment, hope, defeat, and determination; and finally, fighting the process of forgetting both individual and collective struggles within that site.

Memory is closely connected to the notion of subjective truth, which underpins personal narratives: "autobiographical truth is not a fixed but an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation" (Eakin 2014, 3). Along similar lines, autofiction "is less concerned with faithfully reporting what its protagonist did, or even how that person thought and felt, and is more concerned with the speculative question of how that subject might respond to new and often imagined environments" (Dix 2018, 6). Ashour, for her part, creates a parallel imagined environment and a protagonist who complements parts of her life and consciousness. As was the case in *Beer*, the autofictional in *Specters* manifests itself through narrative technique as well as referential locations, which are verifiable through paratextual references in Ashour's other writings to her own life experiences. The paratextual layer in this analysis serves to complement the autofictional manifestations within the texts themselves. An autofictional reading of *Specters* allows for emphasis on Ashour's agency as a Middle Eastern female academic, amplifies her voice, in which she expresses her views on many political, social, and academic causes, and stresses her commitment to fighting corruption, participating and/or writing about revolution(s), and fighting for a better Egyptian academia. Autofiction affords a creative space where the author can situate her lifelong struggles within a fictionalized context that moves away from a strict autobiographical frame. In this space, Ashour can create multiple selves and personas that function in parallel and share common struggles that the

author witnessed in her real life, a space which provides better access to, and interaction with, a diverse reading audience.

Autofictionalizing Experience in Miral al-Tahawy's *Brooklyn Heights*

In Miral al-Tahawy's *Brooklyn Heights* (2011), the fictionalization of memory plays a crucial role in grappling with the experience of cultural displacement. The protagonist's process of remembering the past is structured in parallel with the fictional narrative, where memory registers experience in fictional terms. Miral al-Tahawy (1968-) is a contemporary Egyptian writer, belonging to the generation of Egyptian writers who appeared on the cultural scene in the 1990s and who are considered to have created new spaces for artistic expression in literature, theater, and the cinema (see, e.g., Elsadda 2008, 2012; Anishchenkova 2017; Pepe 2019). This generation of writers has produced a distinct body of literature, identified by literary critics and historians as foregrounding personal experience, breaking traditional literary conventions, and writing across generic boundaries, a trend known as "New Writing."[6] Al-Tahawy is one of the foremost female writers of this period, most of whom continue to write today. She published her earliest pieces of writing in a short story collection entitled *Rīm al-barāri al-mustahīla* (*Reem of the Impossible Wilderness*) in 1995, followed by her first novel, *The Tent* (1996), which established her as an original voice in the Egyptian literary scene owing to her portrayal of women belonging to Egyptian Bedouin culture. In addition to its cultural specificity, her writing is marked by the crossing of generic boundaries, where fiction intersects with memoir. In our autofictional reading of *Brooklyn Heights*, we will focus on the specific ways in which al-Tahawy fictionalizes identity, experience, and memory, and on the potential repercussions for the contemporary reception of writing by Egyptian women.

Experiences of Displacement and Self-Representation

Brooklyn Heights opens with the protagonist Hend's arrival in Manhattan with her young son and describes her attempt to settle down as an immigrant in the USA. Rather than striving for assimilation, she focuses on her estrangement from her new community, constantly remembering and being reminded of her past. She intentionally frequents immigrant

neighborhoods and seeks the company of other Arabs with whom she can identify, as well as attending English language courses with other minority representatives, foreigners, immigrants, and asylum seekers. The text is structured around a series of shifts in time and place, and her encounters in the present bring to Hend's mind scenes from her recent past in Cairo, as well as childhood memories from her native village in the Egyptian Delta. Geographical, cultural, and personal displacement governs the whole narrative and seems to dominate the protagonist's experience from the opening lines of the text:

> She finds it on a Google map of Brooklyn as she hunts for an apartment, a narrow strip winding its way up to the long arching bridge that connects the two islands. […] She turns her back on Manhattan and chooses Flatbush Avenue from among all those myriad streets because it becomes her: a woman shouldering her solitude, a couple of suitcases, and a child who leans into her whenever he grows tired of walking. She carries a few manuscripts of unfinished stories in a small backpack along with the other important documents: birth and vaccine certificates, residence papers, copies of degrees, employers' letters of recommendation, bank papers, and a signed rental contract for an apartment she's never seen. (Al-Tahawy 2011, 1)

In these lines, referentiality is established through the protagonist's detailed description of real places, relying on a "Google map of Brooklyn," with specific streets and locations, as she walks in search of her destination. At the same time, al-Tahawy foregrounds Hend's sense of displacement in establishing her identity as an outsider, a foreigner who carries identification documents and "residence papers." Hend is also identified as an aspiring writer, who, along with her documents, keeps with her "manuscripts of unfinished stories," stories through which author, narrator, and protagonist intersect in their identity as writers.

Fictionalizing Personal Memory

Memory is a central focus of *Brooklyn Heights*, both thematically and structurally, and is closely related to various acts of writing. Each chapter opens at a moment in the present in which the protagonist's experience in the USA triggers a memory from the past, and then takes us back to the narrative present.[7] Hend seeks to find her own place in the new surroundings, attempting to set down roots in a place inhabited by people with

whom she can identify, and who remind her of her past, as "everything around her invites nostalgia" (2). One of her main concerns becomes her continual attempts to remember, together with her conscious fear of failing to do so, as "she thinks about how she has begun to forget so many things—addresses, events, the whereabouts of documents. She worries that her keen memory is getting moldy" (4). The protagonist's strain to remember can be understood as a kind of equivalent to the author's technique of fictionalizing memory: while Hend is remembering scenes and situations from her past in her village and then in Cairo, al-Tahawy is weaving her narrative using threads from Hend's present and past experiences. The author creates imaginary scenes of the remembered past, foregrounding the connections between the past and the present, memory and experience, author and protagonist. That is to say, Hend's narrative voice as well as her experience, as an aspiring Arab woman writer, intersects with al-Tahawy's (herself an Arab woman writer who had recently moved to the USA); and the descriptions of the setting in New York, the Egyptian Delta, and Cairo are anchored not only in real life but specifically in the life of the author.

In terms of the characterization of Hend, there is a clear convergence between her identity and that of the author, despite the lack of direct correspondence in names. The overlap is maintained when Hend identifies with the fictional character of Lilith, an aging Egyptian immigrant who is presented to us through Hend's eyes: all three are Egyptian/Arab women struggling to fit into the USA. It is the correspondence in experience rather than nomenclature that establishes the autofictional identity. Second, in terms of narrative voice, there is a clear convergence between al-Tahawy's omniscient authorial voice and that of the protagonist in Hend's interior monologues. Toward the end of the text, we read the following: "The notebook meanwhile remained innocent of writing. She sketched one self-portrait after another in charcoal on the white pages, images of a woman with hollow cheeks and a long nose, and curly black hair, hands clasped to her withered breast—a solitary woman on the threshold of winter" (156). More than anywhere else in the text, though not singularly, the protagonist's voice seems here to merge with the author's, their converged identities representing an autofictional narrative technique. Structured within the framework of individual and indirectly collective cultural memory, the fictional merges with the remembered. The whole text thus emerges as an example of a specific form of the

autofictional, where the "auto" stands for memory rather than for the self or identity.

Memory additionally carries a generic dimension, most evident in memoirs where the term itself suggests a process of writing/fictionalizing personal memory. The protagonist's identity as an aspiring writer is established from the opening pages of the text when we see her carrying her manuscripts among her documents. Writing, as an identity marker, is extended throughout the text through the connection between Hend and Lilith. Two plot lines focusing on the lives of Hend and Lilith seem to be running in parallel across time, until they unexpectedly converge when Hend introduces Lilith as follows:

> She carries all her important papers with her in the pocket of her coat but she's terrified most of the time that she'll lose them or forget them […] She also keeps a small notebook where she jots down the things she wants to remember […] She writes other things in a clear hand on little snippets of paper and then forgets where she's put them. (146)

This scene, describing Lilith's "important papers" kept in "the pocket of her coat," mirrors the introduction of Hend as carrying "a few manuscripts of unfinished stories in a small backpack along with other important documents" (1). The act of writing can be interpreted as a metaphor for a lost past for both Hend and Lilith as they try to write their memoirs to capture and relive their experiences, as well as for the displaced present, when subtle reference is made to a fragmented process of life writing:

> Back then, she was still capable of living alone, of sitting on a park bench by herself and jotting down in a little notebook the sentences that she hoped would eventually become her memoirs. […] Her memory rebelled against the blank white pages. She was incapable of conjuring all the little details that make up a life. (155)

Hend comes across these papers after Lilith's death, and the connection between the two women is further augmented by Hend's total identification with Lilith's photos and papers: "I know that I've written every word in them myself, she thinks. This is my handwriting, they belong to me" (181). Memory in this situation not only maintains its significance as a thematic element and structural component, but acquires important generic significance, merging identity and experience with writing with

reference to a particular genre, namely, memoir. An important metanarrative dimension surfaces here in which the author's writing of *Brooklyn Heights* is subtly represented in Lilith's fragmented memoir, which in turn is appropriated by Hend. Al-Tahawy thus establishes an autofictional effect by connecting Lilith and Hend through their experiences of displacement and their acts of life/writing, a process in which the voices and identities of author, narrator, and protagonist seem to merge.

Autofictional Memoir?

While in its original Arabic edition *Brooklyn Heights* is subtitled and classified as a "novel," the English edition adds the subtitle "An Egyptian Novel," thus situating the text culturally as well as generically. Hend's personal experience is set against an elaborate transnational socio-cultural background. Reading *Brooklyn Heights* through an autofictional lens brings the generic hybridity of the text into view: it presents a fictionalized life-narrative while simultaneously employing one of the main features of memoir writing in its depiction of human experience against a specific socio-historical background, that is, the experience of displacement and immigration from an Egyptian woman's perspective. Her voice, autofictionally echoing the author's, replaces the conventional passive representations of women in Arabic literature with agency, through active self-representation. Yet, by asserting its fictionality, the text destabilizes the tendency to receive women's writing as life writing, and thus affords an alternative space beyond an autobiographical reading.

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It might seem that we are stretching the concept of the autofictional in our reading of Waguih Ghali's *Beer in the Snooker Club*, Radwa Ashour's *Specters*, and Miral al-Tahawy's *Brooklyn Heights*, but paratextual sources support the viability of such an approach. The current and widely circulating edition of *Beer* is published with an introduction by Ghali's editor, Diana Athill, derived from her memoir *After a Funeral* (1986), in which she writes about the years Ghali spent living in her house. Athill comments on Ghali and his text as follows: "He knew that as a writer he had only one subject, himself, and he saw his life as raw material for a work of literature which he had only begun in his first novel" (2010). Although she identifies the text as a novel, a work of fiction, she also points to Ghali's inscription of himself in his writing. Similarly, Ashour describes *Specters* as "a semi-autobiographical narrative, a partial record of my life intertwined

with that of another character of my age and profession" (2000, 91). She further stresses the autobiographical, self-referential elements in her narrative and the integral part they play in shaping her experience (92). Her categorization of the text as a "semi-autobiographical narrative" manifests the absence (at that time) of a critical concept equivalent to her autofictional narrative, where she intentionally combines the autobiographical with the fictional. Al-Tahawy, in turn, remarks in an interview about her book, when reflecting on her life in the USA, that "you're geographically in America, but you really live somewhere else when you close the front door—the place of your memory. I was really thinking about this when I was writing about Hend" (East 2012). In this quotation, as well as in other interviews, al-Tahawy acknowledges the connection between herself as author and her protagonist Hend, while at the same time emphasizing the fictional nature of the narrative. These sources show that, as both Dix's and Schmitt's chapters in the present volume underscore, paratexts can provide a crucial tool in an approach to the autofictional. Dix, moreover, shows that this is of particular importance when extending the concept to texts not typically considered to be autofictional.

The three texts we have examined in this chapter demonstrate the affordances of the autofictional as a literary strategy in negotiating identity, memory, and experience in the writing of Egyptian literature. In the absence of an established tradition of autofiction criticism in Arabic literary studies, this chapter has argued for using autofiction as a critical lens. We would like to end on a note about a potential topic for further discussion. Taking into consideration that we, as critics, enjoy various degrees of proximity to the authors (knowing them personally in the case of Ashour and al-Tahawy; or knowing people who have known them in the case of Ghali), another question emerges, about "autofictional critical practice"[8] and "personal criticism" (Anderson 2011, 127). These author-critic connections raise further questions about the effects of personal communication and interaction between critic and author in real life and, in particular, about how such relations affect or create an autofictional reading of a text.

Acknowledgments This chapter includes two sections derived from the following PhD theses in progress: Zainab Magdy, "Representations of the Self in Works by and on Waguih Ghali," and Fatma Massoud, "'Autofiction' in Selected Works by Radwa Ashour and Doris Lessing," both supervised by Hoda Gindi and Hala Kamal (The Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Arts,

Cairo University, Egypt). The chapter combines three presentations originally presented in the panel on "Autofictional Modes in Contemporary Egyptian Writing" at the conference on autofiction held at the University of Oxford in 2019. We wish to express our gratitude to the British Council Egypt Office, and particularly to Ms. Cathy Costain, Head of Arts at the British Council, for supporting our participation in the conference.

Notes

1. In his book *Des autofictions arabes* (2019), Francophone critic Darouèche Hilali Bacar examines three fictional works by Arab authors. He seems to be among the first critics to apply the term autofiction in his reading of Arabic literature.
2. Moroccan novelist and critic Mohamed Berrada translated the term "autofiction" into "al-takhyīl al-dhātī" in his novel *Like a Summer Never to Be Repeated* (originally published in Arabic in 1999 and translated in 2009), which emphasizes autofiction as narrative technique. More recently, in an attempt to encompass both generic and technical aspects of autofiction, Hala Kamal translated the term into "riwāyat al-dhāt" in her article, written in Arabic, entitled "From Autobiography to Life-Writing: Trajectories and Intersections across the Humanities and Social Sciences" (2020).
3. The unpublished papers of Waguih Ghali became available under a Creative Commons License in 2013, in an archive entitled *Waguih Ghali Unpublished Papers: Diaries (1964–1968), Manuscript Fragments and Letters* available at https://ghali.library.cornell.edu/. A selection has been edited recently and published in two volumes: *The Diaries of Waguih Ghali: An Egyptian Writer in the Swinging Sixties* (2017).
4. We are using the author's last name, Ashour, to refer to the text's author, and Radwa to refer to the protagonist, who is the first-person narrator.
5. Translated from Arabic by Fatma Massoud.
6. For more on the "New Writing in the 1990s," see Elsadda 2008, 145–164.
7. The only exception is the last chapter, which begins with reflections on the past and Arab culture in general terms, before the final shift to the present in the last pages of the book. It is at the end that Hend's identification with Lilith is at its fullest, and is manifested in their shared displacement, Hend's sense of aging, and being surrounded by scattered memorabilia from the past.
8. This point was raised by Hywel Dix in an informal conversation, during the conference "Autofiction—Theory, Practices, Cultures—A Comparative Perspective" at the University of Oxford (October 2019).

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