CONTESTED KNOWLEDGE: THE POLITICS OF LITERACY IN EGYPT AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

A Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate Schools of Arts and Sciences of Georgetown University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History

By

Hoda A. Yousef, M.A.

Washington, D.C.
December 16, 2011
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Hoda A. Yousef, M.A.

Thesis Advisor: Judith E. Tucker, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

The central thesis of this dissertation is that the emergence of modern Egypt was predicated on the literacy changes that were occurring between 1870s and 1920s as Egyptian men and women were reading, writing, and perceiving the Arabic language in new ways. The result was a dynamic era of Egyptian history, when multiple kinds of literacies were transforming the way Egyptians related to the written word, civic participation, and gendered roles in the public sphere. This study is the first of its kind to investigate the crucial role that various kinds of literacies (in the plural) played in several important cultural and social phenomena during the turn of the twentieth century Middle East—mainly, the increased influence of newspapers and journals, the emergence of strengthened religious and political movements, and the use of new textual practices in everyday social exchanges. However, not all the results were necessarily positive, as new definitions of literacy also imposed limitations as well as opportunities to Egyptians all along the literacy spectrum. Ultimately, this work challenges historians, anthropologists, political scientists, and other academics grappling with the issues of literacy and education in the Middle East to look beyond
institutional “schooling” and examine literacy as a set of discourses and interactions that impacted daily life in the region.
This work is dedicated to

Nina Tahiya, whose memory will always connect me to my past

And

Maryam, who carries with her everything I hope for the future.
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NOTE ON TRANSLITERATIONS AND TRANSLATIONS

I have used the transliteration system of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* for all Arabic words that do not have a commonly accepted spelling in English (like Quran, shaykh, etc.), with the following exceptions and notes. The diacritical mark (ʼ) are used in place of the Arabic letter ‘ayn and (ʾ) in place of the hamza. Any hamza that appears at the beginning of a word has been dropped as has the ta marbuta at the end of words. Plurals of Arabic words have been created by adding an “s” to the end of the transliterated work (as in *kuttāb* pl. *kuttābs*). The diacritical ʾī added to the end of a term indicates the adjectival form of the noun.

Names and book titles that appear in the body of the text and that do not have commonly accepted version in English are rendered only with the ‘ayn and hamza diacriticals. Full diacritical marks are used in the names and titles of books that appear in footnotes or in the bibliography.

All translations from the Arabic are my own unless otherwise indicated.
Introduction

This history is, in part, my grandmother’s story. Born in Egypt around 1920, Amina Qandil grew up flanked by two very different generations: that of her own mother and that of her younger sisters. Like many women before her, Amina’s mother never learned to read or write. Meanwhile, the younger women of the family were part of a new generation of learning; they not only went to school, but one even became a medical doctor. As for Amina, education was pursued at the hands of a series of mistresses who came to her father’s home in order to teach her sewing, crocheting, baking, reading, and writing. Throughout the many roles she played in her life, Amina used these skills to their utmost capacity. She was the amateur seamstress who saved the family the cost of school uniforms, the baker who made enough bread for the whole street, and the family scribe who noted down debts and payments in her delicate handwriting. However, of all the subjects she learned from these female teachers, reading became much more than a useful skill: it was her great passion. She was a voracious consumer of novels in her youth and a dedicated reader of a daily Quranic litany in her old age. But her story, as an unschooled literate for whom literacy was part
skill and part treasure, is absent from the common narrative of Egyptian history which tends to divide the population into the literate elites and the uneducated majorities. She was neither illiterate, nor part of the country’s new, empowered, school-educated classes. Nevertheless, she was part of a growing stratum of Egyptians for whom particular kinds of literacies were deployed, used, and cherished in their everyday social circumstances.

The central thesis of this work is that literacy not only mattered to wide swatches of Egyptian society beyond up and coming elites, but also that it had a key role in remaking the communal life of Egyptian society between the 1870s and 1920s. The literacy I speak of regularly occurred far beyond the confines of modern educational institutions. Students who wrote petitions, farmers and urbanites who frequented scribes, children who memorized the Quran and little else, and communities who gathered to hear the reading of newspapers, all participated in literacies that were often below the radar of “education” and official “literacy.” Some aspects of these literacies were age-old practices of Egyptian and Muslim society; others were innovations that reached their peak at the dawn of the twentieth century. The result was a dynamic era of Egyptian history, when multiple kinds of literacies were transforming the way Egyptians related to the written word, civic participation, and gendered roles in the public sphere. These various kinds of literacies allowed newspapers and journals to become influential, strengthened social and political movements, and remade the relationship between the written word and the everyday practices of Egyptians. However, not all the results were necessarily positive, as new definitions of literacy also
imposed limitations as well as opportunities to Egyptians all along the literacy spectrum.

Today, the designation of “literate” and “illiterate” are shorthand for many social and political assumptions. In fact, when you start to notice it, it can be found everywhere.¹ The United Nations Development Reports on the Arab world regularly highlight the low literacy rate in Arab countries, and particularly among women, as one of the primary social measures holding back economic development in the region.² Indeed, from its inception in 1990 until 2010, the Human Development Index (HDI) used by the United Nations and many other development organizations relied on literacy rates as one the three key factors by which to determine the advancement of a country, along with health and economic measures.³ Along with economic conditions, a

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¹ It is not unusual to see signs that read “Reading for Everyone” in parts of Cairo (Figure 1). In academic literature, to cite a common complaint: “[Illiteracy] results in widespread ignorance among the peasant masses and prevents the growth of enlightened public opinion throughout the country. It also prevents the recommendation of educational solutions which depend upon a literate and well-informed local public for their successful execution” Russell Galt, *The Effects of Centralization on Education in Modern Egypt* (Cairo: Department of Education American University at Cairo, 1936), 9. Also see: Amir Boktor, *School and Society in the Valley of the Nile* (Cairo: Elias’ Modern Press, 1936), 165–167. Yacoub Artin, *L’Instruction Publique en Égypte* (Paris: Earnest Leroux, 1890), 162. Ami Ayalon, *The Press in the Arab Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 140–144. Mohamed Maamouri, *Language Education and Human Development: Arabic Diglossia and Its Impact on the Quality of Education in the Arab Region.* (Washington D.C.: The World Bank, 1998). In the press, Egyptian newspapers also periodically publish articles bemoaning the literacy rates and the failed (or failing) programs designed to address this issue.


³ As more countries approach universal literacy, literacy rates are no longer as useful as a measure of educational progress over time. In 2010, the “education” component of the Human Development Index was revised to exclude literacy rates as a central measure. Rather, education is now evaluated based on the mean of years of schooling for adults aged 25 years and expected years of schooling for children of school going age. “Indices & Data | Human Development Index | Human Development Reports (HDR) | United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)”, n.d., http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/hdi/. For the
low level of literacy is also regularly blamed for backwardness, traditionalism, and overall social and cultural stagnation. The questions these kinds of association raises are multifold. Does education make individuals more amenable to the modern world? Are the less literate more trusting of authority? More politically unsophisticated?

Formal literacy is seldom about ability; rather, it is about an individual’s proximity to a particular educated ideal, one that is often cast as modern, civilized, and advanced.

Simply put, at the societal level, literacy has become a central index by which social progress is measured.

rationale behind this change and a review of the critiques of these measures see Jeni Klugman, Francisco Rodríguez, and Hyung-Jin Choi, “The HDI 2010: New Controversies, Old Critiques,” The Journal of Economic Inequality 9, no. 2 (May 2011): 253, 266–267.


In the recent 2010 referendum on a new Egyptian constitution, some researchers reported the percentages of “Yes” and “No” votes in particular districts along with the correlation with literacy rates. This created something of a stir among liberal revolutionary activists who were disappointed with the overwhelming percentage of “Yes” votes. These activists sought to explain the result with the fact that districts with higher illiteracy rates tended (ever so slightly) to vote for the limited constitutional changes without pressing for more change. William J. Dobson, “What happens in Tahrir Square stays in Tahrir Square?”, March 21, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/post/what_happens_in_tahrir_square_stays_in_tahrir_square/2011/03/21/ABTOfcR_blog.html; H. Kubra, “Egyptian Blogosphere’s White Liberalism | KABOBfest”, April 4, 2011, http://www.kabobfest.com/2011/04/the-white-liberalism-of-the-egyptian-blogosphere.html.
A hundred years ago, the situation was not all that different. The measure of literacy was quickly becoming a way to quantify social advancement. In Egypt, like Europe before it, limited school programs of the nineteenth century were steadily expanding into a countrywide, mass educational system that had literacy promotion as one of its most basic goals. Schools, and the cultural and bureaucratic elites that influenced them, largely focused on a functional and utilitarian idea of literacy, one that they believed would serve the economic and social needs of the growing nation. Historians have largely mirrored these visions of social development. According to our historical narratives, the “new elites”—the modernizers, the nationalists, the religious

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reformers, the fledgling groups of women activists—all grew out of the rising ranks of the educated of Egyptian society. New schools and new opportunities created this dynamic group of Egyptians who became the drivers of history. However, we have very little understanding of how exactly this worked in practice. At its core, it suggests a question that is as relevant today as it was then: how does education transform individuals, and by extension, society? In this work I study the relationship between education and social change by focusing on a significant and understudied element of the educational process: that of literacy.

Ultimately, I am asking historians of Egypt, the Middle East, and beyond to look at the history of literacy during times of change with new eyes: to appreciate its complexity, unevenness, exclusions, and riches. This perspective on educational history gives us a truer picture of how the dramatic social changes that occurred during the turn of the twentieth century actually filtered throughout the diverse parts of Egyptian society. In this space, there is room for a much broader view of the social and cultural history of the emergence of modern Egypt, one that includes the poor petitioner, the lofty idealist, the struggling student, and the worried mother. All of them are the subjects of this work. All of them were, in one way or another, masters and mistress of the pen.

**Background**

Significant educational reforms in Egypt began in the aftermath of Napoleon’s expedition and invasion of the Nile valley from 1798-1801. During Napoleon’s
excursion, the French army, with its retinue of scientists and a printing press, shocked Egyptian society with their probing cultural investigation, odd technologies, and obvious military superiority. Once the French departed, the new Albanian ruler of Egypt, Mehmet Ali, proceeded to expand the agricultural base of the country, the production of cotton, and the reach of the government. Central to his vision of an improved Egyptian bureaucracy, military, and agriculture was importing European expertise and models of rule; he began sending educational missions to Europe, employed European advisors, started several government sponsored schools, and published Egypt’s first official journal. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, his grandson Ismail followed in his footsteps, investing heavily in the infrastructure of the country and expanding government schools. The boom years of high cotton prices fueled Ismail’s ambitious plans, but ultimately led to huge debts. In 1882, the British government, under the auspices of a Debt Commission, declared Egypt a protectorate. The Egyptian and Turkic rulers of this new colonial territory served largely at the will of British advisors who were determined to squeeze every possible saving from the Egyptian government while increasing the revenues extracted from the peasantry.

The political and social elite of Egyptian society were shifting over the course of the nineteenth century. Increasingly, native Egyptians, Egyptianized Ottomans (Turks, Armenians, etc.), and Arab immigrants from the Levant were becoming more engaged in the political process. The events of the ʿUrabi Revolution in 1881 highlighted the
new coalitions of indigenous groups who were willing to champion political reforms. In addition, intellectuals and activists were willing and eager to express their views in public forums, often challenging themselves and others to reform and create a better nation for all Egyptians. Women activists, who became particularly active in the early twentieth century, and Islamic modernists like Muhammad ʿAbduh and Rashid Rida drew from these narratives of progress and reform to present their own solutions for Egyptian society. A wider segment of Egyptian society than ever before were engaged in asking, and seeking answers, to the great social questions of their age: how to improve the material and moral culture of the country and restore Egypt to its former glories.

These changes were fueled by the unique written and writing culture that emerged in the later part of the nineteenth century. The first indigenous press was the government sponsored Bulāq Press in 1820. By the late 1860s and 1870s several newspaper and general presses were opened by private individuals. Over this same period, a relative explosion of printed materials occurred with the increased availability of school books, reprinting traditional Arabic texts, as well as new works of fiction and

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7 Juan Cole cites “the propertied peasants, the urban guilds, and the intelligentsia played the leading role in the Revolution, opposing the dual elite of Ottoman-Egyptian nobles and the European bourgeoisie and labor aristocracy in Egypt.” Juan Ricardo Cole, Colonialism and Revolution in the Middle East: Social and Cultural Origins of Egypt’s ‘Urabi Movement (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1999), 22. For a helpful overview of the various segments of Egyptian society during the nineteenth century see Ibid., 23–52.

non-fiction. Meanwhile, private newspapers were steadily growing in influence. Early precedents like the short-lived 1869 newspaper, *Nuzhat al-Afkar*, and the more well known *Abu Nazzara Zarqa* started in 1877 were deeply political in nature. In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, over 200 new Arabic periodicals had been introduced in Egypt. By 1910, the daily circulation of Egyptian newspapers reached upwards of 100,000. In the meantime, a national postal system was established in 1865 and was also expanding exponentially, providing people throughout the countryside with reliable and relatively inexpensive means of communicating.

Education also underwent significant changes. Although the British administrators largely frowned upon free education and strove to limit the reach of government schools, they did begin in the 1890s to encourage the traditional Quranic schools called *kuttābs* to become elementary schools that could focus on reading, writing, and arithmetic for the masses. These “subsidized schools” as well as the many independent *kuttābs* continued to educate children by the hundreds of thousands in the basics of Quranic recitation and Islamic belief. Parallel, small scale religious schools also existed in Coptic communities. Furthermore, a network of informal and private instruction continued to produce Egyptians with varying degrees of competence in reading and writing.

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9 In the 1850s only 443 books were published in Egypt. By the 1860s that number was 1,391 and by the 1880s the total reached 3,021 books over the course of the decade. ‘Āyida Nuṣayr, *Harakat Nashr al-Kutub fi Miṣr fi al-Qarn al-Tāsi‘ ‘Ashar* (Cairo: Al-Hay’a al-Miṣriyya al-‘amma li-l-Kitāb, 1994), 140.

10 For an overview of this era see Ayalon, *The Press in the Arab Middle East*, 42–61.


Meanwhile, the middle and upper classes clamored for far more opportunities than elite government schools could provide. Through much of the late nineteenth and very early twentieth centuries, missionary schools opened by French, British, and American churches educated many more Egyptians of all faiths than government schools. Soon, nationalists and religious reformers also sought to make their own mark on the educational foundation of the country by opening private schools that ranged in costs from the free to the expensive. A common complaint of the era was that too many “for-profit” schools had opened their doors, taking advantage of parents who were all too willing to pay for education that may or may not have improved the employment prospects of their children. For the largely rural population of the country, the productive capacity of children as part of the family unit was often weighed against the time spent in part-time kuttābs or the more expensive and monopolizing time commitment of full time school. Nevertheless, there was a general sense that education could confer tangible benefits: the prospect of government employment, the opportunity to teach, and, in urban environments, the possibility of continuing onto higher education and professions in law, medicine, engineering, among others. Furthermore, as we shall see, the profession of “writing,” so long associated with scribal and secretarial pursuit, was now expanded to writers who could make their way in life as journalists, novelists, translators, and public intellectuals. Education was associated with brighter prospects and in the words of countless intellectuals, parents, and students, a way to prevent “losing the future” (ḍiyā’ al-mustaqqbal).
Literacy was the first step in the official educational ladder and, as such, was on the minds of Egyptian thinkers of the time. From the religious figure Muhammad ʿAbduh to the feminist writer Malak Hīfī Nasīf, Egyptian reformers made “reform of the Arabic language” an important part of their agendas. Central to this debate about Arabic reading and writing was the question of who should learn and how. For many Egyptians, the growing strain on limited educational resources served to reignite questions about the goals and beneficiaries of education. These debates had both a class as well as gender dimension. What kind of Arabic should be taught? Did everyone need to become masters of the language? What kinds of reading could be deemed dangerous? Was writing appropriate for Muslim women? How could these subjects be taught without compromising the moral character of students or their happiness with their current place in society? At the turn of the twentieth century, educators were carefully treading the path of literacy promotion, even as they sought to control and influence how it would be taught.

Literacy also touched many aspects of Egyptian life, far beyond the confines of formal education. For a largely illiterate society like Egypt, the skills of reading and writing were deeply communal. Scribes who served the needs of individuals and the state mediated the relationship of the masses with each other and their government.

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These scribes drafted petitions and contracts, wrote letters, bore witness and recorded court proceedings, and facilitated the workings of the bureaucratic state. An individual in a community who had learned his letters could read aloud the daily news to many others, be called upon to decode a correspondence sent from distant relations, and serve as a low level translator for all that was written to the larger oral society. However, during this period of Egyptian society, official literacy was also on the rise. More people were becoming independent of these communal literary practices. They could read for themselves, write their own letters, and communicate on their own terms. This change was particularly profound for privileged women, rural elites, and some of the urban poor. These traditionally uneducated segments of society were now afforded a skill that not only conferred potential economic benefits, but could also be used for personal and social agendas beyond the intent of their original literacy education.

In addition, these changes in literacy had profound impact on the Arabic language itself. The new “modern” Arabic of the newspapers and journals sought to reach a wider public, only a minority of whom were actually literate. Some newspapers consciously choose the local Egyptian colloquial as the medium for their forays into comedy, social commentary, and news. Others used a stylistically simplify Arabic that was, in some ways closer, to the spoken word but still retained the overall form of

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15 See Table 1 and 2.

16 Most scholars trace the beginnings of “modern-standard” Arabic to the latter half of the nineteenth century, although Clive Holes dates its maturation to the 1950s and 1960s Clive Holes, Modern Arabic: Structures, Functions, and Varieties, Rev. ed., Georgetown classics in Arabic language and linguistics (Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press, 2004), 42–46. In this work, I have found that many of the writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were quite aware of the fact that they witnessing a change in Arabic towards a more simplified and “modern” Arabic.

17 Fahmy, Ordinary Egyptians, 29–36.
classical Arabic. Ultimately, simplified Arabic and not the Egyptian colloquial became the norm for printed materials, in large part due to the discourse of literacy promotion, the increased numbers of Egyptians who learned to read, and the influence of the schooling system in systematizing and streamlining classical Arabic instruction for the modern educational system.

**Table 1: Literacy Rates According to Contemporary Census Reports**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Census Year</th>
<th>Literacy Rates (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1897</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(revised)</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1907</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1917</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1927</td>
<td>23.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

18 These are self-reported rates by the Egyptian census. In other words, these are the rates that Egyptians would have had access to at the time. In the 1897 revised numbers and 1907 the literacy rate was calculated for the whole population. In the 1917 and 1927 calculations they only included people over the age of 5. Nizarat al-Māliyya, *Ta’dād Sukkān al-Quṭr al-Miṣrī*, 1897 (Cairo: Al-Maṭba‘a al-Kubrā al-Amiriyya, 1898), 28–29; Nizarat al-Māliyya, *Ta’dād Sukkān al-Quṭr al-Miṣrī*, 1907 (Cairo: Al-Maṭba‘a al-Amiriyya, 1909), 121–142; Egypt, *The Census of Egypt Taken in 1917* (Cairo: Government press, 1920), 565; Egypt., Population Census of Egypt, 1927 (Cairo: Government Press, 1931).

19 This year had several irregularities. First, the rate was calculated only for Egyptians over the age of seven, however the 1907 census used revised numbers that took into account the whole population and after 1917 only Egyptians over the age of 5 were included in literacy calculations. Second, they did not include Bedouin tribes in the calculations, thus excluding roughly 600,000 people. See note in Nizarat al-Māliyya, *Ta’dād Sukkān al-Quṭr al-Miṣrī*, 1897, 29.
TABLE 2: LITERACY RATES FOR EGYPTIAN POPULATION 10 YEARS AND OLDER

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Census Year</th>
<th>Literacy Rates (%)</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1897</td>
<td></td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1907</td>
<td></td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1917</td>
<td></td>
<td>15.2%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1927</td>
<td></td>
<td>23.9%</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td></td>
<td>23.4%</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
<td>14.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This new infusion of literacy practices and newly educated individuals fueled the growth of public arena of debate and contestation. The “women issue” and women themselves became the subjects of and (increasingly) the authors of social and religious commentaries. Public protests, so long associated with symbols and oration, were ever more driven by written words in the form of banners, petitions, and published calls to action. Schools shifted from locations of vocational and religious training where language was a means to an end, to spaces where the full use of written language became a central tenant of education. The contours of these literacies reshaped the social life of Egyptian society for the schooled, unschooled, literate, illiterate, educated, and uneducated.

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Review of Literature: Educational History & Literacy Studies

This work lies at the intersection of two disciplines: the history of education and the ethnography, sociology, and history of reading and writing which has come to be known as literacy studies. In developing my own approach to the study of literacy in Egypt at the turn of the twentieth century, I have drawn upon both bodies of work. The expansion of Egypt’s educational system has received a fair amount of attention by historians as they have sought to explain the changes of the last century—from the rise of nationalists movements to the growth of Islamist sentiments. However, these approaches have largely focused on institutional developments and drivers of education. Meanwhile, anthropological and historical works on literacy have advanced important methodological approaches that allow researchers to look at literacy from the “ground up.” However, Egypt and much of the Middle East have been largely ignored in the application of these new methods of examining the impact of changing literacies on society. In pursuing a synthesis of educational history and literacy studies, I intend to use the changes in Egyptian literacy at the turn of the twentieth century as an important example of how literacy and education can (and did) significantly remake society.

The historical implications of education have long garnered academic interest. In the Muslim world, as in many cultures, people of knowledge and learning had a prestigious position as religious, political, and social leaders. With the spread of Enlightenment ideals that held education as the key to perfecting humankind and the panacea for nearly all social ills, broad-scale social education took on new importance. From the perspective of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, education
and literacy came to be seen as the hallmark of modernization and an essential precursor to entering the civilized world. As scholars and researchers have sought to understand the growth of the government educational system of Egypt, initial studies focused on the scope and impact of European influence, particularly as Egypt hewed its way along the supposed path of modernization. From the very earliest historical works on Egyptian schools, the indigenous educational system was viewed as the neglected, regressive backdrop to the “modern/secular” schools introduced over the course of the nineteenth century. The new schools and educational methods were meant to “modernize” Egypt from the ground up and help the nation climb the civilizational ladder of modernity. As Benjamin Fortna has remarked, this view “results in histories which are invariably linked to the broader paths of national ‘emergence’ cum modernization, Westernization and secularization. These strong, near totalizing, projects

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21 For a case study of this phenomenon in Algeria see Osama Abi-Mershed, *Apostles of Modernity: Saint-Simonians and the Civilizing Mission in Algeria* (Stanford Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2010).


23 The ultimate failure of these “modernization” attempts to create a more Western leaning education system is summed up in Heyworth-Dunne’s classic history of Egyptian education as such: “If the Egyptian experiments in modern education were a failure, it was hardly the method which was at fault, but rather the whole structure of Moslem society and the material with which the would-be educators had to build up their system ... Very little could have been expected of Moslem experiments in the fields of Western culture and education until the structure of its society had changed and it had assimilated some of the moral characteristics of the West.” James Heyworth-Dunne, *An Introduction to the History of Education in Modern Egypt* (London: Cass, 1968), 437. For a more recent articulation of the dual nature of Egyptian education see Judith. Cochran, *Education in Egypt* (London; Dover, N.H.: Croom Helm, 1986), 6–7.
have imposed themselves upon the histories of this period in ways that are only slowly becoming clear.”

More recent scholarship has taken a more critical look at the impact and power of education. In the 1970s, using Marxist critiques, some theorists came to see education through the lens of “reproduction theory.” Extending the initially economic argument, thinkers like Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron examined how educational processes can reproduce, not transform, cultural and social inequalities. Rather than a “liberating” force, education (and more specifically institutional education) was viewed as an extension of the state apparatus. From this perspective, hegemonic structures were seen to dictate the outcomes of a ubiquitous and slightly nefarious educational system. In light of poststructuralist critiques of knowledge and power, contemporary works have become more nuanced in their study of the education in the Middle East. Several recent works have been published with the express purpose of rebutting the strict dichotomy of secular versus religious and modern versus traditional schooling and to rethink the impact of education on society. However, despite different conclusions regarding the nature of education, these works tend to emphasize the power and institutional nature of education as a key agent in historical change.

24 Benjamin Fortna, Imperial Classroom: Islam, the State, and Education in the Late Ottoman Empire (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 40–41.
In the Egyptian case, perhaps the most influential work on education has been Timothy Mitchell’s *Colonising Egypt*. Applying Michele Foucault’s ideas on disciplinary power, Mitchell argues that the government educational system that arose in Egypt worked to instill particular bureaucratic values in students. The principles of orderliness, discipline, uniformity, and structure became social imperatives: “new government schools were needed to form the proper mentality in the individual, to make every citizen industrious.” In focusing on the intellectual production of Egyptian and colonial elites regarding their vision and plans for Egyptian education, Mitchell’s conclusions quite naturally reflect their hopes and aspirations for the country. However, with this focus, it is easy for the structural aspects of education to trump the actual impact of the cultural and social changes they produced. In other words, what results is a disproportionate emphasis on what education was aiming to produce rather than what it actually did produce.

Meanwhile, initial work in the study of literacy also was deeply influenced by modernization theory and was largely preoccupied with the role of language in the development of “modern” versus “traditional” societies. The oral-written divide became a dominant theme in the evaluation of cultures across the world and the breadth and influence of a particular society’s written tradition became the measure of civilization. At the apex stood Western European nations and the United States which had not only created a highly literate intellectual culture, but through the spread of mass educational systems in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, had also made basic literacy an

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27 Ibid., 108.
integral part of the social fabric for people of all classes. By the 1960s, while less obviously Eurocentric, locating and defining the oral-written divide both within and between cultures still wielded significant influence.28

In response to this “great divide” model, anthropologists studying literacy have proposed a new approach to literacy studies. They explicitly reject the idea that literacy is a sort of neutral technology that, when applied to various societies, produces fixed and expected results.29 Scholars like Brian Street and others have countered that literacy is not a unitary concept, but rather is bound in time and “inextricably linked to cultural power structures in society.”30 In this alternative framework, called the “ideological” or New Literacy Studies model, the idea of a universally defined literacy fractures into “literacies” built around “the idea that reading, writing, and meaning are always situated within specific social practices within specific Discourses.”31 To put it differently, various kinds of literacies (in the plural) can be studied in their original contexts, without reference to outside cultures or models of development, and without

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30 Brian Street, Cross-Cultural Approaches to Literacy (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 7. Also see Street, Social Literacies.

assumptions about what they mean to the intellectual and social development of the individuals or cultures in questions.

For a historian, the particular appeal of this New Literacy Studies approach is the way in which it allows student agency, literacy practices, and cultural production to come to the fore of studies that look at the acquisition and outcomes of literacy. While earlier theorists characterized education and literacy as social forces operating through hegemonic power structures, more recent work has sought to open “the black box” of education and literacy and look at what is actually happening in schools, homes, and communities. Starting in the late 1970s, anthropological works by Paul Willis, Shirley Brice-Heath, and others began to reinsert the concept of agency and question models that saw education as monolithic. Poststructuralist theories have influenced researchers to further rethink relationships between individual actions and the larger social structures of society, suggesting “a dialectical relationship between structure and agency, and between micro- and macro-level contexts.” While structures include the social, cultural, economic, and/or political forces at work, agency allows us to consider the “contours of action, resistance, and accommodation” at the individual and communal level. Similarly, these anthropological works have also relied on the concept

of practice in order to pry deeper into education and literacy, as a way of
“conceptualizing the link between the activities of reading and writing and the social
structures in which they are embedded and which they help shape.”\(^{35}\) Literacy practices
move beyond the theoretical of what literacy should be to the actual of how literacy was
used. This includes people’s awareness of literacy, constructions of literacy and
discourses of literacy, how people talk about and make sense of literacy.”\(^{36}\)

Taken together, individual agency and practices provide the backbone for
understanding the process of education through the lens of what has been called *cultural
production*.\(^{37}\) Rather than looking at education either as a reproductive structure driven
from above or as a system strictly moved by individual action, the cultural production
model seeks to balance the meanings that students, educators, administrators, and other
interested parties bring to the learning process. Knowledge is not simply transmitted
from teacher to student; rather it is mediated by the larger cultural understandings of the
subjects and objects of the educational process. We can then view culture and
education:

as a continual process of creating meaning in social and material
contexts, replacing a conceptualization of culture as a static, unchanging
body of knowledge ‘transmitted’ between generations.\(^{38}\)


\(^{36}\) Ibid.


In other words, ideology and learning are not passive elements, but are contested, reformulated, and, yes, often reproduced, by actors who are making choices that make sense to them from within their shared understanding and collective experiences. By looking at culture as the product of various inputs, education becomes an important site of a continually remaking and shifting set of cycles. Teachers, students, state bureaucracies, and community interests all have a part to play in how educational experiences create and transmit knowledge onto future generations.

Given the important tools that literacy studies can provide and the contemporary concerns about high illiteracy rates, it is unfortunate that the topic of literacy has not received much attention from Middle East historians. Anthropologists like Dale Eickelman and Helen Boyle, along with developmental psychologist Daniel Wagner have looked at education and literacy in Morocco, often providing a unique perspective on how Quranic literacy and religious education continue to influence national educational models. At the other geographic end of the Middle East, Brian Street’s initial anthropological work on literacy was based on his research on Iranian makātib literacy. Perhaps, the most sustained and complete recent study that deals with Arabic language literacy and its transformations in the modern era, albeit in the legal context,

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39 For a good overview of the oral and textual issues at play in early Islamic history see Gregor Schoeler, *The Genesis of Literature in Islam: From the Aural to the Read*, Rev. ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009). The rest of this section will be primarily focused on the early modern and modern period.
has been Brinkley Messick’s *The Calligraphic State*.\(^{43}\) In his wide-ranging examination of the idea of writing and authority of Islamic legal texts in Yemen, Messick presents researchers with new insights into the interplay of oral and writing transmission, the importance of the scribal tradition, and the inherent differences between “open” legal texts and codified systems of law. In engaging the authoritativeness of texts and their acquisition, use, and transformation, Messick offers one of the few examples of how “Muslim societies elaborated diverse, historically specific textual worlds.”\(^{44}\)

Despite the centrality of Egypt and the Levant to the literary movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the types of literacies produced in these intellectual centers have received scant attention. Some interesting work has been done on the readership of the new newspaper and journal presses\(^{45}\) and several studies have looked at the growing prominence of women authors and the issue of female education and writing.\(^{46}\) The only work that has looked at literacy specifically has been Nelly Hanna’s work, *In Praise of Books*, on book culture from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century.\(^{47}\) In her work, Hanna uses probate records of private libraries to provide an innovative and rich look at educational and literary culture before the widespread use of


\(^{44}\) Ibid., 24–25.


print. In the process, she touches upon issues that remain important through the modern era, particularly how partial literacy and “low-level” everyday uses of written language were used by broad segments of Egyptian society, well beyond traditional elites. In another work, Hanna has directly addressed the inapplicability of the old model of literacy studies and the so-called “great divide” in the context of the Islamic world before the modern age.48 She, like others, suggests that with regards to literacy in the Middle East, “there is room to understand literacy in the context of the social and cultural conditions around it and one can see both their impact on literacy and the impact of literacy on them.”49

Meanwhile, recent scholarship on the Middle East has come to challenge the “great divide” model from another vantage point. Work by Ziad Fahmy, Carmen Gitre, and others look at modern culture, politics, and society beyond the textual world and argue, quite convincingly, that the interplay of oral and written culture often functioned in tandem, feeding on one another to reshape everything from social mores to political movements.50 The relationship between the written and spoken word and the communities in which they appeared was evolving as it became more structured and widely available to people who may or may not have been literate in any bureaucratic sense. In a way my present work serves as a corollary to these works by focusing on the

49 Ibid., 192–193.
mechanisms by which (mainly textual) literacies served as a backbone for these fundamental transformations in both the oral and textual culture of the time.

By drawing upon both educational history and literacy studies, I intend to produce the first study on the Middle East that looks beyond only schooling and institutional imperatives to incorporate the practices of Egyptians as they sought to remake their individual and communal circumstances through various kinds of literacies. Ultimately, the discourse and practices associated with literacy transformed larger social dynamics like gender relations, public participation, and individual actions in measurable and significant ways. In essence, this is a study of literacy not only in a particular historical context, but also as a central agent of social change.

**Theoretical Approach: The Power of Literacy?**

The central question that underlies this present work is: Does literacy matter to societies and, if so, how? In answer to the first half of the question, one does not need to look far. On its own, literacy does not make a society or person more knowledgeable, successful, reasonable, nationalistic, pious, empowered, or a myriad of other adjectives that can and have been used to describe the importance of literacy. Nevertheless, as I will argue, literacy is powerful. As a concept and ideology of reform, literacy and (even more so) illiteracy have underwritten ambitious government programs to create mass educational systems, have influenced how we enumerate and evaluate populations, and have created an undying devotion to social reform by way of letters and words. As a set of practices, literacies continually remake our connection to the written word through
everyday actions that involve reading and writing for ourselves, work, families, and communities.

In order to frame my work and answer the second question of exactly how these literacies impacted Egyptian society at the turn of the twentieth century, I will be looking at two topics: what Egyptians thought and said about literacy and what Egyptians did with literacy. If these seem like two very different approaches to literacy, they are. The idea of literacy is about discourse in the Foucauldian sense: a system of thoughts, ideas, and practices that shape our conception of intellectual and physical subjects. This constellation of meanings ultimately cannot be divorced from the power structures within which they operate and which provide legitimization and the rules of engagement as we negotiate our understandings of the world. In the case of twentieth century Egypt, several structural changes were contributing to a particular discourse on literacy: the colonial imposition of the British protectorate, the government’s growing sphere of interest in everyday matters, and the emerging class of educated elites who preached a gospel of educational betterment. In line with positivist trends in Europe and other parts of the Middle East, reform and social engineering went hand and hand with literacy promotion at the highest levels. The prevailing discourse cast literacy promotion as an increasingly unitary, definable, and, most importantly, measurable social goal. However, as a set of practices, this unitary literacy fractured into its multiple and variegated directions as individuals and groups used these skills to

52 For a survey of these social engineering projects in action, see Omnia El Shakry, *The Great Social Laboratory: Subjects of Knowledge in Colonial and Postcolonial Egypt* (Stanford Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2007).
reproduce, challenge, and transform their social circumstances. Looking at both the discourse and practices of literacy highlights the natural tension between the structural and the individual factors that drive historical narratives. The fact is that the story of literacy at the turn of the twentieth century cannot be told without both.

The importance of this attention to the discourse and practices of literacies is twofold. First, this study sheds new light onto our understanding of education and mitigates the overall tendency of educational history to simply echo institutional history. Education histories often seek to cover a lot of territory under the rubric of learning: different subject matters, teaching methodologies, and pedagogical agendas. In the time period in question, schools of various types were expanding dramatically and to extrapolate from the experience of either the government school system (as the modern, secular archetype) or the Azhari system (as the traditional, religious one) for topics as diverse as math to religion is a gross simplification. Likewise, to study either system in isolation is to ignore the growing convergences happening in society regarding the necessity of a particularly utilitarian education, while also glossing over the differences in how a skill like literacy was used in different kinds of school within (and beyond) both systems. At the same time, this type of educational history highlights the influence of that subset of society that actually undertook formal education which, even across all types of schools, represented a minority of Egyptians. Once we focus on literacy as a particular set of skills—reading, writing, and their related practices—historians can begin to look beyond the confines of schools or those who had access to education. Literacies become a particular kind of expertise that was widespread in
society and that could be employed even by those who were never in school or technically “illiterate.” By examining not only the discourse surrounding literacy, but also the practices associated with it we can begin to crack the institutional silo of education.

This approach requires a delicate balance between the totalizing aspects of normative discourses on literacy and the actual ways it manifested in everyday interactions. It is true that with the growth of a mass educational system, the Egyptian government was able to wield unparalleled influence on its youngest citizen. However, there is a flip side to this power. While this work is deeply indebted to the work of Tim Mitchell’s *Colonising Egypt*, his assertion that with the 1868 Organic Law, “learning, in every detail, had very suddenly become the state’s active and extensive concern, a field of organization, a major realm in which what is called ‘the state’ was to exist and build relations of power”53 mistakes government aspirations for the actual results of these initiatives. It is undeniable that governments undertook modernizing project that sought to measure, control, and guide ever more aspects of Egyptians’ lives. In fact, it would not be difficult to read the sources used in this current study as part of the forward march of these totalitarian mechanisms to bring the very medium of language within its control. However, the aspirations of a mass educational system were not absolute in their reach or implementation. In fact it took decades for something even resembling a mass educational system to arise as a pursuable government goal in the 1920s and 30s.

It would take several more decades before a true mass educational system was actually

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53 Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt*, 76.
implemented in any systematic and wholesale way.\textsuperscript{54} Even then, the relatively low official literacy rate in Egypt to this day indicates that these systems have never been thoroughly successful in even their most basic goal: creating measurably literate Egyptians.

Furthermore, among the many subjects that educational institutions sought to instill, literacy was a particularly mutable skill. Even when schools, curricula, good society, and intellectual leaders worked to inculcate particular practices, writing and reading could be easily deployed for unsanctioned and “dangerous” uses. The subversive nature of reading and particularly writing for those who were not wealthy, urban, and male, were not lost on the would-be educators of the time. As such, they sought to control textual materials and coax students towards the “good literacy” that they believed would strengthen the existing social order by way of the individual, the family, and the nation as a whole. However, every indication, and human nature being what it is, suggests literacy was not so easily monopolized. Love stories were read, political pamphlets were distributed, and reading and writing became a means for many to express their unfettered views. Petitioners used prevailing literacy discourse to make their case for improving their economic circumstances. Women used writing to thrust themselves and their words into the public sphere. Egyptians often preferred fiction, romance, and adventure to more socially beneficial and intellectually edifying reading materials.

\textsuperscript{54} Cochran, \textit{Education in Egypt}, 22–42.
In this study I am aware of the subtle balance that must be struck between the everyday practices and agency of individual Egyptians and the more systematic aspects of literacy promotion that educational history tends to favor. To this end I have striven to bring both aspects of literacy to the fore: those that highlight how Egyptians used literacy skills in its myriad possibilities while simultaneously being influenced by the agendas of various types of schooling and public discussions that extolled the virtues and necessities of a particularly narrow sort of functional literacy. In discussing both, I hope to return the agency of the individual to the narrative of Egyptian education, even as I acknowledge the power of governments and intellectual discourses to shape the form of these literacy practices.

The second contribution my approach to literacy will provide is in showing how literacies were able to transform social understandings and relationships with the written word, particularly in the public sphere. Reading and writing can be deeply personal and isolating practices. In fact, as more individuals became literate, many communal practices would eventually give way to individual literacies. The space and mediators of literacy shifted away from the community scribe and the group readings of newspapers and letters aloud to the more private realms of personal writing and silent reading. However, at the turn of the twentieth century, Egypt was still very much in transition. The male literacy rates, even for major urban areas, were only 20 to 30% and communal practices still dominated social life. Furthermore, reading and writing, coupled with the new technologies of print, opened new possibilities for communication among people in public. This type of public communication—via newspapers, journals,
public petitions, circulating books and pamphlets—had profound implications for the development of an Egyptian national consciousness, public displays and protests, and the role of women in the public sphere. Once again, the discourse about these public literacies as well as the practices they supported both play a crucial role in the transformation of public writing.

Central to all these changes is the idea of visibility and its implications for public space. Indeed, written language itself is a type of visual disclosure: transposing the aural into the physical world. Once words are written they are no longer ephemeral, they become fixed in a corporeal space that can be decoded by anyone with access to the text and the ability to read. The use of printing presses only compounds the visibility and latent power of these texts as they can be multiplied, moved, spread, and re-seen over and over again. Ideas, complaints, and requests that were once private or semiprivate can be shared broadly. Debates behind closed doors can reach large segments of the society. In the same way, once many women began writing, they too became visible, named, and known beyond their immediate social sphere. As will be discussed, for women this written visibility was a double edged sword. On the one hand, writing in the privacy of the home was a more sheltered and acceptable physical assertion into the public space than say leaving the home unveiled or working in male dominated workplaces. Yet, on the other hand, writing and being “seen” (with or without a pseudonym) could be interpreted as a public invitation to notoriety and an unacceptable exposure of the female to the largely male, outside world. Nevertheless, many female writers did become part of a larger community of women, activists,
reformers, and public intellectuals who were rethinking and critiquing Egyptian society and, thus, becoming visible in the public arena.

Written language has always had the potential to reach broad audiences as an extension of the communicative nature of oral language. However an audience, a “listening” public that is engaged and ready to interact with public writing and communication, must exist for this potential to be realized. Locating this “public audience” has been the work of many historians. Gregor Schoeler has argued that, in Arabic, the first “published” composition, a text created and disseminated with the public in mind, was Sibawayhi’s 8th century grammar\textsuperscript{55} and by the 9th century the famous litterateur, al-Jahiz, was composing works for elite as well as mass audiences.\textsuperscript{56} Other researchers have looked at pre-modern public spheres in the Muslim world—textual and personal networks usually led by religious leaders and institutions that are neither strictly private, nor state-run.\textsuperscript{57} Between the private and the official, this public space is one in which people can engage each other in full view of a community that stretches beyond what is strictly local or familiar. One can argue that most societies with at least some semblance of a written tradition have developed a textually based public sphere at one time or another.

\textsuperscript{55} Schoeler, \textit{The Genesis of Literature in Islam}, 87. Aside from the Quran, which is its own special case.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 104.
\textsuperscript{57} Miriam Hoexter, S. N Eisenstadt, and Nehemia Levtzion, eds., \textit{The Public Sphere in Muslim Societies} (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002).
However, in modern societies, the public sphere and language have taken on new relevance.\textsuperscript{58} The idea of the public sphere described by Jürgen Habermas is a space of rational debate (carried on, historically, by middle class men) that allows citizens to assert their vision of the collective good and effect change in their societies.\textsuperscript{59} Habermas locates the beginnings of this movement in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in parts of Europe and sees in them the underpinnings of modern civil society and social movements. One of the central conditions of these public spheres was the emergence of an autonomous press that allowed news and debates to enter into the social awareness of the reading public. Benedict Anderson has elaborated on the role of the press in developing national consciousness, emphasizing the importance of what he termed \textit{print-capitalism}.\textsuperscript{60} Anderson likens the daily reader of a newspaper to a proto-citizen who is connected to his/her fellow compatriots. The reader is:

\begin{quote}
continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life… fiction seeps quietly and continuously into reality, creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations.\textsuperscript{61}
\end{quote}

The dissemination and use of printed technologies allowed imagined communities to develop in powerful new ways and ultimately set the stage for modern nation state.

Taken together, Habermas and Anderson’s view of communal, modern life as shaped by

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[58] For an interesting set of approaches and good introduction, see Armando Salvatore and Mark LeVine, eds., \textit{Religion, Social Practice, and Contested Hegemonies: Reconstructing the Public Sphere in Muslim Majority Societies} (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).
\item[61] Ibid., 35–36.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
nation-states is inconceivable without the written language, audience, and dissemination possible with literate publics.\textsuperscript{62}

In this present work, my objective is to focus on an expanded understanding of literacy as it relates to public space. In the process, I do not wish to restate or offer to reformulate the argument that the press and its relationship to the public sphere significantly transformed Egyptian conceptions of national sentiment or communal interest.\textsuperscript{63} Suffice to say, I accept the premise that the public sphere was transformed by print technologies and a growing, literate readership. What I do not accept are the boundaries of the definition of “literate.” Rather, what I wish to provide is a study of the literacy practices and gendered uses of the written word that reached far beyond the traditionally male, urban, and highly visible textual public sphere. In short, rather than limiting my scope to textual material as such and the producers and consumers of these works, I will be looking at a range of literacy practices that embodied interactions with public space via the written word. These interactions, between the act of reading or writing and the public, between the word and its social implications, between the use and negotiation inherent in deploying written text, are at the heart of this work.

While I am focusing on the historical specificity of the Egyptian case, the implications of this kind of approach is much broader. As an example, let me return to


\textsuperscript{63} Armando Salvatore and Mark Le Vine provide a useful summary of the applicability and limitations of Habermas’s public sphere to modern Middle East societies in Armando Salvatore and Mark LeVine, “Reconstructing the Public Sphere in Muslim Majority Societies,” in \textit{Religion, Social Practice, and Contested Hegemonies: Reconstructing the Public Sphere in Muslim Majority Societies}, ed. Armando Salvatore and Mark LeVine (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).
the idea of “masters and mistresses of the pen.” The term “masters of the pen” or *arbāb al-aqlām* is a long standing designation, often contrasted with *arbāb al-ṣuyūf* or “masters of the sword.” Between these two elements, the sword and the pen, there has grown a large literature of symbolism and debate. Which is stronger? Which is more important? Which is more effectual? The ensuing discussion has become a proxy for debates about the primacy of action versus contemplation, of combat versus scholarship, and of conquest versus rule. In essence, it becomes a surrogate for the question: what does it mean when someone embodies the action and ways of a “lettered” person? The corresponding antithesis for “mistresses of the pen” was *rabbāt al-buyūt* or “mistresses of the home.” If the “natural” or primordial nature of men was located on the battlefield, then that of women was the familial environment. Although there are no similar historical discussions about the contrast between the “pen” and the “home,” as we shall explore further in Chapter 4, the implications of women entering the public sphere by way of the written word was nevertheless controversial and contested. The embodiment of literacy for men was a movement from action to scholarship, from farming to the office, and from old ideas of Egyptianess to new one. Along with this movement, came class concerns and fears of “lazy educated farmers” and of masses “too bookish” to engage in manual labor. For women, literacies had a very different implication. It was a move from the familial to the public and from the secluded to the visible. Different suspicions came to the fore: the trope for the “mistress

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of the pen” became the “Westernized woman” who too freely consort ed with men and the girl too caught up in books to look after her duties to family and nation. Looking at literacies as gendered and embodied practices allows us to understand the implications and discomforts associated with increased literacy, the perceived power of writing, and the contested nature of literacy for newly educated segments of Middle Eastern societies.

**Methodology & Sources: Locating Literacies**

Although literacy can refer to any sort of competency in a particular body of knowledge, for the purposes of this study I will be focusing on a broadly defined engagement with (or exclusion from) the written word. However, in using the term, I must acknowledge the problems inherent in referring to “literacy” in an Arabic language context. To begin with, there is actually no one word for “literacy” in Arabic. The closest corollary are references to the composite skills of reading and writing referred to in phrases like *al-ilmām bi-l-qirā’a wa-l-kitāba* (competency in reading and writing). Nevertheless, the whole range of educated and learned people, whom we can call literate in different senses, certainly did exist: many who could only “read” particular texts (like the Quran) either from memory or books, some who were scribes who transferred oral dictation to written text, yet others who were masters of the Arabic literary arts, and many other learned interactions with the written word. In discussing “literacy,” I am using it as a proxy for these various textual interactions. In

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65 As I will return to in Chapter 6, there is a very long history associated with the term for illiteracy, which is *ummiyya*.  
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this context, the New Literacy Studies model of looking at literacies in the plural makes particular sense. There was simply no one way to be literate in Egyptian society.

These rich variations of literacies also present a methodological challenge. To loosely paraphrase Yasir Suliman, when language is your subject, everything ever written becomes your data.\textsuperscript{66} The locales of literacies are almost innumerable: published works of fiction and non-fiction, private diaries and correspondences, poetry, court records, business interactions, religious litanies and practices, legal texts, schools, government bureaucracies, street signs and displays, etc. In order to narrow down this body of literature, I have chosen several case studies of literacies to highlight my larger thesis about social change and the power of literacies to impact public discourse. I have also made some trenchant choices: to focus on prose writing and not poetry and to largely ignore material that vacillated between the oral and written, like theater performances, religious observances and rites, songs, and speeches.\textsuperscript{67} When confronted with the vast scope of potential research materials, excluding particular genres was often the surest way to bring the project down to manageable proportions. Furthermore, other topics that came to the fore at the literary and linguistic moment of the early twentieth century—such as the contest between colloquial and classical Arabic, the simplification of classical Arabic for public consumption, the impact of new literary

\textsuperscript{66} In his work on nationalism, Suleiman has noted that “Arabic does not constitute the data for this book, but pronouncements about Arabic as a marker of national identity do.” Yasir Suleiman, \textit{The Arabic Language and National Identity: A Study in Ideology} (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 14.

forms and styles, debates about Latinizing the Arabic script, and shifting language usages—while often referred to in order to highlight certain points about the nature of literacy changes, are not the subject of this work.  

As for the choice of case studies, they largely centered on the twin concerns of public discourse and practices of literacy. To this end, Chapter 2 focuses on elite notions of education and literacy and their centrality to the various reform projects of the era. In this chapter I focus on how local and colonial bureaucrats, women activists, religious thinkers, and nationalists all viewed literacy promotion as a means of furthering their political and social agendas. Strikingly, their vision for the future of Egypt—as a colonial holding, a national homeland, or an egalitarian society—had profound implications for the types of literacies they wished to encourage among their compatriots. The subtext of this “discourse of reform” was the pervasive view that literacy was to be managed and controlled in order to ensure that certain groups of people were getting the “proper” literacy for their station or gender.

In the next two chapters I turn to the intersection of these discourses with the everyday practice of Egyptians in several contexts. In Chapter 3, I look at the various types of literacy practices that were occurring “on the ground,” particularly among newly literate groups. These practices are facilitated by several developments of the turn of the twentieth century: mainly, the increased accessibility to printed materials of

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all types and the emergence and exponential growth of a national postal system. Both innovations made written materials more easily accessible to the literate and illiterate alike— as people employed scribes to communicate with their friends and families and gathered in communal areas to listen to a reading of the most recent newspaper. I end the chapter with a study of the development of petitions during this period and how this age-old form of communication was quickly adapted to the changing discourses and technologies of the early twentieth century. In Chapter 4, I discuss the issue of gender and class-based literacy. The contested nature of female literacy, in particular, highlights the fissures in the discourse of literacy promotion. Rather than an unmitigated benefit, literacy was also seen as a potential new source of corruption as women and those of the lower class engaged in “dangerous” reading and “subversive” writing. I end the chapter with a discussion of the emergence of women into the visible public sphere by means of writing and how women sought to negotiate and redefine this transgression as a compliment to their domestic roles as “mistresses of the home.”

Chapter 5 examines the growth of institutional reading and writing in and outside the classroom. In order for Arabic to become a language of instruction for ever-growing numbers of Egyptian children, educators needed to develop new ways to condense the very lengthy and experiential tradition of Arabic study into courses that could be taught in a few short years. Attempts to modernize the language were highly influenced by this pressing need and textbooks served as medium for much of simplification and streamlining of classical Arabic into what is known as modern standard Arabic. Furthermore, the school environment also served as a new locale for
new reading and writing practices that were at once highly controlled, yet difficult to ultimately restrict. Students were able to re-channel their writing and reading skills towards unsanctioned behaviors, even as they often echoed the many “civic” and “national” discourses the schools sought to instill in them.

Finally, in Chapter 6, I examine to the meta-narrative created around the dangers of illiteracy and how it should be measured and resolved. In this chapter I trace the genealogy of the concept of illiteracy, from its often positive connotations to a term that came to represent social backwardness and underdevelopment. This change was quite strikingly manifested in the growing concerns of the 1920s about the social danger of illiteracy and the first real government attempt to irradiate illiteracy from the population. Without a new concept of “illiteracy” the idea of mass education and the opportunities and exclusions it entailed could not have been possible for Egyptian society.

In order to pursue these issues, I have relied on a variety of sources: textbooks and pedagogical materials, petitions from Egyptians to government offices, journal articles, written works by reformers of various backgrounds, government reports and documents, postal statistics, census data, and works of fiction. My primary concern as I have presented these materials is to distinguish actions from aspirations and practices from prescriptions. However, as is often the case, structural discourses and individual practices are not distinct entities and the complexity of the resulting interactions is both intriguing and instructive. For example, a poor Egyptian woman petitioning the government for the opportunity to send her sons to elite schools was relying on several
types of literacy practices and discourses. Her hopes for her children, her assumptions about what motivates her government, her several attempts to petition various groups and government offices, and the different scribes she employed in making her case all indicate that practices and discourse were intertwined in her written quest of a better education for her sons. Literacies were pursued by individuals on their own terms and for benefits they deemed important. However, the contours of these interests and pursuits are determined by larger discourses about the benefits and necessity of skills like reading and writing and the structural forces that determined how accessible they were to the average person. Ultimately, literacies were used by the illiterate and literate of all classes and, cumulatively, reshaped the use and importance of written words in the public sphere. Reading these varied sources for the meta-narratives and literacy practices they represent have been central to this study.

**Conclusion**

There has been a sustained interest in the intellectual history of the Middle East and the larger Muslim world, particularly in light of the “problems” that emanate from that part of the world: religious extremism, lack of representative structures, and populations mired in economic stagnation. Protesters, religious movements, feminists, national and pan-Arab ideologues, and repressive governments have all used the larger and expanded public sphere to make their case to the “Arab street.” Most recently, young protesters in the January 25th revolution used a type of electronic literacy that would have been unrecognizable to an earlier generation to coordinate their movements,
spread information about their demands, and ultimately win the public relations battle against the government. However, these public forums of debate and ideological dissemination are little understood. How are ideas communicated and spread throughout society? How do individuals internalize, contest, or transform these ideas for their own circumstance? How are various kinds of communication deployed both above and below the radar? This is where literacies matter. They are the medium and mediator of these public interactions. How people use and perceive the written word, in physical or electronic form, determine the success and spread of collective identities, public opinion, educational programs, and indigenous secular and religious social movements. Contrary to the hopes of many reformers, literacy did not open the gates to modernity nor usher in a new era of social nirvana. However, the idea of literacy and many of the practices it informed did change the course of Egypt’s social history: making public protest, women, writing, and debates more visible to the Egyptian collective. This work is aimed at those social historians, educational researchers, anthropologists, and policy makers who are interested in the masters and mistresses of literacies—all along the literacy continuum—who both were remade by the written word and used it to remake their world.
Chapter 2
The Politics of Literacies

Introduction

Muhammad al-Muwaylihi’s *Fatra min al-Zamān*, which first appeared in 1898 was one of the early experiments in social commentary for the budding newspaper presses. Satirizing everyone from mayors, lawyers, judges, to donkey “cab” drivers, al-Muwaylihi provided a scathing picture of his contemporaries through the eyes of a narrator attempting to show a resurrected Pasha around modernizing Egypt. Although a work of fiction, al-Muwaylihi’s piercing analysis of Egyptian society touched on many of the novelties of his time, and the changes in literacy did not go unnoticed. ‘Isa, the narrator, gives a bleak assessment of the literary world of his time: although books have become abundant, people do not purchase them; whatever is learned in school is promptly forgotten; no one appreciates literature or bothers to read.69 Over the course of several chapters, the main characters attend a series of social gatherings with the express purpose of learning about the literary pursuits of the thinking classes of the era.70

The result is a dismal but illuminating view of the very different ways Arabic literacy suffused social life. Interestingly, for each of the caricatured groups, the literacy

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70 Interestingly, two of these four chapters were removed from the fourth, “school edition” which appeared in 1927.
described has not only a particular style, but also a distinct “location.” For an assembly of religious scholars (ʿulamāʾ), the world of books, newspapers, and government schools is contrasted with the scholarship, commentaries, and expositions of the Azhari system. When a shaykh attempts to write an article for a newspaper, it is so effusive and flowery that it is almost incomprehensible. Although the skaykh receives high praise for its eloquence from his colleagues, the narrator makes clear that bringing “Azhariʾ”-style Arabic into a newspaper was foolish at best.71 Meanwhile, a group of merchants—themselves uneducated—debate the merits of education in governments schools for their sons. Although they themselves may not have had conventional education, they are exposed to literacy by having one of their sons fetch a newspaper to read it to them.72 A group of civil servants, likewise, gather as one of them reads a newspaper. However, every headline and news item is met with sarcasm and the meeting eventually devolves into a political dispute.73 In al-Muwayliḥī’s final portrayal, the highest classes use books and magazines as mere accessories to thumb through aimlessly while “their eyes were focused on the mirror so that they could enjoy the reflected view.”74 Al-Muwayliḥī makes a point to note that these elites choose to speak in a foreign language instead of Arabic. The literacy of the mosques, the literacy of the market, the literacy of the government, and the literacy of the palaces, each existed in separate gatherings and separate discursive locales.

72 Ibid., 246–249.
73 Ibid., 256–259.
74 Ibid., 260.
His social critique aside, al-Muwaylihi’s vignettes of literary life at the turn of the twentieth century can be read as a portrait of conflicting literacies – in the plural. The literacy of newspapers differed in content and style from that of Azhari expositions. Literacy for the highest classes was taken for granted, but for the middle classes, it functioned as a stepping stone to government posts or political activism. The literacy of the government schools served a different purpose than that of the mosque-school. These diverse modes of literacy—these literacies—underscore the changing landscape of Arabic language of the time. At the core, the groups al-Muwaylihi describes represent different types of education in the Arabic language: elites for whom it was just a language among many, the budding civil service class for whom it was a means of economic advancement, and the shaykhs for whom Arabic represented a particularly specialized realm of moral and religious authority.

The way in which the multitude of literacies that existed in the Egyptian society were perceived and promoted at the turn of the twentieth century reflects the extraordinary political and social power of literacy. Beyond the mere ability to read and write, Arabic literacy was a contested form of knowledge: who defined it, what form it would take, how it would be imparted to future generations, and what it meant for those who practiced it all became part of a larger debate about the direction of the nation. Literacy was not just a neutral technology or set of skills. Rather, when promoted and spread through a society such as Egypt, it represented the various hopes and dreams that Egyptians had for each other and their nation. While most agreed that literacy was
imperative to the success of country, different groups and factions of Egyptian society saw Arabic literacy as a way to reshape the country in their own interests. Nationalists, feminists, colonial bureaucrats, and religious reformers all expressed their deep concern about the state of Arabic literacy, even as they pursued their own agendas. Not unlike al-Muwaylihî, it was hard for these groups to look at Egyptian society and not see the potential dangers and opportunities that literacy provided for their vision of the future.

For this chapter, I will be examining the major elite players in the politics of Arabic literacy. For the sake of simplicity I will be looking at bureaucrats (colonial and local), nationalists, feminists, and Islamic reformers in turn. Viewed from this vantage point, this chapter will present an unabashedly “privileged” view of literacy, produced by the already literate of society. Each group had a well-established stake in the future of the Arabic language for their society. However, the purpose behind the promotion of Arabic literacy differed significantly with each group; the reason that a colonial administrator promoted Arabic literacy differed from that of a nationalist which differed from a feminist, etc.

The fact that literacy was not only contested, but re-shaped and re-conceptualized according to the interests of various social, religious, and political groups is perhaps unsurprising to a contemporary reader. The proverbial “political footballs” that are education, language, and literacy are regularly used in the domestic

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75 No particular group was monolithic in its views and there were certainly individuals who could be classified in more than one of these categories. As such, I will be highlighting the ambiguities and cross-over when possible.

76 In the next chapter, I will be examining how literacy practices were changing for a wider segment of Egyptian society.
politics and policies of nations well beyond the Middle East. Nevertheless, there are
several benefits of this examination of the Egyptian case. First, the fact that these
debates have a long-standing pedigree in Arab societies should give some historical
context for those who see the echoes of these arguments reflected in the political and
social discourse of today. Literacy, its importance, and how to promote it in Muslim
societies continue to confound policy makers the world over. In Egypt, the way in
which various groups could co-opt and adopt a “discourse of reform” shows how
various stakeholders were willing to “talk the talk” of literacy promotion. Second, the
aim of this chapter is also to complicate the relationship between this “discourse of
reform” and the actual policies these groups were willing to put into practice. As we
shall see in later chapters, literacy was, for the most part, deemed a social good.
However, the seed of anxiety related to increased public literacy was never completely
absent from the discourse of elite actors. Last, although this chapter emphasizes the
realm of theory and intellectual thought, these debates would ultimately deeply inform
the kinds of actual literacy practices Egyptians would adopt and which are the subject of
the next chapter. This connection between discourse and practice is one of the central
themes of this work. My intention with this introduction to the politics of literacies is
that it will encourage scholars examining the contested nature of certain types of
knowledge to take a critical look at the role elite discourse played in domestic policies.

The Egyptian Government and Arabic Literacy
During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Arabic was only one of several languages in use within the Egyptian government. The growing bureaucracy, which had long been operating in both Ottoman Turkish and Arabic, had only recently begun to use French and some Italian as languages of administration when the British occupation in 1882 began. Over the course of the few decades, French, English and, to a lesser extent, Ottoman Turkish dominated the higher echelons of the bureaucracy and the communications within the ruling class. Meanwhile Arabic was used at the local level and in all administration that had direct contact with the populace.  

Despite Arabic’s rather inglorious position within the government, Arabic literacy among bureaucrats and the population in general was an area of concern for government administrators. As early as 1880, a government commission on education in Egypt noted the particularly abysmal state of the Arabic language among government school graduates. After over 12 years of Arabic instruction in school, “graduates enter government service without having the ability to write an official letter, an administrative report, or judgment.” As a result, these officials heavily relied upon low-level secretaries and scribes to compose most of their written texts. Given the amount of effort expended in teaching Arabic, the 1880 commission recommended that the Ministry of Education research new methodologies and reorganize Arabic instruction at all levels of government schools. The following year, in an article entitled “The Problem of Writing,” the editor of the official government journal, a young

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78 DWQ, Majlis al-Wuzara‘, Nizārat al-Ma‘ārif, Box 5A, Folder 4 (#0075-044101), Taqrīr Qāmisūn Tanẓīm al-Ma‘ārif al-‘Umumiyya (10 Nov 1880), 45.
Muhammad ʿAbduh, expressed his own dismay at the obscure language, lack of clarity, and misuse of words and phrases that was rampant in the Egyptian government.  

With the start of the British occupation in 1882, literacy took on a dimension of cultural and linguistic competition. Although French would attain a clear cultural ascendancy among the upper classes in Egypt, the English language of the colonizer became the language of power and access to power in the bureaucratic realm. This linguistic separation between the rulers and ruled was not unusual in Egyptian history. Nevertheless, the extent to which the British occupation went to promote both English and Arabic, in strikingly different educational contexts, was unprecedented. Unlike other colonial endeavors which sought to “civilize” the colonized by forcing Western language and culture on indigenous peoples, in the Egyptian case, Cromer advocated an idea of strict linguistic segregation. British administrators were aided in part by the Egyptian elites who benefited from this separation and who believed that “higher standards” were maintained by keeping lower class students out of elite government schools. In terms of language, Western style education in a foreign language was

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82 For a case study in the former, see James Collins and Richard Blot, Literacy and Literacies: Texts, Power, and Identity (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), Chapter 6. For the differences between the North African case with French colonialism and the Levant and Egypt, see Bassiouney, Arabic Sociolinguistics: Topics in Diglossia, Gender, Identity, and Politics, 210–254; Suleiman, The Arabic Language and National Identity: A Study in Ideology, 11–12.

83 The idea of education differing based on class, was not new. However, the degree to which the British strove to keep the medium of instruction completely separate was a novelty.
rationed out only to students who could afford high fees and who could go on to professional schools or government service. Meanwhile, Arabic literacy was promoted for the masses through traditional elementary schools called kuttābs. Any attempt by these traditional schools to experiment or, indeed, to provide a more economically beneficial education by including English or French classes was not only actively discouraged, but also financially penalized.84 The fate of Arabic literacy in elite government schools and the more ubiquitous traditional kuttāb elementary schools went down divergent paths.

After 1882, the largely free and well-regarded government schools that the khedive Ismail had invested heavily in, changed dramatically and suffered significant setbacks. In the first decade of their rule, the British consul-general, Lord Cromer, and his counterpart in the Ministry of Education, Douglas Dunlop, imposed strict financial limitations on government-sponsored education. Despite the growing calls from reformers, communities, and elites for more schools, the British overseers of the Egyptian government insisted that the Ministry of Education produce more revenue and not expand its budget. Cromer preferred that students (and their parents) show their dedication to education by paying their way through primary, secondary, and higher education.85 Scholarship students, who had made up the majority of students in

84 Cromer repeatedly expressed his dismay that private schools all over the country were mimicking the elite government schools in preparing students for higher education rather than focusing on more class-appropriate education in Arabic. Reports by His Majesty’s Agent and Consul-General on the Finances, Administration, and Condition of Egypt and the Soudan in 1902 (London: Harrison and Sons, 1903), 55; Reports by His Majesty’s Agent and Consul-General on the Finances, Administration, and Condition of Egypt and the Soudan in 1904 (London: Harrison and Sons, 1905), 72–73.
85 Report by Her Majesty’s Agent and Consul-General on the Finances, Administration, and Condition of Egypt and the Soudan in 1898 (London: Harrison and Sons, 1899), 39.
government schools before the occupation, were almost completely phased out. Although a modest number of new schools were added to the Ministry’s charge over the years, the demand for schools far outpaced the supply. When Cromer left Egypt in 1906, there were only 32 government primary and 4 government secondary schools.  

Within these government schools, instruction in Arabic literacy occupied a precarious place. Cromer and Dunlop were known for their hostility to the Arabic language in general. Dunlop in particular, despite over 30 years in Egypt and being in charge of its educational system, “not only never learned a word of Arabic, but also preferred that his underlings and employees not know Arabic either.” Unsurprisingly, over the course of Cromer’s period of control, upper level schools shifted from using Arabic as the principal language of instruction to either French or English. By 1897, in government secondary schools, all courses other than Arabic language were taught in a foreign language. As a result, primary schools began cutting into their own Arabic instruction to introduce students to either French or English at earlier ages and for more sessions per week. Although most students were given a choice between French and English, in deference to the obvious preference of British administrators, inspectors, and rulers in the country, French was quickly replaced by English as the most opted for

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89 Ibid., appendix 3, 3.
“secondary” language for government school pupils.\(^9\) In prestige, Arabic was well behind its European counterparts.

With regards to education, this period of Egyptian history is generally viewed as one of stagnation and neglect. However, the limitations on elite government schools were only a part of the colonial agenda. At the other end of the spectrum, the Egyptian government, starting in 1895, began the first real process of regulating the *kuttābs* (local Quranic schools) that existed throughout the country. The government started a subsidy program that linked government aid to inspections by the Ministry of Education, with the eventual goal of transforming these schools into “awwali” (elementary) schools. As long as the school passed inspections by the ministry, local *kuttābs* would get between 10 and 15 Egyptian piasters per student (double for each girl) that attended. In conjunction, special classes and examinations for the teachers of these schools were also set up in the hopes of bringing more schools into the government fold. The existence of these government-approved *kuttābs* allowed the Ministry and its Egyptian elites to continue raising fees in the government schools while feeling assured that they were not denying poor children an education.\(^9\) In fact, the Ministry claimed that higher tuitions allowed them to continue expanding the elementary *kuttāb* education program.\(^9\) Indeed, by 1913, the amount of money expended on the subsidies reached

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\(^9\) DWQ, Majlis al-Wuzarāʾ, Nizārat al-Maʿārif, Box 5B, Folder 10 (#0075-044111), Ministry of Education, Note from Majlis al-Maʿārif al-ʿAʿlā (Oct 1901). Taqrīr Qūmisyūn Tanẓīm al-Maʿārif al-ʿUmumiyya (10 Nov 1880), 45. The class separation inherent in this system would have appealed to Egyptians in the upper echelons of the Ministry who hailed from upper class households.

\(^9\) Ibid.
23,000 Egyptian pounds for over 175,000 students. However, although not an inconsequential amount, these subsidies represented only around 5% of the Ministry of Education’s total budget.

The politics of Arabic literacy differed greatly in these kutṭāb schools from the elite government schools. The motives behind the subsidy program were explicitly class based and introduced a kind of linguistic segregation in the educational system. In order to qualify as a kutṭāb or elementary school, the school had to teach Arabic only. In fact, schools that taught a European language were specifically excluded from the subsidy program. The logic of this requirement was at once cynical and pragmatic. Since these schools were aimed at the masses of Egyptian society, it stood to reason that Arabic would be the main language of instruction. From the government’s perspective, these schools served as a cheap alternative to a mass educational system and a first line of defense against ignorance and illiteracy. However, by requiring an Arabic only curriculum, the policy also ensured that graduates of these elementary schools and kutṭābs could not continue onto the “elite” secondary or higher level schools of the government since they would not have the language skills to understand classes taught in French or English.

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93 Sāmī, al-Taʿīm fī Miṣr fī sanatay 1914 wa-1915, 87.
95 1898 Report, 43. This requirement was frequently reiterated by Lord Cromer in his reports: “It cannot be too distinctly understood that the Government views with entire disfavour any attempt to teach European language in these schools. … I mention the point as several attempts have been made to teach English in these schools.” 1904 Report, 73.
96 Reports on the Finances, Administration, and Condition of Egypt, and the Progress of Reforms, 1 (London: Harrison and Sons, 1898), 40.
Through the subsidy program, the promotion of Arabic literacy was a way to encourage a linguistic division in Egyptian education and, by extension, shape the class dynamics of future elites of the society. In his 1900 report on the affairs of Egypt, Cromer addressed the issue of language in the kuttābs and his view that expanding foreign language instruction would be “not only undesirable, but hurtful.” He noted that many Egyptians wished their children to learn English in order to secure a job in the government. However teaching anything but Arabic would have disastrous results:

[The English] would see with reluctance the undue growth of a class of Egyptians, many of whom would probably be doomed to disappointment in their aspirations for obtaining Government employment, who would, therefore, become discontented, and who would probably succeed better in life if the time passed in linguistic study had been devoted to other matters.

The idea that language education could create a discontented and dangerous class of people was consistent with Cromer’s view that too much education, particularly of the free variety, would encourage a new generation of students to “rise in the social scale” instead of staying happily in the class to which they were born. Basically, in his view, language education was a necessarily socially stratified pursuit. In this, Cromer shared with some of the Egyptian elite the idea that people of the “wrong” social classes getting the “wrong” education would upset the social balance. However, this balance was largely manufactured by colonial policies. In order to get a government job, or indeed to get into any of the higher level schools like law or medicine, students needed

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97 Reports by His Majesty's Agent and Consul-General on the Finances, Administration, and Condition of Egypt and the Soudan in 1900, 1 (London: Harrison and Sons, 1901), 51.
98 Ibid.
99 Ibid., 50.
to know a foreign language. In turn, the teaching of foreign languages was increased in government primary and secondary schools. However, if one did not “value” education enough to pay the tuition for these schools, then they could not learn the requisite languages and were effectively shut out of middle and upper class employment. The result was a striking difference in economic prospects for the many who received free or nearly-free Arabic education and the few who had access to tuition-based, multi-lingual education. The son of a poor farmer who learned Arabic at a local school may have gained a useful skill, but aside from completing his studies in Azhar or becoming an elementary teacher himself, he had few options to continue his education. As a government policy, Arabic literacy was promoted deliberately to be an educational and economic dead end.

The Egyptian government, even at the height of British influence, was not monolithic and the obvious tensions between foreign-language and Arabic instruction were not lost on Egyptian bureaucrats and administrators within the colonial government. These Egyptian bureaucrats occupied a tenuous middle ground as locals who were indispensable to the colonial bureaucracy, even as they sought to reaffirm their national identities and future autonomy. Furthermore, as articulated by Heather Sharkey in the Anglo-Sudanese case, “nationalism was also a literary undertaking.”

\[101\] In Cromer’s view, these students should have gone on to some sort of skilled manual labor. As such, he championed additional technical schools. By 1917, the options for kuttāb students had expanded a bit. Boys could continue into new “advanced” elementary schools, the industrial and agricultural school, or the Nāṣiriyya school. Girls could attend the advanced elementary schools, the school for home economics, or the school of midwifery. DWQ, Abdīn, Box 237, Folder 5 (#0069-004641). Ministère de l’Instruction Publique, “Note sure l’Organisation et la Direction de l’Enseignement” (22 Nov 1917).

\[102\] Heather Sharkey, *Living with Colonialism: Nationalism and Culture in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 3. In the Sudanese case, however, the assertion of
Elites who were groomed for government service used their literacy skills and the new explosion in printing to express their vision of an independent and “national” future. In Egypt, this hybridity—being parts of both worlds, the colonial and the indigenous—colored the attitudes of the Egyptian bureaucrats who served the colonial administration and sought to reconcile the realities of their current domination and their hopes for their political future.

The realm of language became a natural arena of cultural, economic, and political competition. In Egypt, Arabic was the language of national and cultural pride, English or French was the language of social and political power. However, within the Europeanized bureaucracy, many Egyptians occupied a linguistic middle ground: their recognition of the importance of Arabic literacy for their country and national ambitions did not preclude an appreciation for foreign language instruction. Like many Egyptians who flocked to private schools that taught both Arabic and foreign languages, these bureaucrats rejected Cromer’s either-or proposition for language instruction.103

As an example of the attitudes and sensitivities of Egyptian bureaucrats when it came to Arabic literacy, one can look at a 1911 proposal to reform Dar al-ʿUlm104 by

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103 Cromer was constantly having to reiterate his position, particularly since private schools started by Egyptians seemed intent of teaching both languages.

104 Dār al-ʿUlūm underwent several name changes from 1872 until 1920. From 1900 to 1920 it was known as Madrasat al-Muʾallimīn al-Nāṣiriyā (The Nāṣiriyā Normal School), although Dār al-ʿUlūm was still a recognized name and its association with Arabic instruction was unchanged. Lois Aroian, The
then secretary-general to the Egyptian cabinet, Ahmed Zaki. Zaki was himself a prolific writer and Arabic philologist and deeply involved in both the state administration and the linguistic development of Arabic. His interest in reforming Dar al-ʿUlum stemmed from the school’s founding mission to train future Arabic teachers. Since its inception in 1872, Dar al-ʿUlum’s prestige, location, and institutional affiliation fluctuated, although its association with Arabic instruction remained constant. In his 1911 proposal, Zaki suggested that Dar al-ʿUlum move beyond producing teachers of elementary kuttābs, primary schools, or secondary schools and add another section to specialize in more advanced studies of Arabic language. His vision of an advanced degree was almost a university level undertaking: it including classes in Arabic grammar, Quranic exegesis, Semitic languages, pedagogy, public speaking, and even psychology.

Zaki’s complaints with the current system were two-fold, one pragmatic and the other cultural. This pragmatic concern was that the Egyptian bureaucracy severely lacked administrators who were capable of writing in Arabic. Rather, the bureaucracy used its own jargon that was neither colloquial nor classical Arabic and relied upon foreign terms. By raising the level of instruction in this most important of Arabic language programs, Dar al-ʿUlum would influence future Egyptians in government service. Meanwhile, the cultural life of Egyptian society as a whole was suffering.

Nationalization of Arabic and Islamic Education in Egypt: Dar al-ʿUlum and al-Azhar (Cairo: American University in Cairo, 1983), 25.

Although the goal of producing Arabic teachers for the ever growing number of schools was progressing, the cultivation of a truly high level of Arabic study was being neglected. Zaki asserted: "The country has a great need for authors, writers, litterateurs, philosophers, historians; in short, we are completely lacking intellectuals." Zaki wished to see not only an expanded intellectual class, but also one that could articulate itself in the Arabic language. For Zaki, encouraging ever higher levels of Arabic instruction and cultural production was essential to the government and country as a whole. Unlike Cromer, in this vision, Arabic was not just a vernacular for the poorest schools, but a potential competitor to European languages among the cultural elite of the country.

Zaki also made a carefully constructed argument that Dar al-ʿUlum should also teach students a foreign language. The government teaching colleges of the time were divided based on language: graduates of the Khidiwiyya Teachers College taught in English, the Tawfiqiyya taught in French, and Dar al-ʿUlum/Nasiriyya taught in Arabic. Among the three schools, Dar al-ʿUlum had was considered a particularly “Muslim” school since its students came from within the Azhari system and the Quran was a central element of its Arabic studies. In this context, Zaki explicitly states the need to make a religious case for why foreign languages should be taught to Dar al-ʿUlum students. He cites a fear of offending Muslim sensibilities as the reason that some were hesitant to make foreign language a pillar of Arabic education. However, Zaki goes on to mention a companion of the Prophet Muhammad and later famous figures who

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Ibid., 9.
learned Syriac, Persian, Greek, and French. Furthermore, particularly during his era, most careers required skills in more than one language and the social and economic realities that required multi-lingual education for government school graduates in other fields applied equally to those dedicated to the study of Arabic.

Caught between rulers who did not value Arabic and a traditional education that did not feel the draw of foreign languages, individuals like Zaki who were part of both worlds were looking for compromises that would serve both their country and its students. On the one hand, that meant constructing and promoting modes of Arabic literacy that did not exclude other languages. On the other, Arabic literacy needed to be taught and used at higher cultural and administrative levels—not just as a language for teaching basic literacy to the masses.

As a matter of policy, Egyptian administrators sought a middle course. When Saʿd Zaghlul, the future nationalist leader, became Minister of Education in 1906, he began the process of reverting government primary and secondary schools to largely Arabic instruction.  

In anticipation of the 1907-1908 school year, the curricula for Arabic language, religion, and Islamic history were all redone “in order to be in accordance with the needs of the nation and its desires.” However, Zaghlul did not go so far as to completely remove foreign languages from primary schools, recognizing the fact that Arabic-only instruction was a disservice to students who would need to compete for future positions in the government, higher level schools, or private

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employment.\textsuperscript{109} Indeed, within his own Ministry, teachers in foreign languages were paid significantly more than those who taught in Arabic\textsuperscript{110} and the economic benefits of multilingual education for the upper classes were multifold. However, the change back to Arabic as the language of instruction in primary and secondary schools did mark a fundamental shift in the language of education. By 1921, a commission of the Ministry of Education examining higher education reflected the return of Arabic as the principle medium of instruction. Although there were concerns that foreign languages may need to be used until enough instructors and textbooks could be secured, the commission stated that Arabic was the preferred language of instruction for university level study for nationalist reasons as well as the familiarity students had with Arabic over any other foreign language.\textsuperscript{111} In other words, Arabic’s role as the medium of instruction in education at all levels was no longer in question; it was just a matter of when.

\textbf{Nationalist Sentiments and Arabic Literacy}

For most Egyptian nationalists at the turn of the twentieth century, the Arabic language was an undeniable element of the Egyptian character. Language, unlike religion or even ethnicity, had the power to unite Egyptians as they strove to define themselves as a unique people, with their own characteristics, history, and geographic

\begin{footnotes}
\item[110] The minimum for foreign language teachers was 114 Egyptian pounds per year. For Arabic language instructors the minimum was 96 Egyptian pounds for 1907, up from 84 in 1906. DWQ, Majlis al-Wuzarah, Nizārat al-Maʿārif, Box 4D, Folder 3 (#0075-044043), Saʿd Zaghlūl, “Ijāba Nizārat al-Maʿārif” (25 May 1906), 2.
\item[111] Ministry of Education, \textit{Final Report of the University Commission} (Cairo: Government Press, 1921), 27–28. The report by this commission expressed both the positives and negatives of Arabic language instruction. Their final recommendation was that Arabic be the medium of instruction, however, in practice, there would be some leeway until proper instructors and textbooks could be obtained. Ibid., 28–29.
\end{footnotes}
boundaries. The nature of nationalist concerns about the Arabic language tended to revolve around one of two axes: first, how to defend Arabic from the external threat of European political and cultural dominance and, second, how to define the flavor of Arabic that would serve Egyptians best. On the first concern there was general agreement. Faced with the realities of British occupation, most championed Arabic as an extension of national autonomy and cultural pride. These nationalists sought to guarantee Arabic’s position as the language of expression for Egyptian literary production, education, and public discourse. However, what form this Arabic should take was less clear cut, particularly since the traditional standard Arabic was neither uniquely Egyptian nor was it without the sort of historical baggage that was deemed unfitting for a modernizing society. As such, nationalists struggled with which kind of Arabic best served the national interest: standard Arabic, colloquial Egyptian, a hybrid, or some other compromise. As we shall see in Chapter 5, the importance of these debates was not just theoretical. Nationalists dedicated a lot of energy to education and Arabic instruction, both of which were ultimately colored by these debates about Arabic language.  

For many nationalists writing about language, the danger of colonial imposition could not be overstated. As an example, the late nineteenth century journalist and critic, Abdullah Nadim, made championing the Arabic language a perennial theme in his

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112 I have generally sought to stay away from debates that are substantively about the Arabic language and rather focus on debates about what it means to be literate in the Arabic language. However, in this case, nationalist views about language cannot be divorced from their views on literacy and how to promote it.
works.\textsuperscript{113} In 1881, Nadim wrote an article, entitled “Losing Language is Surrendering the Self,” in which he argues that not protecting one’s native language would result in a loss of love for one’s country (waṭaniyya) and religious beliefs. In fact, there was a risk that instead of a living as a “free national,” one would fall into the hands of foreigners who could do as they please.\textsuperscript{114} Over a decade later, this sentiment recurred in several articles published in his journal \textit{al-Ustadh} or “The Teacher” (1892-1893). In these articles the connection between language and national identity and pride were reiterated in stronger language.\textsuperscript{115} Nadim asserts that guarding one’s language was the equivalent of protecting one’s ethnic identity and national sovereignty.\textsuperscript{116} Furthermore, the connection to colonialism was explicit: using the language of the occupier was surrendering an individual’s very soul to that outside power.\textsuperscript{117} By 1902, the nationalist leader Mustafa Kamil elaborated on this formulation by asserting: “A nation does not safeguard its language except that it safeguards its independence. A nation does not safeguard its native tongue except that it safeguards its very being.”\textsuperscript{118} The idea that

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    \item \textsuperscript{113} Nādim did not fit clearly in any one ideological camp. He is sometimes viewed as primarily an Islamic reformer because of his educational background in Azhar and strongly Muslim views. However, he was also a political figure who was involved in the ‘Urābī revolt and agitating against the British. In the context of language, he certainly makes the “Islamic” case of why Arabic was important (as the language of the Quran), but he also wrote passionately about the nation, education, and the Arabic language—which is why I am including him here as a nationalist. For more background, see Linda Herrera, “The Soul of a Nation: Abdallah Nadim and Educational Reform in Egypt (1845-1896),” \textit{Mediterranean Journal of Educational Studies} 7, no. 1 (2002): 1-24.
    \item \textsuperscript{114} Abdallah Nadīm, \textit{Al-Tankīt wa-l-Tabkīt} (Cairo: Al-Hay’a al-Miṣriyya al-‘Āmma li-l-Kitāb, 1994), 53–54.
    \item \textsuperscript{115} “Bāb al-Lugha,” \textit{Al-Ustādh} 1, no. 20 (January 3, 1893): 468–469; “Tarbiyat al-Abnāʾ,” \textit{Al-Ustādh} 1, no. 9 (October 18, 1892): 204–205; “Al-Lugha wa-l-Inshāʾ,” \textit{Al-Ustādh} 1, no. 8 (October 11, 1892): 184. Also see \textit{al-Ustādh} 1, no.2 (1893): 25-41.
    \item \textsuperscript{116} “Tarbiyat al-Abnāʾ,” 204.
    \item \textsuperscript{117} Ibid.
    \item \textsuperscript{118} “Bi-l-‘Ilm Taḥyā al-Bilād,” \textit{Majallat al-Liwāʾ}, no. 1 (1902): 54.
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Arabic was the foundation of national independence had become a rallying cry of the nationalist movement.

The idea that language imbued its speakers with certain characteristics and qualities was echoed in many of the arguments against using foreign languages instead of one’s own native language. The idea that one would become some other nationality by virtue of language resonated with writers who saw European habits and cultural norms, particularly among the elites, being imported along with language. In this framework, statements like Nadim’s that Arabic needed to be used in education lest “children grown up neither as Egyptians nor as foreigners” was not meant as a hyperbole. Abandoning Arabic carried with it the danger of created quasi-Egyptians who were not part of the national family. As we shall see later, this argument was especially potent in debates about women’s language education.

As an extension of this debate, nationalists tended to take up the mantel of education, and particularly “nationalist” Arabic education, as one of their major goals. Writers like Nadim had long advocated that education be conducted in Arabic in order to secure the nationalist sentiments of future generations. Similarly, other journalistic outlets, such as the journal *al-Hilāl* and the newspaper *al-Liwā‘*, wrote about the need for Arabic language in Egyptians schools as a source of linguistic and national revival.

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120 The argument that language carried with personal and national characteristics was a common theme in writings during this period. One early example can be found in the Arabic translation of Peltier Bey’s book *Al-Qawwāl al-Muntakhab fī al-Tarbiya wa-l-Adab* [The Select Word in Education and Morals] (Cairo: Al-Matba‘a al-Amīriyya, 1891). The then director of Egypt’s teaching schools extols the importance of teaching a “national language” since it bestows on its masters courage, good morals, and honor (41–42).
The proprietor of *al-Hilal*, the famous Christian and Syrian writer, Jurjī Zaydān, took pride in Arabic as a language of history and culture.\(^{122}\) As a longtime resident of Egypt, Zaydan took special interest in the linguistic development of the country and extolled “when the righteous rose to create an Egyptian university and announced that Arabic would be the medium of instruction, hope rose for the revival of this language.”\(^{123}\) In a speech delivered in 1902 and published in *al-Liwa‘*, Mustafa Kamil articulated in the clearest terms why “nationalist” education in the Arabic language was a political and social imperative:

> It is obvious that Arabic is the tool to achieve the desired improvement and majesty. Language is the lifeblood of the community (*umma*) … The Arabic language is the only means to improve Egypt and let her achieve the status of other advanced peoples. It is the language of the Quran and the tongue of Islam. What has happened to it? … the ignorant of its people and the devious of its enemies throw a thousand arrows at it every day …\(^{124}\)

In the view of Kamil and others, to defend and propagate the Arabic language was no less than defending the nation as a whole.

In line with the centrality of Arabic language education to the future of the nation, the building of “nationalist” schools (*madāris waṭaniyya*) became a central

\(^{122}\) The many Christian and Muslim Syrians who made Egypt their home in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century took a particular interest in language and played crucial roles in the modernization and feminist movements. On Syrian writer in Egypt Beth Baron has noted: “Most important, they sought to safeguard Arabic. That they battled over Arabic was not surprising, for language tied the Syrian Christians to other Arabs and Egyptians.” Beth Baron, *The Women’s Awakening in Egypt: Culture, Society, and the Press* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 160, also see 105–108.


\(^{124}\) “Bi-l- ‘Ilm Taḥyā al-Bilād,” 53.
plank of several political and religious groups. In 1899, the Mustafa Kamil School was opened to several hundred students as a first step in fulfilling a “duty to the nation” and its future generations. Meanwhile, Kamil and others strongly encouraged and celebrated the opening of schools through private funds as a means of essentially doing what the government was not willing to do. In fact, across the political spectrum, the opening of private, national schools was seen as an expression of patriotism and a way for wealthy individuals to give back to their communities. At the communal level, in 1905, the Kamil’s Nationalist party (Al-Hizb al-Waṭani) set up a network of night schools to spread education and teach basic literacy in an effort to reach out to the urban lower class. These native initiatives were also seen in a competitive light. Since the first private schools in Egypt (aside from the kuttābs) were generally started by foreign missionaries, nationalist alternatives were seen as an assertion of local identity and pride. Meanwhile, within the British administration, Douglas Dunlap, came to be seen as the embodiment of British animosity to education and, particularly, Arabic

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125 While some were purely “nationalist” in their framing of education, many of these groups included a distinctly religious tenor, such as the Islamic Benevolence Society known as Al-Jamʿiyya al-Khayriyya al-Islāmiyya and others like Jamʿiyyat al-Urwa al-Wuthqā and Jamʿiyyat al-Masāʿī al-Mashkūra.


127 Kamil seems to have made a point of speaking at these schools and encouraging the goodness of its founders. Ibid., 192–195, 231–237.

128 The idea of madāris waṭaniyya, or national schools, was echoed in the press as well as in the literature of actual schools. “Tarbiyat al-Abnāʾ,” 208. DWQ, Abdīn, Box 230, Folder 2 (#0069-004462). Sayyid Muhammad, Al-Kulliyā al-Ahliyya bi Miṣr (1911-1912), 1.

129 “Iqtirāḥ ‘alā al-ʿUlamāʾ,” Al-Jāmiʿa 1, no. 18 (December 1, 1899): 412-414. This impetus was encouraged by Cromer and others who wished to see more kuttābs opened using private funds. The government even began giving private projects land-grants in order to facilitate opening schools. Yūnān Rizq, “Nahdat al-Katatīb,” in Al-Ahrām: Dīwān al-Ḥayā al-Muʾāṣira, vol. 7 (Cairo: Markaz Tārīkh al-Ahrām, 2002), 65-76.

130 By 1910, there were eight of these schools. See Joel Beinin and Zachary Lockman, Workers on the Nile: Nationalism, Communism, Islam, and the Egyptian Working Class, 1882-1954 (American University in Cairo Press, 1998), 67.
language instruction. In 1908, thirteen students even wrote to the Khedive complaining of Mr. Dunlop’s treatment of students and his insistence on “fighting national feelings” (‘awātif al-waṭaniyya). In the face of foreign intervention, the notion that Egyptians needed to provide a more “authentic” education for their children, be it in government or private schools, became a part of the nationalist narrative.

The question of what kind of Arabic to promote also became an issue of nationalist concern, particularly when it came to the issue of how educate future generations. The basic problem was that literacy had up until that point been the pursuit of an educated minority. If Egyptian’s wished to see literacy spread among the masses, the argument went, then the kind of Arabic that was taught needed to be modified. Future farmers, artisans, housewives, and shopkeepers could not spend the five or more years that an Azharī student did in the kind of exhaustive study that Arabic seemed to require. Basic literacy had to be imparted in a more streamlined way. For this problem, there were generally one of three solutions proposed, the echoes of which reverberate throughout the region to this day. For some, the obvious answer was to make the written language conform to the spoken Arabic that all Egyptians already knew. Others wanted to modify or replace the Arabic script to make written texts easier to read.

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131 Russell, “Competing, Overlapping, and Contradictory Agendas,” 54. As we have seen, the colonial government actually did take steps to regulate Arabic language instruction, within certain parameters.
132 DWQ, Abdīn, Box 482, Folder 2 (#0069-009365). Letter 2 from ʿAbd al-Maqṣūd Sālim and 12 others (March 1908).
133 As an example, see Salams Musa’s championing of this idea in Suleiman, The Arabic Language and National Identity: A Study in Ideology, 185–190. In not specifically for education, the use of colloquial was also championed by some writers who wished to see the literary arts reflect the “Egyptian character.” See for example Muḥammad Taymūr in Muhammad Badawi, Early Arabic Drama (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 101–104. For a reaction against the idea of using colloquial see “Al-Ṣāḥīf al-ʿArabiyya,” Anīs al-Jalīs 3, no. 4 (April 30, 1900): 129-132.
especially when it came to the vowels that were generally dropped in anything other than beginner texts.\footnote{One example was one Jamil Zahawi who created an entirely new script: Jamīl Zahāwī, \textit{al-Khaṭṭ al-Jadīd} (Miṣr: Maṭbaʻat al-Muqtaṭaf, 1896). For a response see Rāfiq Al-ʻAzām, “Al-Qawl al-Sadīd fi al-Radd ʻalā Šāhīb al-Khaṭṭ al-Jadīd,” \textit{Al-Hilāl} 5, no. 5 (November 1, 1896): 170-173. This is something that Malak Hifni Nasif also promoted, although unlike Zahawi, she wanted to just modify the Arabic script to make it more explicit. Malak Nāṣif, \textit{Āthār Bāḥīhat al-Bādiya} (Cāiro: al-Mu’assasa al-Miṣriyya al-ʻĀmma li-l-Ta’lif wa-l-Tarjama wa-l-Nashr, 1962), 143–145.} The last, and largest, group held that Arabic needed to be modernized and simplified so that it could be taught efficiently and quickly in a mass educational system that seemed to be, at least theoretically, the end goal of Egypt’s educational mission.\footnote{We will return to this in more detail in Chapter 6.}

Although the details of these solutions are interesting in of themselves, my attention here is on how pedagogical concerns about Arabic literacy were channeled and used in nationalist discourse. In particular, the intersection of politics, national heritage, and fear of colonial impositions are most evident in debates around the first, and most controversial, idea of making the Egyptian colloquial the “national language” and the language of education. Since nationalists presumably had a particular stake in the “Egyptian” character of the language, it would seem logical that nationalists would find the unique Egyptian expression of the Arabic language a source of national pride. However, the power of Arabic’s Islamic and cultural heritage and the realities of class and colonial politics made the idea of holding up the Egyptian colloquial as a “national” language a difficult proposition. Although this debate has gone through several
iterations throughout the last century, two examples from the turn of the twentieth century highlight the complexity of the argument.\textsuperscript{136}

In 1893, William Willcocks, an English engineer in the Ministry of Public Works, delivered a speech at the Azbakiyya Club asserting that the use of standard Arabic for writing and literary works was thwarting the creative and intellectual potentials of the Egyptian nation. The fact that standard Arabic took years to master and was overly flamboyant meant that it could never be a truly practical language for the country. Willcocks saw the solution as simple: turn “the spoken language of Egypt into its language of science and culture.”\textsuperscript{137} A few years later in 1901, J. Selden Willmore, a judge in the Native Courts, wrote a grammar of the Cairene dialect of Arabic. In the preface, he makes the case that unless Egyptians want only the very elite to be literate, the educational and national system of the country would have to switch to the Egyptian colloquial.\textsuperscript{138}

The politics of class and colonial power appear in both the critiques and defense of the idea of the Egyptian colloquial as a national language. The leading nationalist voices, particularly the figures who would have been engaged in the Egyptian press, were undoubtedly part of an elite group of readers, writers, and thinkers. Among this category, the reactions to these two propositions were swift and largely negative. Willmore noted in the preface for his second edition that, although several “native

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\textsuperscript{136} For additional information and examples see Gully, “Arabic Linguistic Issues and Controversies of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” 87–95.
\textsuperscript{137} Suleiman, The Arabic Language and National Identity: A Study in Ideology, 185.
\end{flushleft}
gentlemen of high standing” privately intimated to him their support, “a thousand and one columns have been published by a certain section of the native press anathematising (sic) my suggestion that for secular purposes there should be one language for speech and literature.”139 For Willmore, his conclusions were nothing short of common sense, since “the working-man, having no time to study a strange idiom, and nothing to gain by learning the letters, remains, and will ever remain under the present system, illiterate.”140 In other words, clinging to the ideals of a high level Arabic was “at the expense of the lower classes.”141 Despite these good intentions, the reactions to both Willcocks and Willmore were disbelief that colloquial could ever replace standard Arabic. The colloquial was simply too vulgar and undeveloped, a “dead language.”142 In this, class certainly played a role. As one commentator asked, “is the language of the donkey-seller and seaman capable of expressing the noblest sentiments of the heart …?”143 Leading nationalists like Ahmed Lutfi al-Sayyid, who generally supported some Egyptianizing of Arabic, nevertheless found the colloquial an anemic language for the theatrical stage and was appalled that others enjoyed it.144 Even for Abdullah Nadim, who used colloquial in his journals with the expressed purpose of reaching out to all

139 Ibid., xii–xiii.
140 Ibid., xx.
141 Ibid.
142 “Bāb al-Lughah,” 476. This was an inversion of the claim that classical Arabic was a dead language in that it did not have the ability to adapt to modern needs.
parts of Egyptian society, the idea of replacing the standard Arabic with the Egyptian dialect was still unthinkable.  

The reasons behind this opposition can be interpreted in a variety of ways. One cannot discount the real and profound attachment many had to classical Arabic, the language of the Quran, of high poetry, and of classical literature. There was also a certain classist perspective, that “high” Arabic should not be debased by that which is “lower” and more common. As we have seen with the segregated educational system, perhaps keeping standard Arabic literacy a unique skill would have further insulate children of the elites from the children of other classes. However, beyond the idea that elites were withholding literacy from the masses due to their own misguided attachment and snobbery, there was also a clear element of cultural competition and fear of foreign imposition. Willmore makes the case that adopting the colloquial could be an important defensive move: “There is reason to fear that, unless this be done and a simpler system of writing be adopted, both the colloquial and literary dialects will be gradually ousted, as the intercourse with European nations increases, by a foreign tongue.” This same fear of Arabic being displaced completely by foreign languages was also echoed in nationalist defenses of standard Arabic. The logistical and administrative realities of colonial rule made this discussion more than hypothetical. Nadim noted that Egyptian money was being spent by Europeans to teach Egyptian

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145 Other journal editors like Jurjī Zaydān, Ibrahim al-Yāzijī, and Yaʿcūb Ṣaffūf expressed varying degrees of disapproval, even if they accepted some degree of linguistic reform was necessary. Gully, “Arabic Linguistic Issues and Controversies of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” 87–95.

146 Willmore, The Spoken Arabic of Egypt, xxiv.
children “in the language of a country other than their own and for an interest other than their own.”\footnote{“Bāb al-Lugha,” 475.} To encourage foreign languages in schools, as was the colonial policy for government schools, then to have individual European administrators championing the colloquial seemed cynical and was received as such.\footnote{Willmore noted that his proposition earned more scorn because of his background.} Nadim asked, if there is such a obvious benefit in promoting dialects, why do not the English use slang in their own books?\footnote{“Bāb al-Lugha,” 476.}

Ultimately, many nationalists did accept the premise that something needed to be done to simplify Arabic instruction. However, they were not willing to discard the standard completely. Rather, the solution that many advocated was to simplify classical Arabic to suit modern times.\footnote{“Al-Lugha al-ʿArabiyya al-Jadīda,” Al-Jāmiʿa 3, no. 7 (March 1902): 494-497; Suleiman, The Arabic Language and National Identity: A Study in Ideology, 170–174; “Al-Taʿīf fī al-Lughah al-ʿArabīyya,” Al-Hilāl 20, no. 9 (June 1, 1912): 543; “Al-Ṣarf wa-l-Nahw al-Faransí wa-l-ʿArabī,” Al-Jāmiʿa 1, no. 21 & 22 (February 1, 1900): 516-517.} As we shall see later in this work, many nationalists, like Taha Hussein and others, channeled their energies into reforming the Arabic language in order to make literacy palatable for the modern educational needs of the country. Suffice to say, nationalists were concerned with the nature of the Arabic literacy that would be the bedrock of education and discourse for a modern Egyptian nation.

Language, National Identity, and Gender

The turn of the twentieth century coincided with the emergence of a middle and upper class women’s movement in Egypt that was, in many ways, inextricably linked
with the growing nationalist sentiments of the time. Women writers of Egyptian, Syrian, and Turkish origin began associating themselves with the nationalist movement, framing the liberation of women as an integral part of national liberation.151 For their part, some nationalists welcomed these women into their various political parties and encouraged their writings, occasional speeches, and women’s auxiliaries.152

Unsurprisingly, on the issue of Arabic literacy, several of the prominent women of the time had concerns that paralleled that of the nationalists on issues of pedagogy and modernizing the Arabic language. Many expressed their displeasure with the complexity of traditional grammar and the inadequacy of contemporary teaching techniques and materials as major barriers for the adaptability of the Arabic language.153 Malak Hifni Nasif, an educator and social commentator, proposed a specific solution. She advocated simplifying the orthography of Arabic to make the vowels explicit (as opposed to simply marks that usually did not appear in texts) and changing the spelling of Quranic words to conform to conventional spelling in order to facilitate Arabic


instruction in schools.\textsuperscript{154} Another lifelong educator, Nabawiyya Musa, perceiving a lack of suitable materials in modern Arabic, authored an Arabic reader for female students.\textsuperscript{155} However, certain elements of the debate on Arabic literacy took on new dimensions when it came to language education for the women of the country. In particular, the question of the purpose of literacy and the use of foreign languages had more potency when it concerned the “gentler sex.” I will be returning to the wider debates and implications of literacy education for women in Chapter 4. However, for the purposes of this discussion, I will be focusing on the critical intersection of Arabic language, nationalism, and authenticity in the discourse of early Egyptian feminism and its vision of social reform.

The notion of authenticity played a key role in the politics of literacy and gender. The nationalist rhetoric of the era privileged the idea of the “new” Egyptian women of the nationalist cause, one who was both modern and authentically Egyptian. These “new women” were tasked with preserving the authenticity of the Egyptian nation through their domestic roles while at the same time reinforcing modern ideals in their households, husbands, and children. Within this formulation, there existed “persistent tensions between the modernist trends in nationalism, which favoured an expansion of women’s citizenship rights and social equality, and the organicist, anti-modernist, strands which were concerned about the dilution and contamination of

\textsuperscript{154} Nāṣif, Āthār Bāḥithat al-Bādiya, 143–146.
cultural values and identity in a post-colonial context.” The ramifications of this tension touched many levels of Egyptian society from social relationships to political movements, and in the realm of education, language literacy. Instilling the future mothers and wives of the nation with love of Arabic was seen as part of the nationalist project. Conversely, foreign language instruction was a potential danger to the “authenticity” of a newly educated Egyptian woman.

The idea that language and national identity needed to be inculcated through schooling was championed by many prominent women writers. Often deeply invested in the importance of education, writers like Labiba Hashim would assert that “for every people, perfecting the national language has primacy over every other type of knowledge.” Language was the mold that shaped every kind of expression and thought. The more beautiful this mold, the more exquisite the resulting meanings and thoughts. As a result, young children needed to be exposed to Arabic literature and reading in order to develop their understanding and fluency in their native language. Nabawiyya Musa, an educator and activist, made clear her position regarding language education: “all the advanced nations do not teach their children anything in the beginning but their own national language and pride in its people, so that love of country becomes established in their clear hearts.” Musa explicitly criticizes the foreign schools within which girls were not taught Arabic, the beauty of its style, and

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158 Ibid., 112.
159 Ibid., 70, 122.
the importance of its people as a direct affront to the intelligence and moral upbringing of the “Egyptian girl.” Schooling was meant to raise girls who were morally and intellectually upright and who could, above all else, become the future mothers and wives of the nation. A basic understanding of the Arabic language was deemed a necessary part of that education.

The alarm over lack of Arabic language instruction, particularly for girls, was not an abstract concern at the turn of the twentieth century. Unlike her male counterpart, if a girl was enrolled in school, more than likely she was enrolled in one of the many foreign or missionary schools that had sprung up all over the country and that took special interest in filling the void in female education. Despite government subsidy incentives, girls were still only a small minority of kuttāb students. Similarly, government schools of all levels, already limited in their scope, were educating only a few hundred girls in the entire country. Among the few girls who were in school, particularly among the wealthy, the vast majority attended foreign schools that were often run by missionary organizations. As a cultural and linguistic (and religious) competitor, these schools posed a particular problem for nationalists and feminists alike. The symbolism of this competition was particularly important of feminist leaders who had been educated in multiple languages. Prominent feminists, like Huda

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161 Ibid., 59–60. Also see Ibid., 57.
163 The subsidy program did have an effect. By 1915 there were more girls in kuttābs than in any other type of school (governmental or foreign). Even then, the 42,240 girls who attended kuttābs represented only 11% of kuttāb students. Sāmī, al-Ta’īm fi Miṣr fi sanatay 1914 wa-1915, Appendix 1, Table B.
164 As an example, a government report from the Ministry of Education in 1889 cited the need to provide an alternative to the foreign schools that many of the upper class were using. DWQ, Majlis al-Wuzarā’, Nizārat al-Ma’ārif, Box 4G, Folder 19 (#0075-044028), “Rapports Sur la situation des Ecoles des Filles des aveugles et sourds-muets et de cette de Rosette” (12 February 1889).
Sha’awari and Nabawiyaa Musa, made a conscious point of writing in Arabic and extolling its virtues, despite their fluency in French.  

The perceived cultural and imperial threats of foreign language instruction for Egyptian women were crystallized in discussions about girls’ education. One clear example was published in 1892 in Abdullah Nadim’s *al-Ustadh* newspaper under the guise of a dialogue between two girls, Zakiyya and Nafisa. Zakiyya is asking about Nafisa’s day in school. When she learns that Nafisa is learning Arabic, French, sewing, piano, and dancing, Zakiyya expresses her disapproval. Arabic was certainly useful for reading the Quran and learning about religion, but the other subjects were not. Zakiyya asks, why would she need foreign language? Wasn’t Nafisa going to marry an Arab or Turk? Nafisa says that this is what girls in the Levant are learning and that this is part of “new modern life” (*al-tamaddun al-jadīd*). Zakiyya responds:

Zakiyya: I can see why men would have to learn foreign languages, they have reasons. They need to know what the foreigners are saying, read their books. But why us? Are we girls going to open a shop or meet with foreign consuls? Will we give speeches in the parliament or write in the newspapers? That’s nonsense. Instead of teaching girls foreign languages, your school should be teaching you your own language, the ways of your religion, and how to bring up children and take care of the house, not this nonsense about things that aren’t useful. Let’s say a woman knew French and her husband didn’t. She would leave him in search of someone who knew French so that she could speak use her

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165 For example, both of their autobiographies were written and published in Arabic. Sha’awari harbored a lifelong sadness that she had denied the opportunity to study literary Arabic formally because she was a girl (her autobiography was dictated to an assistant). Musa, meanwhile, learned French early on and only came to Arabic once she entered school. We will be returning to how women learned Arabic in Chapter 4. Nabawiyaa Mūsā, *Tārīkhī bi-Qalamī*, 3rd ed. (Cairo: Multāqā al-Mar’a w-al-Dhākira, 1999), 37, 86; Huda Shaarawi, *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist (1879-1924)*, trans. Margot Badran (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1987), 39-41, 62; Hudā Sha’rāwī, *Mudhakkirāt Hudā Sha’rāwī: Rā’idat al-Mar’a al-‘Arabīyya al-ḥadītha* (Cairo: Dār al-Hilāl, 1981), 43–46, 83.

166 “Madrasat al-Banāt,” *Al-Ustādh* 1, no. 11 (November 1, 1892): 246-251.
French and retain what she learned. I swear, people these days do not know what’s come over them. They imitate anything they see the foreigner doing without thinking. They want to become foreigners too and completely forget themselves. It’s sad.167

Over the course of this dialogue, Nadim expresses through Zakiyya several objections to foreign language and the anxieties they produced in the larger cultural debates regarding women’s education. These concerns centered around two issues: first, the authenticity of women and their ties to their national community and, secondly, the fundamental purpose of education for women and the usefulness of certain topics of study. Regarding the former, Nadim was not alone in his fear of foreign languages creating “unauthentic” or not fully Egyptian women, women who would marry and imitate foreigners. The writer Zaynab Fawwāz encountered resistance to the idea of women’s education with her opponents claiming it was merely the idea of those who wish to imitate others: “they even try to change their tongues, and whoever changes his language, changes his religion.”168 Others saw the use of foreign languages as a precursor to foreign “ways,” be it in dress or comport.169 Girls who emerged from schools with English curricula had “knotted up tongues” and could not cope with the everyday realities of becoming an Egyptian homemaker.170

The fundamental purpose of education for women also played a large role in how language education was viewed. In the prevailing view of the time, women were educated solely for the purpose of raising the next generation, serving future husbands,

167 This translation is adapted from Herrera, “The Soul of a Nation,” 11–12.
and ultimately, creating a stronger nation.\textsuperscript{171} For many writers of both sexes foreign languages did not fit with this goal. Arabic language, along with moral education, homemaking, and the like, did. Just as Zakiyya argued, the ideal Egyptian woman would marry an Egyptian man, live a life mediated by their national language, and raise their children in the linguistic and cultural traditions of the nation. In other words, Arabic literacy supported the domestic sphere that women’s education was intended to serve. Foreign languages were for another space, the realm of politics, public discourse, and trade; a masculine space that most women never need enter.

However, this limited view of women’s education, its purpose, and its linguistic implications was not shared by everyone. Two leading feminist writers, Malak Hifni Nasif and Nabawiyya Musa, had many of the same ambivalences regarding female education, language, and national authenticity that their male nationalist counterparts had in promoting Arabic for boys’ education. Both were educated through the government system with its multi-lingual education and served as educators within the school system. Nasif writes “I do not understand preferring one language over another in teaching because I find all languages beneficial. If I could find someone to teach me Berber or Chinese I would learn them.”\textsuperscript{172} Meanwhile, Musa makes the case that boys who receive an education that exposes them to foreign languages will be ill-matched


\textsuperscript{172} Nāṣif, \textit{Āthār Bāḥīthat al-Bādiya}, 78.
with their potential brides who do not receive the same. Neither saw foreign language instruction in of itself as a threat to Egyptian womanhood. Nevertheless, Arabic instruction was still championed by both as a better way to educate girls.

Because these two writers saw the education of women as more than simply preparation for the domestic realm, their preference for Arabic literacy over foreign literacy needs to be examined in a different light. Yes, a woman’s education would need to prepare her for the rigors of childrearing, family life, and homemaking. Yet both Nasif and Musa also make the case that education had broader goals: allowing woman to economically support themselves when necessary, to widen their understanding of the world, and to contribute to the intellectual life of their people. In these types of endeavors, Arabic literacy was not simply a tool to facilitate a blissful home life. Rather, all kinds of literacy would need to be supported to create a well rounded education. In this context, their promotion of language education was part of an agenda to allow women to enter economic activity and have an intellectual life beyond what was strictly needed for the cause of national advancement.

In pursuit of this economic space for Egyptian women Arabic literacy played a special role. While Musa and Nasif did not oppose foreign language instruction in principle, as a matter of economic and political independence, foreigners who taught in Egyptian schools were a threat to Egyptian girls and the nation as a whole. Nasif reiterates several times in her writing the importance of Egyptian female teachers as

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\text{Mūsā, Al-Mār`a wa-l-`Amal, 38–39.}\]
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\text{As an example see Nāṣif, Āthār Bāhīthat al-Bādiya, 78–79, 137; Mūsā, Al-Mār`a wa-l-`Amal, 44–46.}\]
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\text{Mūsā, Al-Mār`a wa-l-`Amal, 31–32, 68–73; Nāṣif, Āthār Bāhīthat al-Bādiya, 79, 137.}\]
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\text{We will return to some of the literacy practices that were promoted in Chapter 3.}\]
moral guides for local girls who may be otherwise become alienated from their families if they were only exposed to European teachers.\textsuperscript{177} Nasif’s insistence that Egyptian women needed to enter the teaching field echoed the famous nationalist slogan “Egypt for the Egyptians,” only with a feminist twist. Meanwhile, Musa made the connection more explicitly. She framed the idea of employing Egyptian women in a host of professions as an assertion of political and economic independence from outside control: “If we spent money on educating Egyptian women they would undertake all this work [done currently by foreigners] in the best way and the wealth of Egypt would not leave its people.”\textsuperscript{178} Women who were part of the national fabric, spoke its language, and understood its culture were better suited for professional work within Egyptian society. Like some nationalist men, these activists advocated for the education and training of women in Arabic in order to accomplish two things: cement the national identity and Egyptianness of women who were educated and assert the value these women had for the economic and social life of the country.

While for some Arabic literacy was a means of restricting the location of female education to the “legitimate” sphere of domestic life, Arabic literacy could also serve as a means to assert identity and carve out an economic space for these newly educated women. Women writers of the era negotiated these various tensions by deploying the discourse of education and literacy for their own ends.

\textsuperscript{177} Nāṣif, Āthār Bāḥithat al-Bādiya, 77, 126, 141.
\textsuperscript{178} Mūsā, Al-Mar’a wa-l-‘Amal, 67.
Islamic Reformers and Arabic Literacy

The Arabic language is an undeniably important part of Muslim life as the language of religious rites and the Quran. However, for the Arabic speaking Muslim world, the Arabic language was not simply the language of religion; it was the language of the sacred and the profane alike. Whereas the Arabic language would always have its place in Muslim practice, the place of Arabic literacy in daily life was not always so assured. In the wake of the many changes that were occurring at the turn of the century, many within traditional Muslim institutions like Egypt’s Azhar University saw themselves as the guardians of this sacred language. Indeed, schools like Dar al-ʿUlum that specialized in Arabic instruction drew their students exclusively from Azhar and in the early days of the government school system most Arabic instruction was conducted by graduates of Islamic institutions. However, as the secular uses of Arabic were changing, the response from religious leaders differed. Not unlike the portrait painted in al-Muwaylihi’s Fatra min al-Zaman, many religious figures had a reflexive distain toward the changes that were occurring in the new styles of writing in the press, the new centers of education in secular schools, and the new educated classes of effendīs.179 However, for reformers from among the ranks of the religious who sought to either modernize Islam and/or reform its role in society, these changes in the practices

179 On the term effendi: “It was first an honorific title, which, in the nineteenth century, came to signify a category of western educated bureaucrats from privileged backgrounds who were sent to khedivial schools or to Europe.” By the 1930’s they came to be associated with an indigenous, urban middle class. Lucie Ryzova, “Egyptianizing Modernity through the ‘New Effendiya:’ Social and Cultural Constructions of the Middle Clss in Egypt under the Monarchy,” in Re-envisioning Egypt 1919-1952, ed. Arthur Goldschmidt, Amy J. Johnson, and Barak A. Salmoni (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2005), 125.
associated with Arabic literacy represented both opportunities and dangers. On the one hand, the power of literacy, in the press and in the spread of basic education, provided a new vehicle for their messages of reform. Yet, at the same time, the diffusion of authority that was inherent in these changes made literacy a potent danger to traditional religious and moral authority.  

For this section, I will be focusing on the writings of three Azharīs who, like many of their era, sought to change Egyptian society by influencing its educational system. All three deal with the issue of language and literacy in unique ways. Muhammad ʿAbduh, the famous Islamic modernist, had a long standing engagement with educational initiatives at Azhar and through the Islamic Benevolent Society. Among his life’s purposes, he saw “the reform of the way of writing the Arabic language” as second only to his work on religious reforms. In 1904, one of ʿAbduh’s students, Muhammad al-Ahmadi al-Zawahiri, published a scathing critique of the various educational systems in Egypt and an ambitious program of reform entitled Al-ʿIlm wa-l-ʿUlama’ wa Nizam al-Taʾlim, or “Knowledge, the Scholars, and the Educational System.” As a young scholar, son of the rector of the Ahmadīyya school of Ṭanṭa, and twenty five years before he himself became rector of Azhar, al-Zawahiri’s sought to strike a balance between the ideas of the ʿulamā’, the sufis, and the self-

proclaimed “enlightened” Westernized elite. In the realm of Arabic literacy, as a scholar presumably speaking to other scholars, he advocated changes at every level of the education system and in the very approach the ‘ulamā’ had to the uses of language. His work was so controversial in its call for wholesale restructuring that the then-rector of Azhar forced al-Zawahiri’s father to have all the copies he could find burned.183 Two years later, in 1906, another book advocating reforms from within the Azhari system was authored by Muhammad Badr al-Din al-Halabi, entitled Al-Ta’lim wa-l-Irshād, or “Education and Guidance.”184 In this work, Halabi goes into the details of all the religious sciences that are taught at Azhar and how they should be reformed. The subjects relating to the Arabic language, in proportion to their importance within the Azhari system, received a lot of attention.

In the works of all three reformers, their approach to Arabic literacy is colored by their view of language and the purpose of language. Within the Azhari system, Arabic was a major subject of study, sometimes stretching a decade or more for students.185 Nevertheless, in the hierarchy of Islamic sciences, Arabic was a “helper” science and served as a tool to understand the other sciences. Arabic was important because it was the means by which scholars could understand Islam’s fundamental

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184 It appears from comments made in the book that al-Halabī was a student from another part of the Muslim world who came to Egypt to study at Azhar. He refers to ‘Abduh as “the mufti-teacher” and commented on ‘Abduh’s proposals to reform Azhar. Ḥalabī thought that although ‘Abduh’s plans were too extreme and lost him many potential allies, it was not fair to discard all of his ideas. Muḥammad Ḥalabī, Al-Ta’lim wa-l-Irshād (Miṣr: Maṭbaʻat al-Saʿāda, 1906), 219–220.
185 While many of the Islamic sciences had lost their prominence in the Azhari system, Arabic along with fiqh, seemed to continue to be strong areas of study. As we shall see in these critiques, some felt that it had perhaps become too strong and too detailed a field.
texts. Much in the same way, advocating Arabic literacy was a means to an end and was important insofar as it could facilitate their own objectives: the reform of society along more moral and religious lines. Each writer saw education as the key component of social and intellectual reform and a crucial factor in not only improving society as a whole but also raising the stature of the traditional Islamic scholars that institutions like Azhar University produced. In the final analysis, these writers strongly advocated literacy practices that they believed would serve their religious agendas.\footnote{Between the three, they encouraged reading newspapers and journals, keeping personal diaries, and going to libraries. We will return to this topic in Chapter 3. al-Ẓawāhirī, \textit{Al-ʿIlm wa-l-ʿUlamāʾ}, 43–44, 206–209, 249–250.}

Because of their goal of encouraging religious and moral reform, these writers had more flexibility than the label “Azharī” would imply when it came to controversial issues like Arabic instruction, the colloquial, and foreign languages. All three advocated the simplification of Arabic instruction at all levels of education. Halabi bemoaned the long years that Azharī students spent studying grammar by way of exhaustive commentaries and expositions.\footnote{Halabī, \textit{Al-Taʿlīm wa-l-Irshād}, 61–65, 76–78.} Although he approved of the books used in government schools, he felt that government school students relied too much on memorization and did not really benefit from what they learned.\footnote{Ibid., 71–72, 81.} Halabi found the movement towards clearer prose in modern writing a vast improvement over centuries of convoluted writing and in stark contrast to the style of the intransient ʿulamāʾ of his day.\footnote{Ibid., 209.} Similarly, al-Zawahirī shared Halabi’s concerns about Arabic instruction,\footnote{al-Ẓawāhirī, \textit{Al-ʿIlm wa-l-ʿUlamāʾ}, 144–153, 190.} but
went even farther in his praise of modern Arabic: “the style of newspapers today is among the best and greatest in its impact on the reader and is appropriate for *al-lughah al-fuṣḥa* (literally, eloquent Arabic).”\(^{191}\) As for ‘Abduh, it seems that his style of writing was denigrated by other ‘ulamā’ who thought it “closer to the words of lawyers and journalist.”\(^{192}\) ‘Abduh himself felt that the content in newspapers and journals had a tendency towards low-brow topics and literary styles. However, he also believed that journalists and editors could serve as the catalysts of high linguistic standards and thereby ultimately strengthen the cause of good stylistic Arabic.\(^{193}\)

As for the issues of using colloquial Egyptian and learning foreign languages, both al-Zawahiri and ‘Abduh tended to take very utilitarian stances that reflected their educational agendas. Al-Zawahiri believed that colloquial could, in certain circumstances, be more persuasive and effective than standard Arabic.\(^{194}\) He even advocated writing simple books on the basics of Islamic practice, beliefs, and morals in the Egyptian colloquial for the masses.\(^{195}\) On the question of foreign language instruction for the lower classes, ‘Abduh’s stance echoed that of Lord Cromer: he believed that learning a foreign language was unnecessary for students who were not going to continue onto government service.\(^{196}\) Education, rather, should provide the lower classes with a basic understanding of the precepts of religion and fundamental life

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\(^{191}\) Ibid., 191.

\(^{192}\) Ibid.


\(^{195}\) Ibid., 263–264.

\(^{196}\) In fact, as much as possible, government service was to be discouraged among lower class Egyptians since it was neither productive for society nor helpful to raise the hopes of children of lower classes. ‘Abduh, *Al-Aʾmāl al-Kāmila 3*, 3:161–162.
skills. Once completed, this basic education would allow poor students to return to their own family trades and live morally upright lives.\(^{197}\) Foreign language instruction simply did not mesh with this vision of lower class education. At another end of the educational spectrum, al-Zawahiri suggested that that learning foreign languages was actually a religious obligation for the people who would be the future ‘ulamā’ of the society.\(^{198}\)

While Ahmed Zaki the bureaucrat had been cautious in his suggestion of foreign language education for Dar al-’Ulum students, al-Zawahiri the Azharī saw learning foreign languages as part of the religious duty of scholars since they needed to defend, explain, and spread Islam among other nations. Al-Zawahiri concedes some of the cultural fears surrounding foreign language instruction—that those who learn it do so only to Westernize themselves or to show off—but he nevertheless asserts that its necessity cannot be ignored.\(^{199}\)

In all of these issues, rather than take an ideological position about the purity of classical Arabic or the evils of Western influence, these writers choose to advocate the forms of literacy that they believed best served their goal of religious reform.

In pursuit of this reform, Arabic literacy could be both a powerful tool as well as a dangerous one. All three writers were aware of the explosion in the number of newspapers and journals that were being published in Egypt. The influence that was intrinsic in this newfound ability to reach more people through the written word was not lost on these reformers. As early as 1875, in the first year of the newspaper *al-Ahrām*’s

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\(^{197}\) Ibid., 3:165–167.  
\(^{199}\) Ibid., 186.
existence, Muhammad ʿAbduh was extolling newspapers and journals as one of God’s
greatest blessings. ʿAbduh understood the important role the press could play in
influencing public opinions, societal norms, and the political future of the nation. He
described newspapers as an educational tool with religious overtones: newspapers could
lift “the night of ignorance” from the people and newspaper men were not unlike the
“speaker who climbs upon the pulpit of the world” to proclaim messages that can bring
life or death. Meanwhile, al-Zawahiri suggested that all ‘ulamāʾ should make a habit
of reading newspapers and journals. He writes:

There are some ‘ulamāʾ who believe that all the words of newspapers are
lies and that it is not permissible to read them. This opinion is obviously
wrong. Not reading the newspaper isolates a person completely from the
world … this person is seen by others as simpleminded, knowing only
the religious rulings and nothing of that state of the people.

Furthermore, al-Zawahiri asserts that not being able to express oneself through the
written word was particularly unacceptable since writing had become an important
means of reform. The ‘ulamāʾ needed to be writing and publishing new books to
spread religious principles and moral reforms in society.

However, these new literacy practices were not without their dangers for society
and for the traditional authority of religious scholars. ʿAbduh, despite his early
involvement in the press, was not completely happy with the results of the Egyptian
foray into the print world. In 1881, ʿAbduh wrote about the different types of books

\[\text{References:}\]
\[\text{200 ʿAbduh, \textit{Al-Aʾmāl al-Kāmila} 3, 3:13.}\]
\[\text{201 Ibid., 3:14.}\]
\[\text{202 al-Zawāhirī, \textit{Al-ʿIlm wa-l-ʿUlamāʾ}, 43–44.}\]
\[\text{203 Ibid., 189.}\]
\[\text{204 Ibid., 120, 126–128, 162–163.}\]
available in Egypt at the time. He found that while scientific, intellectual, historical, and literature books were becoming more available, the bulk of what was being read were books, in his opinion, of no value: works of pure fiction and fantasy. He approved of the government’s ban on books that were intellectually and morally corrupting as “purification for the country from this infectious disease” of harmful reading materials.\(^{205}\) Over two decades later, in 1902, ʿAbduh was still disturbed by the power of newspapers to spread lies and encourage the worst in people by feeding their love of baseless humor.\(^{206}\) It is not that these shortcomings of the press were insurmountable, but they were impulses that needed to be supervised, controlled, and redirected to benefit society.\(^{207}\)

Halabi’s discussion about the problem of authority in the press crystallized some of these anxieties.\(^{208}\) He writes that because ideas are bought and sold in the public square, every issue of public concern becomes fodder for writers who publish their opinions with no regard for right and wrong. The result is an onslaught of views with no way to distinguish the good from the bad. Even when an insightful scholar does write an important or beneficial article or book, within a day or two, a barrage of criticism and responses rains down upon it from people who are seldom as knowledgeable as the initial writer. The result is a whole host of ideas floating around society with absolutely no backing and no practical solutions. The course of public discussion on matters of

\(^{205}\) ʿAbduh, \textit{Al-Aʾmāl al-Kāmilā}, 3:51.
\(^{206}\) Ibid., 3:126. The fact that ʿAbduh himself had been subject to quite a bit of lampooning in the press, undoubtedly colored his views.
\(^{207}\) Ibid., 3:127–128.
\(^{208}\) Halabi, \textit{Al-Tāʾīm wa-l-Irshād}, 216–219.
social import always ends with an observer feeling that solutions are “within grasp, however, when they open their hand they see that they were just clutching at air.”

With the diffusion of ideas and public discourse, also came the inevitable diffusion of authority. Instead of the most knowledgeable people commanding clear and unquestioned respect, anyone with a pen and access to the press could ascend to the heights of public discourse. For reformers who felt they had the answers to the problems of Egyptian society, this diffusion of authority was particularly problematic.

The debates surrounding mass education highlight the potential power and dangers of literacy to established moral and intellectual authorities in Muslim society. On one level, there was the question of what mass education was supposed to impart. When it came to literacy, there was general agreement that it should be a part of any basic education. Halabi makes the scholarly argument that knowledge of Arabic language is not religiously mandated on every individual (i.e. not fard ʿayan).

Nevertheless, it was a necessary skill because without it one became like a blind person, needing another person’s help to navigate through life. The ultimate purpose of any kind of mass education was first and foremost religious education. Not entirely unlike Cromer and some Egyptian bureaucrats, al-Zawahiri saw the kuttābs as one of the best opportunities to reform society and improve the level of religious instruction in Egypt for the lower classes. This focus on religious education did not necessarily preclude economic benefits, although, social mobility was not a goal. As mentioned above,

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209 Ibid., 218.
210 Ibid., 59–60.
211 al-Zawāhirī, Al-ʿIlm wa-l-ʿUlamāʾ, 273.
ʿAbduh did not believe that education for the poorer segments of society was supposed to be a means of economic or social advancement. Poor children were supposed to learn enough reading and writing to be self-sufficient in the trades of their forefathers. The purpose of moral education was to improve society as it was, not fundamentally alter the structure of society.

A second concern regarding authority and the mass educational system was the issue of who was to control and influence this particularly potent form of national socialization. In this our writers disagree. ʿAbduh, who had advocated the idea that al-Azhar University be put under the authority of the Ministry of Education, was more open to government involvement in education. He appealed to the English administration to drop its antagonism towards Egyptian education since it was in the interest of both the British overlords and the Egyptian populace that the educational system improve. Meanwhile, he acknowledged the shortcomings of kuttāb and elite government education and worked from within the government to improve them. As such, ʿAbduh focused his attention on getting government schools and government controlled kuttābs to include more religious studies and Arabic language. Al-Zawahariri took a less accommodating view. He saw the colonial initiative to establish control over the kuttābs as a fundamental threat to religious education, not simply an

212 ʿAbduh first expressed this idea in an 1887 recommendation for education in the Ottoman empire. He then reiterated it repeatedly in a speech in 1900 at one of the schools sponsored by the Islamic Benevolent Society. ʿAbduh, Al-Aʿmāl al-Kāmilah 3, 3:77, 161, 165.
213 Ibid., 3:172.
214 See for example the report he authored in 1904 recommending an increased focus on Quranic memorization. DWQ, Majlis al-Wuzarāʾ, Nizārat al-Maʿārif, Box 2, Folder 9 (#0075-043768), “Mudhakira Marfūʿa min Nizārat al-Maʿārif ilā Majlis al-Nuẓẓār” (29 April 1906), 3-4.
In this al-Zawahiri reflected the view of many others in the religious community who believed that government control of education was a direct threat to the nature of the “literacy” that these schools were suppose to impart. Al-Zawahiri explicitly voiced the fears that if the government continued its initiative to control kuttābs, within 50 years there would only be a handful of individuals in Egypt who had memorized the entire Quran. While al-Zawahiri agreed with the need to reform these kuttābs and re-train its teachers, he was deeply concerned about the nature of the education that was given. If students did not memorize the Quran, were they truly educated? And what did the transfer of these kuttābs from private hands to that of the government mean for the influence of the ‘ulamā’ on the education of the masses? For al-Zawahiri, it was the ‘ulamā’ who must step in and take these kuttābs under their wings. Between the current ineffectual kuttāb teachers and the dangerous agenda of the government, the ‘ulamā’ must assert their influence on the future generations of the country.

There was no better way to do that than through the education and literacy of the nation’s youngest members.

Conclusion

The issue of Arabic literacy cannot be divorced from questions about who would define it, what purpose it had for various segments of society, and what form it should

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216 See for example the Ministry of Endowment’s objection to the educational changes made to kuttābs that were transferred to the Ministry of Education. DWQ, Majlis al-Wuzarā’, Nizārat al-Ma’ārif , Box 2, Folder 1 (#0075-043760), “Taqrīr” (6 May 1900).
217 al-Zawāhirī, Al-‘Ilm wa-l-‘Ulamā’, 274.
218 Ibid., 272–273.
take. In the contentious milieu of the turn of the twentieth century, the cultural and political implications of Arabic literacy as opposed to foreign language literacy, of elite literacy as opposed to the literacy of the masses, and of female literacy as opposed to male literacy were continually subject to debate. In each of these issues, depending on who was promoting Arabic literacy and for what reasons, literacy policy provided a way for various groups to express their vision of the future of Egyptian society. Literacy was seen as an important tool of social reform, one that Egyptians were willing to wield; colonialists, bureaucrats, Islamic reformers, and women activists all wished to harness the power of a literate public to enact the kinds of improvements they wished to see for Egypt.

The purpose of this chapter was also to highlight the ambiguity inherent in the language of reform. For many, literacy represented both dangers as well as opportunities. In particular, literacy presented a problem for established religious and economic elite for whom a diffusion of language skills also meant a diffusion of authority. Unsurprisingly, these reformers tended to narrowly define literacy for the “subjects” of this reform—be they women or men. For the poor who could not afford multi-lingual education, Arabic-only instruction barred them from whole portions of the economy. For women, Arabic was the symbolic language of the domestic sphere. Nevertheless, as we shall see, even with its exclusions, these various literacies created a multitude of opportunities.

While this chapter has focused on the metanarratives and discourses of literacy among the educational elite, these debates had real-world consequences. Ultimately, the
spread of literacy in society would have an impact on literacy practices of all kinds:
how people expressed themselves privately and publically, what people read and wrote,
and how people engaged each other and their governments. It is to these changes that
we now turn.
Chapter 3

Literacy Practices

Introduction

In depictions of Egypt’s 1919 revolution, one image reoccurs: the distinctive upturned crescent and three stars that adorned flags and banners held by the women, men, and students protesting the British occupation. Some signs included a few words to identify the protesters or their cause, however, the presence of the symbol rendered these words largely superfluous. In the world of 1919, the use of symbols would have been a powerful and effective way to reach the vast majorities of Egyptians who would have witnessed this show of dissent. Photographs of protests held on the same streets during the 1940s and 1950s provide a very different visual landscape. In those protests, banners awash with long statements dominated the processions. Within thirty odd years, public processions and more importantly, public communication, had changed drastically in Egypt. Conveying information by way of statements and slogans became the natural choice for mid-century protesters. Although symbols will always have their place and power, with increased literacy and schooling, the written word came to be a transformational force in public communication.

The anthropological concept of practice facilitates the study of the everyday usage of reading and writing as part of literacy’s larger impact on society. By focusing

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220 Ibid., 1:134, 139.
on practice, or what people do with literacy, we can begin to conceptualize “the link between the activities of reading and writing and the social structures in which they are embedded and which they help shape.”\(^2\) It is clear that the elite within Egyptian society were interested in reading and writing and were actively engaged in wider debates about literacy in society. However, beyond this minority of Egyptians, we can begin to examine the wider spectrum of practices associated with literacy that was changing and expanding among the non-elite in society. The gatherings of local shopkeepers to listen to a reading of the newspaper, the attempts of the ever-growing class of school children to express themselves in writing, and the myriad ways writing was transforming the public space, all represent the kinds of literacy practices that were increasingly becoming a part of daily life.

\(^2\) Barton and Hamilton, Local literacies, 6. Not unlike historians seeking to balance structural and individual forces, according to Bradley Levinson, ethnographic observations of practice provide a similar balance: “The idea of practice has emerged as a way of accounting for how structure and agency together perform the work of social and cultural reproduction—that is, the merging and ongoing flow of social life. Practice has been articulated as a powerful heuristic corrective to the structuralisms (which accorded little agency to individual actors and little power to historical emergence) and voluntarisms (which accorded little power to patterned social forces in constraining or enabling individual action) dominating the social sciences of the twentieth century.” We are all equal, 339.
Figure 2: Picture from 1919 Protest.\footnote{Sijill al-Hilāl al-Muṣawwar, 1:98.}
However, for the historian, this sub-stratum of literacy practices is not always easy to measure or access. By their nature these practices are fleeting and, like the protest signs, are usually only described or depicted as part of larger narratives about the era. In order to study these practices and their growing relevance to the Egyptian public, I will be necessarily using a multipronged approach. I will be examining depictions of literacy in the press and other printed materials, literacy rates, postal statistics, and finally, the example of petition writing. Each source has its merits and downfalls. Anecdotal or recommended practices described in books or journals may not be representative of what people were actually doing in their daily lives, although they

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224 Ibid., 1:134.
give us insight into what kinds of practices were being promoted and idealized by a
growing number or Egyptians. The statistics and quantitative data of literacy or postal
rates, while problematic in providing exact measures of usage along a wide spectrum of
literacy, nevertheless, can show the relative growth and expansion of literacy practices
among the general population. Finally, looking at the pre-existing genre of petition
writing and tracing its changing uses and forms, while a somewhat narrow example,
points to the larger transformations that were happening in society and in the use of the
written word.

By combining these various sources on literacy, I hope to shed light on what
was indeed changing during the early twentieth century in terms of practice and social
life for Egyptians among the non-elite classes. In this chapter, two themes will come to
the fore. First, over the first few decades of the twentieth century, certain literacy
practices were becoming integrated into daily life at an unprecedented level. New forms
of written materials (newspapers, journals, petitions, etc.), advanced modes of
distribution (the printing press, postal system, etc.), and the public’s growing
engagement with these new kinds of literacy production created an opening for more
Egyptians to interact with written communication despite of their own reading or
writing abilities. Second, these new means of literacy production and distribution also
accompanied a shift in how writing was perceived and used. During this period, scribes
and handwritten documents dominated everyday interactions in the realms of the court
systems, marketplaces, and personal correspondences. However, with the increased
visibility of the printed word and greater numbers of people reading and producing it,
literacy began to take on a distinctively public dimension; one that was unmediated by scribal tradition or previous writing conventions. Writing was transforming, and being transformed by, a new kind of public expression.

**The Changing Image of Everyday Literacy**

How were people using literacy? In its broadest sense, literacy was undoubtedly part of Egyptian social life well before the twentieth century. Through correspondences, basic religious education, religious litanies, court or administrative needs, social engagements, or business dealings, the average Egyptian had to engage the written word, either mediated by a scribe or other assistance, on a regular basis. Studying the eighteenth century, Nelly Hanna has estimated that as much as a third of Cairo’s adult male population had received some education and, by extension, some semblance of literacy. However, at the turn of the twentieth century there was a qualitative and quantitative shift in how Egyptians were using literacy. In particular, new types of print materials were becoming more widespread with the emergence of the presses that were churning out newspapers, journals, literature of all kinds, textbooks, and private publications. Meanwhile, new segments of Egyptian society, like women and students, were increasingly encouraged to partake in literacy practices that were at once more mundane and more publically pervasive.

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225 For good overview, see Hanna, “Literacy and the ?”.
226 Ibid., 184.
The vibrancy of Egyptian newspaper and book presses is perhaps the most striking change of this era. The first government press was started in 1822, primarily to provide translated works and publish the official government gazette. Although, it was only in 1860 that the first private press appeared, by the turn of the century, there were well over 100 hundred private presses in use. According to Ayida Nusayr’s bibliographic work on the Egyptian press, of the 10,405 works that were published in the nineteenth century, at least 6,107 unique titles were printed between 1880 and 1899.227 Between 1900 and 1925, the number rose to 9,782 titles.228 Meanwhile, newspapers grew in import as the arrival of British forces in 1882 galvanized a new class of journalists and proprietors representing a wide range of political and social causes. Although exact circulation numbers are difficult to come by, Ami Ayalon, in his study of the Arab press, provides a good list of estimated circulation for individual publications as well as reported national totals.229 Garnered from a variety of sources, these average daily circulation estimates are by no means exact and tend to fluctuate considerably. Regardless, the relative growth of an estimated 24,000 newspapers in circulation on any given day in 1881 to 180,000 in 1927-1928 is demonstratively large enough to presume a large scale change. Ultimately, newspapers, books, and other printed materials became much more widely available in the 1920s than 40 or 50 years earlier.

Furthermore, the collective impact of a single printed work, be it a book or newspaper or journal, may have been more significant than their circulation numbers would imply. As Ayalon notes, there is no way to know how many times an individual newspaper or journal changed hands. Anecdotal references suggest that the practice of reading aloud, reusing papers, or renting papers before returning them to the seller were widespread.\textsuperscript{230} Even printed materials that we may view as disposable now, such as journals and the like, were often collected and bound to become part of an individual’s private library.\textsuperscript{231} Newspapers and journals could easily have had second or third lives beyond their initial sale, making them integral to some of the broader and more communal aspects of literacy.

These increasingly ubiquitous reading materials also became the site of a new kind of social advocacy for reading and writing practices. In some ways this advocacy was rather self serving, since it was only natural that writers and journalists would want the public to become more engaged in the reading practices that make books, newspapers, and journals profitable. However, what is striking about the promotion of literacy was the sheer range of practices that were encouraged. The act of reading for leisure or edification,\textsuperscript{232} historically reserved for only the most educated in society, was increasingly viewed as an everyday occurrence and something that was beneficial to a broader array of Egyptians.

\textsuperscript{231} Baron, “Readers and the Women’s Press in Egypt,” 226.
\textsuperscript{232} Here I’m excluding reading or recitation of the Quran or religious litanies.
The acts of reading and writing were explicitly referenced in many of the journals that styled themselves as *adabī*, or focused on the *belle-lettres*. Two of the most influential of this era, *al-Ustādh* and *al-Hilāl*, both had proprietors who had a long standing interest in the Arabic language and were deeply invested in its revival as a language of Arab literature and culture. Both journals had prominent series on language, reading, and writing.\(^\text{233}\) Furthermore, as a service and encouragement for curious readers, *adabī* journals would periodically publish recommended readings on various literary topics, book reviews of recently published works on reading and writing, as well as listings of new journalistic publications.\(^\text{234}\) These recommendations created a sort of ecology of literacy practices, each linked to one another. A reader of a particular kind of journal was also expected to be a reader of books, an amateur literary historian, and an aspiring writer (who may need some good advice to get them started). As with other debates about literacy, these recommended practices often reflected the particular point of view of the publication. A journal with a religiously conservative bent suggested further readings of books that “tread a desirable path between true Islam and modern civilization.”\(^\text{235}\) While the first women’s journal in Egypt, *al-Fatā*, addressed


\(^{234}\) As examples, see “Asʾila wa Ijwibatuhā,” *Al-Ḍiyāʾ* 1, no. 17 (May 15, 1899): 529-532; “Hidāyat al-Sāʾ il ilā Insāḥ al-Rasāʾīl,” *Al-Ustādh* 1, no. 19 (December 27, 1892): 454-455; “Bāb al-Suʾāl wa-l-Iqtirāb,” *Al-Hilāl* 2, no. 17 (May 1, 1894): 536. For a 1915 example of an ideal library collection for women, see Baron, “Readers and the Women’s Press in Egypt,” 224–226.

the concerns of mothers who wished to introduce their daughters to “morally beneficial” works by French authoresses.\(^{236}\)

Generally, the already literate were encouraged to partake in ever more morally or socially beneficial types of reading. In an 1899 article on the conduct of female teachers, the author strongly recommends that teachers read up on pedagogical books and subscribe to scholarly journals that are filled “with academic, moral/behavioral, and household benefits.”\(^{237}\) Similarly, Islamic reformers extolled the virtues of the press and the necessity for Azhari shaykhs and students to read newspapers, journals, and a wider range of books. In his 1906 book on educational reform, Muhammad al-Zawahiri called upon Azhari’s to read newspapers and journals to understand the world around them, contribute to journals, and author more books in order to spread the truths of religion. He even praised Westerners who use fiction and the theater as didactic aides.\(^{238}\)

Whether for a female teacher or a male religious scholar, reading “new” types of media (newspapers and journals) were seen as a way to excel in their professional and moral life.

The practices promoted by published writers were not, however, all aimed at the already highly literate. As an example, one can look at the activist and journalist Labiba Hashim who wrote frequently and passionately about reading and writing practices. In an article published in 1900 on “Newspapers and Writers,” Hashim articulates her fears

\(^{236}\) “Fāʾida Adabiyya,” *Al-Fatāh* 1, no. 10 (February 15, 1894): 446-448.


regarding the future of the Egyptian press. After making the case that there are too few good journalists, she turns to the second half of the equation necessary to create a vibrant press: a sustained and wide base of readers. Although the aforementioned poor quality of journalism turns away some readers, Hashim sees the problem as more widespread. There are too few potential readers who have spent the requisite money on education to become literate and those who may be inclined to reading are often too poor to support fledgeling journalistic enterprises. In her view, the only way for newspapers to succeed is for “education to become common, the domain of knowledge to be spread, and the number of readers increased.”

In her concern about the low numbers of literate Egyptians, Hashim was certainly not alone. With the publication of the official census every ten years and its report of low literacy rates among the Egyptian public, journalists found many opportunities to write appeals for more general education, more literate Egyptians, and, ultimately, more readers.

Hashim also represented a relatively new segment of the reading public: educated women. Unlike other groups for whom literacy was deemed important, literacy practices for women were largely seen as an extension of the domestic sphere. For Hashim, reading regularly and widely, beyond the “basics” of what was imparted in school education, was necessary for women to learn about the “outside” world which

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240 Ibid., 431.
241 For two early examples see “Al-Iḥṣā` al-Miṣrī,” *Al-Bayān* 1, no. 15 (January 1, 1898): 571-574; “Nisā`unā wa-l-Qirā`a,” *Anīs al-Jalīs* 1, no. 1 (January 31, 1898): 12-15. Also see discussion in Chapter 6 of this work.
they may never experience directly. Writers like Hashim, Malak Hifni Nasif, Nabawiyya Musa and other recommended books, journal, and newspapers that they believed could help develop a women’s mind and, if the reading material was sufficiently educational, could provide moral lessons. Likewise, in Mona Russell’s study on the cultivation of a nationalist model of womanhood through education, she highlights some of the very precise activities that were expected of Egyptian women. Many of these reflect new kinds of literacy practices for the Egyptian domestic sphere. Women were to set aside time each day for reading, serve as the family’s record keeper, make a catalogue of the family library, maintain financial records, and keep their own records and notes on housekeeping. As for writing practices, the idea of women as “mistresses of the pen” who wrote at their desks as their children played underfoot (although somewhat contentious as we shall see in the next chapter) also served as a useful image of the idealized female practice of literacy. Ultimately for many of these writers the literacy practices they envisioned would serve to facilitate a woman’s primary purpose in life: running her home, becoming good wife, and raising the next generation of Egyptians.

Meanwhile, this next generation of Egyptians as represented by the growing population of students in government, private, and religious schools, became the direct focus of literacy promotion. From the 1870’s and onwards, student magazines and

244 Russell, Creating the New Egyptian Woman, 149–151.
journals were a mainstay of the Egyptian press. In these journals, the act of reading was often encouraged directly. As an example, the children’s magazine *al-Samīr al-Ṣaghīr* published a story of a child who is caught reading the magazine in class and is reprimanded by the teacher. Luckily for the student he knows all the answers his teacher poses because he just read them in the last issue of the magazine. The moral of the story was that children should engage in beneficial reading—just on their own time and not in the classroom. Furthermore, as an expansion of the very extensive “advice” literature in Muslim societies and a type of conversion from the oral tradition of education to a more text based literacy, the trope of the student-teacher dialogue became popular in educational journals and newspapers. Abdullah Nadim used this format extensively in his journal *al-Ustadh* and other journals followed suit. The role of a student was no longer just to listen and engage with teachers and mentors in person. Rather, they were encouraged to read (and in some cases create their own) educational dialogues projected onto the written page.

Strikingly, students were encouraged to not only use their newfound skills of reading and writing as an educational exercise, but also as a form of public expression. The earliest educational journal in Egypt encouraged student submissions, publishing

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246 The first was *Rawḍat al-Madāris* that was published from 1870-1877. Other examples include *al-Madrasa* that was founded by Mustafa Kamil and some of his friends in law school in 1893, *Al-Samīr al-Ṣaghīr* that was published from 1897-1900, and *Al-Tarbiya* that was published by the staff of Kamil’s *al-Liwā‘*.


erudite example from advanced students who were often well on their way to becoming teachers or administrators themselves.\textsuperscript{250} Al-Samīr al-Ṣaghīr solicited regular writing submissions on subjects ranging from explanations of poetic verses to sample letters to family members.\textsuperscript{251} They even conducted a contest asking students to submit creative stories based on a series of cartoons.\textsuperscript{252} The best submissions were then published along with the student’s name and school.\textsuperscript{253} Even journals that were not specifically geared towards children often had articles written (or purportedly written) by students.\textsuperscript{254} These articles were often reflexive and self-aware of the literacy practices they were engaged in and actively praised or encouraged others to write as well.\textsuperscript{255}

In the wake of all these endorsements of literacy practices associated with the press, the question remains: how was all this received by the average Egyptian? A general perusal of any of the popular newspapers or journals from this period certainly gives the impression of an active audience of readers who were eager to engage in discussions, respond to questions, and participate in contests and writing opportunities provided by the press. However, gleaning the response of the general readership and beyond remains a challenge. In an effort to analysis one group of readers, Beth Baron

\textsuperscript{250} Hoda Yousef, “Reassessing Egypt’s Dual System of Education under Isma‘il: Growing ‘Ilm and Shifting Ground in Egypt’s First Educational Journal, Rawdat al-Madaris, 1870-1877,” International Journal of Middle East Studies 40, no. 1 (February 2008): Figure 2.

\textsuperscript{251} The inshā’ or composition, section was a regular part of the question and answer section.

\textsuperscript{252} “Su‘āl Taṣwīrī Muḏḥik,” Al-Samīr al-Ṣaghīr 1, no. 5 (December 1, 1897): 20; “Su‘āl Taṣwīrī Muḏḥik,” Al-Samīr al-Ṣaghīr 1, no. 6 (December 11, 1897): 23.

\textsuperscript{253} For example see “Ḥal Maṣā‘ il al-‘Adad al-Sādis,” Al-Samīr al-Ṣaghīr 1, no. 8 (January 1, 1898): 31.


provides an interesting case-study of women readers at the turn of the century.\textsuperscript{256} Relying on memoirs and reports from literate women, circulation and distribution data, and a survey of writers and contributors to the women’s press, Baron paints a fairly detailed picture of the kinds of literacy practices that characterized “a young, unmarried, middle-class Muslim or Christian woman from Cairo or Alexandria.”\textsuperscript{257} As Baron notes, while certainly useful, any such case-study is necessarily limited to a minority of the Egyptian public.

Looking at idealized notions of literacy is helpful insofar as the depictions of these literacy practices give us insight into what kind of expectations existed. Even if these works reached only the intellectual and social leaders in society, what the upper and middle classes were projecting onto society undoubtedly colored the perspective of many. However, in order to provide a more comprehensive representation of literacy practices in Egyptian society, one can also examine the more commonplace acts associated with reading and writing.

**Broader Literacy Practices**

In his 1913 novel \textit{Zaynab}, Muhammad Haykal depicts Egyptian village life through the eyes of two young couples.\textsuperscript{258} One set, Hamid and Aziza, represent the quintessential newly educated elite. Hamid, the son of a landlord, is a student who is

\textsuperscript{256} Baron, “Readers and the Women’s Press in Egypt.”
\textsuperscript{257} Ibid., 232.
\textsuperscript{258} Muḥammad Hussein Haykal, \textit{Zainab: The First Egyptian Novel}, trans. John Mohammed Grinsted (London: Darf, 1989). Although dubbed the “first real Egyptian novel” by H.A.R Gibb in 1933, there are several other earlier works that could have certainly been given this moniker. See Brugman, \textit{An Introduction to the History of Modern Arabic Literature in Egypt}, 210–211.
sent to school in Cairo, while ‘Aziza’s in-home education ends at the age of 12 when she starts to veil and enters the seclusion that was typical of her class. They are both avid readers, write notes and cards, and collect whatever books that they can find. Interestingly, their unfulfilled love exists only through a series of letters between the two, sent by post and intermediaries. As for the second couple, Zaynab and Ibrahim, they represent the other end of the literacy spectrum. They are farmers in the village for whom education is simply not a question. Nevertheless, the tragedy of their love story also culminates by way of the written word. When Ibrahim is sent to the army, he manages to pay a scribe to dictate a letter for him. Although addressed to his friend, Zaynab harbors a hope that he has mentioned her in his letter and she waits for it to be read aloud to a gathering of friends and family. When it is finally read by a child using “the clear voice in which he was accustomed to recite the Qur’an in school” without mention of Zaynab, she becomes heartbroken and loses her will to live. As both love stories unfold, the processes of letter writing, along with literacy practices ranging from reading newspapers aloud to the widespread use of scribes, are shared by literate and illiterate alike.

These wider uses of writing and reading contradict our most straightforward measure of literacy during this period: the official census. Given the intense interest in literacy and education, it is no surprise that the number of literate Egyptians was

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259 Haykal, Zainab, 128–141.
261 Ibid., 194.
262 For other examples of public and private literacy practices see Ibid., 4, 13–14, 25, 49–50, 58, 152, 171–179, 208.
growing at the dawn of the twentieth century. Between 1897 and 1927, the percentage of men who could read increased from 8% to 23% and among women from .2% to nearly 5% (See Table 1). Although to roughly triple the percentage of men and increase the percentage of women who could read 25 times in three decades was a vast social change, the absolute numbers were still low. Particularly in rural areas, where literacy rates were often much lower, Egyptians who were classified as illiterate were the vast majority. However, these official rates of literacy belie the fact that despite being “illiterate,” many Egyptians were still engaged in literacy practices. Gauging the extent and impact of this more ephemeral level of literacy practice is a complex matter.

One approach advocated by the historian David Vincent is to look at postal rates as a measure of functional literacy and a corrective to other historical data on literacy.²⁶³ Unlike literacy rates which are counted in a somewhat arbitrary manner by census takers who either determine a person’s capacity or simply ask people to self-report, the numbers of parcels of mail that are delivered provide a relatively unbiased reading of one of the most basic functions of written literacy: to correspond with people beyond the immediate vicinity. In other words, instead of measuring a designation (literate or not), postal rates measure one of the most prominent and accessible kinds of literacy practice. Since, as in the case of Zaynab and Ibrahim, letters were not necessarily only sent by the literate, they also give us access to a larger pool of people who would have

²⁶³ Besides official literacy rates when available, in Europe marriage registers within which couples either signed or made their mark have been used as a way to gauge literacy. David Vincent, The Rise of Mass Literacy: Reading and Writing in Modern Europe (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2000), 19–21.
used scribes, relatives, or friends to dictate letters for them. In this context, it makes sense to view literacy, and particularly letter writing, as a communal act, not one that was only undertaken by the educated, self-sufficient Egyptian in the privacy of his/her own home. Particularly at a societal level, the intensification of this type of literacy practice becomes significant not only for individuals but also for the cultural milieu as a whole.

However, this approach cannot be undertaken without certain reservations. As an aggregate, we do not have access to how individual Egyptians made use of the postal system. A class of particularly prolific letter writers may have offset the national average, as would have more writing-based segments of civil society, like business or journalistic enterprises. Furthermore, during this period, the postal system in Egypt was neither mature nor ubiquitous. In tandem with the increased postal rates, the infrastructure of the postal system itself was also expanding. In such a situation, it is hard to say if higher capacities earlier on in the postal system would have produced even higher rates of postal usage or vice versa. However, this ambiguity does not render this data useless. Rather, the postal rates in Egypt for the early part of the twentieth century not only measure this particular kind of literacy practice, but also provide a glimpse into the demand that it generated.

The postal system was one among several state-building enterprises during this period that was increasingly becoming a part of Egyptian life. In 1865, Khedive Isma’il

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264 As we shall see in the section later in this chapter on petition writing, this was not an insignificant number of people.
bought out the largest privately owned postal company in Egypt and converted it into the Egyptian Postal Service. At the time, there were only 25 public post offices in Egypt. By 1900, the number of post offices had reached 318 and by 1930 that number was 592 throughout the country.\textsuperscript{266} In tandem with this growing network of post offices other extensions of government services were stretching deeper and deeper into the countryside.\textsuperscript{267} The centralized bureaucracy and military of Mehmet Ali allowed for more efficient tax collection, improved infrastructure, and an omnipresent threat of corvée or conscription. By the end of the nineteenth century, new technologies like the telegraph and the railway system created networks the crisscrossed the country and allowed state entities and individuals to more easily engage one another. The postal system was just one way in which the country was becoming a “smaller” place.

Between 1880 and 1930, the numbers of pieces of mail sent through the national postal system grew exponentially.\textsuperscript{268} Regular, domestic mail (excluding government correspondences) were about 2 million pieces in 1880 and 68 million in 1930, roughly doubling every decade. Similarly, in 1880, while only about one and a half million printed journals, newspapers, and samples were sent out through the post, that number was nearly 30 million in 1930. On a per capita basis, the rate went from about 1 piece of mail sent per inhabitant per year in 1885 to almost 6 per inhabitant in 1925.\textsuperscript{269}

\textsuperscript{266} Wizarat al-Muwāšālāt, Maṣlaḥat Al-Barīd, \textit{Al-Taqrīr Al-Sanawī ʻan A‘māl Maṣlaḥat Al-Barīd Li-Sanat 1938} (Cairo: Al-Matba‘a al-Amīrīyya, 1939), 48.
\textsuperscript{267} Fahmy, \textit{Ordinary Egyptians}, 21–27.
\textsuperscript{268} See Table 1.
\textsuperscript{269} Using the Egyptian census as a measure of population is problematic since the 1882 census was widely viewed as underestimating the population and the 1917 census was probably out of date by 1925. However, as an expression of relative growth, this measure does give us some indication of how much more the postal system was being utilized. Union Postale Universelle, \textit{Statistique Générale du Service
Meanwhile, the cost of sending an ordinary letter steadily decreased. In 1878, it cost 1 piaster to send 10 grams anywhere in the country and by 1898, it was only half a piaster\textsuperscript{270} to send 30 grams.\textsuperscript{271} The net result was that printed materials were becoming more common, sending mail was getting cheaper for the average Egyptian, and the volume of written correspondences sent through the Egyptian postal system rose considerably.

Ultimately, the chance that an Egyptian in 1930 had access to printed materials or had sent or received a letter, \textit{even if they themselves could not read or write}, had increased significantly. This is an important point. In a country with reportedly only 1.7 million literate and nearly 9 million illiterate citizens in 1927,\textsuperscript{272} it is perhaps conceivable that the nearly 100 million letters, post cards, journals, and newspapers in circulation were being used nearly exclusively by the literate minority. However, given the communal nature of literacy practices, it is far more likely that these written works were part of a wider range of literacy practices that made their way into the homes and lives of a large portion of the population.\textsuperscript{273} Although the absolute numbers of literacy rates or postal rates do not tell us much about what people were actually doing with literacy, they do point to the fact that nominally and functionally, the availability and

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item \textit{Postal 1885} (Berne: Imprimerie Suter & Lierow, 1887), 2; \textit{Union Postale Universelle, Statistique Générale du Service Postal 1925} (Berne: Bureau International de l’Union Postale Universelle, 1927), 2. If you look at all letters, including those excluded from taxes, this rose to nearly 9 letters per inhabitant in 1925.
\item 5 millieme was equal to half a piaster. One Egyptian pound has 100 piasters, and each piaster has 10 millieme.
\item Egypt, \textit{Les Postes en Égypte} (Cairo: Imprimerie Nationale, 1934), 75. Initially, in 1865, the government had set one unified rate of one piaster for 7 ½ grams.
\item Roughly 14\% of the population was designated literate. Egypt., \textit{Population Census of Egypt, 1927}.
\item Vincent, \textit{The Rise of Mass Literacy}, 16–17. As we shall see with the long-standing tradition of petition writing, scribes and other forms of assistance, were widely used by the illiterate and semi-literate.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
The circulation of the written and printed word had changed dramatically over the fifty years between 1880 and 1930. The minority of officially “literate” Egyptians were not the only beneficiaries of this sea change.

Table 3: Domestic Postal Service for Egypt, 1880-1930

![Domestic Postal Service for Egypt 1880-1930](chart)

Letters and post cards
Printed Materials

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274 Wizarat al-Muwāšalāt, Maṣlaḥat Al-Barīd, Al-Taqrīb Al-Sanawi’ an A‘māl Maṣlaḥat Al-Barīd Li-Sanat 1938, 50; Union Postale Universelle, Statistique Générale du Service Postal 1885; Union Postale Universelle, Statistique Générale du Service Postal 1895 (Berne: Imprimerie Suter & Lierow, 1897); Union Postale Universelle, Statistique Générale du Service Postal 1905 (Berne: Imprimerie R. Suter, 1907); Union Postale Universelle, Statistique Générale du Service Postal 1915 (Berne: Imprimerie R. Suter, 1917); Union Postale Universelle, Statistique Générale du Service Postal 1925.
The comparative rate of the growth of official literacy and postal rates can also tell us something about the importance of these practices. While it took 30 years (1897-1927) for the literacy rate to triple in Egypt, over the same period, the number of letters sent through the Egyptian post increased six times. In other words, Egyptians as a whole were using literacy as a practice far faster than individuals were able to acquire it as a skill. In some ways this makes sense. While it takes years and considerable cost for someone to become literate, for 5 millieme postage or a trip to a local gathering place, the average Egyptian got access to one of the most fundamental aspects of literacy. To use economic terms, literacy practices had a low cost of entry compared to the education involved in becoming literate. Coupled with the aforementioned tendency to communal literacy, these postal rates show that literacy practices, beyond simply the vision of literacy championed by the elite, were indeed becoming an important part of Egyptian social and economic life.

In order to trace some of the qualitative changes associated with this quantitative increase in literacy practices, I will be looking at one particular form of written correspondence, that of petition writing.

**Petition Writing: Literacy, Discourse, and Technology in Practice**

The act of petitioning those in power for favors, justice, or assistance is as old as humanity. Since the rise of Islamic empires, bureaucracies have dealt with requests from the populace through various means, at times systematically and at others on an
ad-hoc basis. In their written form, we have extant Arabic petitions dating back to the first century of Islam. Since these earliest examples, the general structure of petitions has tended to remain roughly the same, although the precise wording would depend on the addressee, circumstances, and nature of the request. The standard petition included an initial prayer or invocation (the basmala), an address, an initial blessing on the addressee, an exposition of the situation, the specific request, the motivation for the addressee to fulfill this request, and then a final blessing on the addressee. Over time this format and the proper titles, wording, verb tenses were codified in numerous manuals of style meant for the growing ranks of professional scribes who were often tasked with the duty of drafting petitions for the general public and elites alike.

In Egypt during the nineteenth century, the bureaucratization of the Egyptian government under Mehmet Ali led to an incredible amount of these petitions (by one estimate at least 1 million) being recorded and preserved within the Egyptian archives. Many of the original petitions submitted by petitioners in the first decades of the twentieth century were preserved and organized by topic in the ‘Abdīn

277 Ibid.
278 The most famous in Egypt is perhaps Qalqashandī’s Ṣubh al-A’šā’ from the 14th/15th century. Aḥmad Qalqashandī, Kitāb Ṣubh al-A’šā’ fi Ṣinā’at al-Inshā’, al-Ṭab’ah 1. ([Cairo]: al-Hay’ah al-Miṣrīyah al-‘Āmmah lil-Kitāb, 2006).
Although they provide a wealth of information on life in Egypt, the relationship between the state and its people, and the way in which Egyptians expressed themselves, they have been surprisingly underutilized by researchers.

For my purposes, I will be using the evolution of petitions regarding education over these first decades of the twentieth century as a means to trace literacy in action. As a source of social history, these petitions are particularly instructive on several levels. First, demographically, these documents represent a broad cross-section of

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280 There are something like 200 boxes in the ‘ʿAbdīn collection at Dār al-Wathāʿiq of petitions on topics that touch many aspect of daily life (agriculture, guilds, government jobs, schools, Sufi orders, the pilgrimage, prisons, etc.), starting from DWQ, ‘ʿAbdīn, Box 377, “Iltimāsāt.” These subject boxes were organized well after the petitions were received by the government. For an idea of how these petitions were originally processed, see ‘ʿAbdīn Boxes 623-630 “Diwān Khidīwī, ʿArḍḍḥālāt.” The diwān boxes contain the records and brief descriptions of all the petitions that were received from 1901-1915 before they were forwarded on to various parts of the administration. Judging from a spot check of these records, almost all the original petitions regarding education did indeed end up in the “Iltimāsāt” subject boxes about education, although some of those that were extensively addressed were stored with other Ministry of Education documents. There are also other boxes of petitions in some of the collections of the individual ministries. For example DWQ, Majlis al-Wuzarāʾ, Majlis al-Nuẓẓār, Boxes 8A and 8B, “Iltimāsāt.” For examples of where to find nineteenth century petitions see Hilāl, “Al-ʿArḍḍḥāl,” 307–313.


ilāl, “Al-ʿArḍḍḥāl Ṣawt al-Fallāḥ al-Muḥṭaj.”

ilāl, “Al-ʿArḍḍḥāl Ṣawt al-Fallāḥ al-Muḥṭaj.”

ilāl, “Al-ʿArḍḍḥāl Ṣawt al-Fallāḥ al-Muḥṭaj.”


282 I am looking at petitions primarily regarding education, student affairs, and occasionally other subjects.
Egyptian society. The wealthy, the poor, women, men, students, parents, Muslims, Christians, Jews, villagers, and urbanites all sought educational advantages by way of appeal to the government. Second, petitions are a unique space of negotiation and interaction between people and those in power. The way in which petitioners were able to re-appropriate the “officially sanctioned discourse” to their own ends shows how much of the prevailing “literate” discourse influenced society at large. Lastly, as a source on literacy, these petitions provide a unique perspective on how writing was being used by Egyptians. These petitions show in stark relief the way in which writing and increasingly print were being used by the literate and illiterate alike to express their demands. In terms of content, who was writing, and the audience they were addressing, these petitions document the changes that were occurring to literacy in the private and public sphere of Egyptian society.

Petitions regarding education were not an invention of the twentieth century, although they did take on new urgency with the growth and expansion of the government and private sector schools. Mehmet Ali received petitions from mothers and fathers asking that their children be admitted into the citadel’s school to learn “reading and writing.” At the time, students of the government schools received not only free room and board, but also a stipend. As a result, the poor often requested entrance into schools as a means of providing for children that could not be supported at home. By the twentieth century, the situation had reversed dramatically. Degree

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283 Chalcraft, “Engaging the State,” 304.
284 ʻArab, Shalaq, and ʻUthmān, Al-Sulṭa wa-ʻArḍḥālāt al-Maẓlūmīn, 112, 147, 164, 165.
285 Ibid., 135, 157, 164.
conferring schools, both private and governmental, were costly by most standards. Nevertheless, demand far exceeded supply and many parents sought financial relief or special concessions from the government to allow their children to attend these schools. 

Interestingly, these petitions often mirror the discourses perpetuated by the national press, the government, and the elites in society regarding education and literacy. As a general strategy, petitioners often took pains to echo the “official” discourse and repurpose it for their specific request. As an indication of the importance of basic literacy, some students and parents would mention a child’s ability to read and write as evidence of their intellectual preparation for the generally more rigorous (and expensive) primary and secondary government or military schools.

Education more broadly was framed in these petitions as a necessity to secure the future of the child and, by extension, the country as a whole. A parent made the case that two of his six children should be entered into government schools “in order that they do not lose their future in this age where the light of knowledge and understanding has been

286 Kuttâbs and other religious and charity schools were still within the reach of most families. Government schools, missionary schools, and private schools modeled after them required tuition that was beyond the means of most Egyptians.

287 For example, appealing to a ruler’s justice when seeking redress for a wrong, highlighting his generosity when seeking financial assistance, etc. This can in some ways be viewed as a “distortion” of the petitioners voice. However, for the purposes of this study, this is simply an important element of these documents particular context and worthy of examination in of itself.

Another petitioned the sultan that his son be able to continue his education so that his son can become “a small servant from among the servant of the country of Your Greatness.” In contrast, one mother was perhaps a little too frank in her assertion that “I desire education for my aforementioned son so he may benefit me and benefit himself.” Rather than take her direct approach, most other petitions couched the economic benefits of education to the individual in the language of national progress and improvement.

Petitioners seemed particularly adept at appealing to nationalist fervor and political circumstances to make their case. One student framed his request to be admitted into a school as a national service: “I request help in education so I can become educated and serve the country under whose sky I was raised, whose sweet winds have relived me, and whose water has quenched me … I must serve the nation (waṭan) honorably and my service will not be good unless I am educated.” Another asserted, quite dramatically, “I have no desire in this world except to serve the beloved nation (waṭan), for a person who does not benefit his country or sacrifice his life for it, his death is better than his life …” For the student Muhammad ʿAbd al-Wahhab Darwish, the provisional independence granted Egypt in 1922 seemed like an opportune time to ask for tuition relief. Darwish began each paragraph of his letter with “The

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Trust! The Trust!” *(al-amāna)* before laying out the kind of trust the nation was to fulfill: “God has brought independence to the nation at the hand of my Lord and my Lord has truly risen to the duty *(qām bi-l-wājib)* by establishing a school to guide every lost person …”293 A ruler who established schools could surely provide the 20 Egyptian pound fee for this one humble student.

Other students eschewed flattery and opted for veiled threats about the bleak future that awaits the country if people like them did not receive assistance. In this too, petitioners reflected the general discourse on the importance of education and literacy for social reform. One student feared he would become a paralyzed limb of the social structure.294 For didn’t every limb of the social body need to be healthy in order for the country to succeed? Another student by the name of ‘Abbas Mursi Marhawi used the growing ranks of idle, half-educated students with no gainful employment to his advantage—by raising the specter of joining them. He explained that his father only has five faddāns (acres) of land and was able to pay his way through primary schools. However, neither he nor his father could afford the tuition of secondary school. “In this situation I will be denied the fruits of education. I will be lost and my morals will be corrupted … I will be among those without a trade, especially since I’ve reached 18 years of age without taking a trade except learning in school.” Here the negative discourse about primary education alone was of no benefit for lower class Egyptians is

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given credence, although Marhawi proposes a logical solution: provide secondary education as well.

While the discourse on the benefits (and limitations) of literacy and education permeate these petitions, the occasional letter directly addressed some of the literacy practices that allowed this official discourse to reach petitioners. Several petitions referenced the laudable desire of the khedive or sultan to spread education. In particular, the short term of Husayn Kamil from December of 1914 to October of 1917 became a catalyst for these sorts of appeals. Media coverage of Kamil was particularly intense because he was installed as the new “sultan of Egypt” by the British government when Khedive Abbas Hilmi II sided with Turkey at the start of World War I. On the one hand, his assent to power by colonial fiat made him a target of scorn and assassination attempts. On the other hand, his relatively humble life before the throne and the fact that he had previously served as the Minister of Education and was actively involved in the Islamic Benevolent Society’s schools program made him a symbol of educational opportunity. The latter was highlighted in Kamil’s speeches and declarations and was used by petitioners to frame their own requests. What they “heard” or “saw” of the new sultan’s dedication to education was explicitly mentioned in statements like: “from time to time we hear and see your pure assistance in reviving the nation and its education”

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or “we heard the good news that that this school was opened with your name” or “I know from the sultan’s many visits to centers and schools his support for his children, the students.” How did this and other educational news reach petitioners? In the words of one, poverty-stricken sixteen year old student: “We read daily in the newspapers of the desire of your Greatness to spread knowledge, encourage students and teachers, and your generosity [which has] encouraged me to throw myself between your hands and to explain my state to your Greatness.” The official discourse on education and its importance was making its way to the public by way of the press and communities who were passing along this information. In other words, the information imparted by the new flurry of journalism and public literacy was indeed reaching average Egyptians.

What can these petitions tell us about the changing writing practices of this era? In one sense, these letters remain an enigma because it is often impossible to tell just who did compose and write the letter. The use of scribes, particularly ones specialized in petition-writing (during the Ottoman period called a ‘ardhaḥālijī), was common. Although the scribe seldom signed his own name, the use of recognizable “professional” phrases, the presence of a shaky signature from the petitioner at the end,

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or references to the petitioner in the third person in the body of the letter all can indicate a scribal hand. The case of one mother who sent the Egyptian government numerous petitions on behalf of her children from 1908 to 1913, often in different handwritings, indicates that she had at least several different scribes draft her letters.\(^{301}\) However, even an absence of these obvious indications or signs of “unprofessionalism” (shaky handwriting, lack of proper form, etc.) does not necessarily mean the petitioner him or herself wrote the petition, only that the actual writer was unskilled. In only one case did I come across a letter where the 10 year old writer proudly disclosed that he was the “writer of this handwriting.”\(^{302}\) Other particularly personal expressions of creativity or first person accounts point to the petitioners as authors,\(^{303}\) although one can never really know.

The use of scribes, however, can be examined as its own kind of writing technology. Scribal services were a tool that could be adapted to local needs, had their benefits and drawbacks, and ultimately shaped the content of written works in particular ways. For example, scribal technology was an accessible, semi-private method to create


\(^{303}\) So for example, did a student who composed his plea in poetic verse and beautiful calligraphy author the work himself? Did he write the verses, but get someone else to pen the letter? DWQ, ʿAbdīn, Box 490, “Iltamāsāt ʿṬalab al-ʿIlīthāq bi-l-Madāris,” Folder 7 (#0069-009600). Document #16, letter from Sulaymān Aḥmad Abū Zayd (4 June 1917).
Local individuals or groups could employ the services of a scribe as quickly as the writer could be physically located. Dictating a complaint was an oral exercise, one that could be spontaneous, overheard, and contributed to. The conversational, at times verbatim, accounts in the body of these petitions let the voices, more so than the crafted written words, of the petitioner emerge. In a sense, the oral act of dictating to a scribe could bleed into the fabric of the written text, making the petitions a sort of intermediate step between oral and written compositions. With the appearance of new technologies, like that of the press, different aspects of the writing process came to the fore.305

Starting in the mid-1910s, printed group petitions are increasingly present in the archival record, indicating their growing popularity and expanding applications.306 Group petitions in of themselves were not a novelty. In was not unheard of for professional guilds, students, and whole villages to draft petitions to local or national authorities.307 However, the use of printed petitions was an innovation with consequences that were at once limiting and flexible. Printing required a drafted original, typesetting and proofing, and access to (certainly compared to pen and paper) expensive machinery. At the same time, the printed petitions had new sorts of

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304 In the Yemeni context, Brinkley Messick describes the similar function of private notaries who were “legal specialists [that] functioned in an institutional space that was, again, neither public nor private in the modern sense. It was located outside the purview of the Islamic state and involved serving the public with acquired legal knowledge in a marketplace-demand fashion.” Brinkley Messick, “Written Identities: Legal Subjects in an Islamic State,” History of Religions 38, no. 1 (1998): 38.
305 Another technology of communication which is beyond the scope of this study, but appears in these archives, is telegrams.
306 For some of the epistemological implications of this kind of shift in the context of legal documents, see Messick, The calligraphic state, 240–250.
307 For several nineteenth century examples, see Chalcraft, “Engaging the State.” Also Chalcraft, The Striking Cabbies of Cairo and Other Stories.
flexibilities. They could be printed in large quantities, distributed over a large geographic area, and, as we shall see, addressed to a much broader audience than that of the traditional authorities.

As an example, the progression in the printed petitions offered by students is striking (Figure 5). The first petition I came across was from a group of students who were not able to find employment after graduation in 1915.308 They headed their petition with a crown and an embellished slogan of “long live our Lord Sultan,” the authority from whom they were seeking help. They did not include any signatures, just the name and location of their school. Presumably the printed petition was meant to give credence to their request. Two years later, 164 student with secondary degrees complained of the same fate, this time with all their names listed.309 In this case, the petitioners seemed to feel that their strength was in their numbers and they included almost 3 pages listing their individual names. Furthermore, they chose the nationalist symbol that would become famous in the 1919 revolution, the crescent and three stars, to adorn their petition (Figure 5, B). In an indication of their attempt at a broader appeal, the final address of the petition reads: “We raise our complaint to his honor the president of the Sultan’s council and all the men of the government and every upright, fair person who upholds the truth.” The handwritten phrase “his honor the president of the Sultan’s council” along with the date was written on the petition after printing,

signifying that multiple copies of this petition were printed and distributed to various levels of the government in their effort to reach “all the men” in their address.

Another set of petitions from 1919 indicate that “form petitions” were growing in popularity (Figure 5, C).\(^{310}\) This time, multiple copies of the same petition were sent to various parts of the government, each with different signatures representing former students working in different Sharʿīʿa courts. The name of the addressee, the petitioners, and dates were all filled in after printing, in all likelihood, as the petitions were circulated among various parts of the court system. With each of these successive petitions, both the extent of the audience and circle of petitioners was widening: a group of students appealing to the sultan, then an enumerated group of 164 appealing to various levels of government, and finally, students from various geographic locations using form letters for distribution among themselves and government agencies. These written petitions, printed and made for distribution became a means for mobilizing people over wide geographic areas in a much easier fashion than multiple copies of a handwritten petition could have.

\(^{310}\) DWQ, ‘Abdīn, Box 482, “Iltamāsāt Jamāʿī Ṭalaba,” Folder 10 (#0069-009371). Documents #1-6 (2 November 1919 to 10 November 1919).
FIGURE 4: HANDWRITTEN GROUP PETITIONS

A: 1908 petition from a group of students complaining about the negative influence of Mr. Dunlop, the British controller in the Ministry of Education.

B: 1915 petition from a group of residents from the village of Fāqūs requesting a school for their community.
FIGURE 5: PRINTED GROUP PETITIONS
In a way, the technology of print invited distribution and an appeal to public opinion in a way handwritten petitions simply did not. Handwritten petitions were most decidedly part of a two way exchange between the petitioner(s) and the recipient. Furthermore, even when addressing communal needs, they were geographically limited, representing people from the same village or place of work. A common example regarding education was the frequent requests by communities for the government to open new schools or educational institutes in their areas. In some cases these requests represented the first in a series of negotiations between the state and the local communities as they strove to locate the resources for these educational projects. In 1892 a new initiative offered government run schools for communities that could donate the physical facilities. However, upon further inspection, the government found the locations proposed by some villages to be unfit. The ensuing petitions from villages disputed the government findings or offered to provide better locations, buildings, and the like. Although these documents often included the usual praise for the ruler and

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311 As an example, see the petition from a group of residents in the village of Fāqūs who made the case that their community was particularly bereft of education and teachers and, therefore, in need of a new instructional center. DWQ, ʿAbdīn, Box 483, “İltamāsāt Ṭalaba,” Folder 7 (#0069-009413). Document #26 (15 June 1915). See Figure 1, Image B.

312 DWQ, Majlis al-Wuzarāʾ, Nizārat al-Maʾārif, Box4D, “Mawdūʿāt Mukhtalifa” Folder 24 (#0075-044063). Letters from Bilbis and Ibrāhīmiyya (1 and 5 October, 1892) and response from Ministry of Education (31 October 1892).
exaltation of education, the petitions and their responses largely focused on the specifics of practical governance. Despite their communal aspects, these group petitions were definitely created for bureaucratic consumption.

In contrast, printed documents—with their association with the “public” sphere of journalism and their graphic images meant to grab attention—reinforced the desire of these petitioners to reach more than just the rulers. In 1909, an anonymous government worker from Tanta printed a petition in the style of a newspaper article with columns and a headline proclaiming: “Read with Care, May God Show You Mercy.” The article-petition complains that the government “does not hear the cries of its small civil servants” as they “wait in vain because their complaints never reach the highest authorities.” In order to make sure that this particular complaint is heard, the author embellishes his plea with rhetorical flourishes like interspersed exclamations of “ahh and a thousand ahh” and a handwritten assertion that “by God our situation is very dire and we seek kindness and a respond to our plea.” The petition is signed only with the initial Ḥ.A. However, in one final populist touch, the last line indicates that it is submitted by way of (bi-wāsiṭa) the patron saint of Tanta, Al-Sayyid Ahmad al-Badawi. The writer, although specific in his claims, most definitely created this work as an appeal to public sentiment.

By the 1920’s printed petitions, sometimes in the form of pamphlets, with various signatures and addressees were being used by students of all kinds, government employees, and even ‘ulamā’, all pleading their cases with the government.

and beyond.\textsuperscript{314} The production level of these petitions mirrored improvements in the printing process, with better graphics, multiple pages, and higher quality papers. In their design, these documents were meant for not only a onetime appeal, but rather a more extensive audience. Increasingly in these cases, public opinion became part of the audience as, literally and figuratively, one of the addressees. The cover of one eight page pamphlet-petition from one group of students was addressed to “those in power and public opinion” (Figure 5, D).\textsuperscript{315} Rather than a private or semi-private plea to those in power, these petitions were crafted, designed, and printed with the larger public in mind. The tradition of written petitioning, as a literacy practice, was becoming part of the public sphere.

In an interesting twist, women who were traditionally active petitioners on behalf of themselves and their families in many handwritten petitions, were completely absent from these examples of public, printed petitions. This is not to say that women were not an increasingly part of public life. The 1919 revolution saw women of all ranks at the front lines of protests and the nascent feminist movement was coming into its own. Yet, as a literary practice, writing in the public sphere was still a privileged act that was very distinct from the private requests of individuals seeking assistance. It is

\textsuperscript{314} DWQ, ʿAbdin, Box 482, “Iltamāsāt Jamāʿī Ṭalaba,” Folder 16 (#0069-009379). Document #18, “Mudhakkira” (1925); DWQ, ʿAbdin, Box 408, “Iltamāsāt Jamāʿī Muwwazzifīn,” Folder 4 (#0069-007867). (1 January 1923 to 31 December 1924); DWQ, Box 408, “Iltamāsāt Jamāʿī Muwwazzifīn,” Folder 10 (#0069-007873). (3 February 1927 to 28 May 1927); DWQ, Box 502, “Iltamāsāt Al-Azhar,” Folder 5 (#0069-009970). Document #12, “Mudhakkira” from blind student of Azhar (3 November 1923);

these ambiguities associated with consuming and producing the written word in the public and private realm that is the topic of the next chapter.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have sought to refocus our historical lens from the rather limited discourses of literacy to the larger changes in literacy practices occurring among a wide segment of the Egyptian populace. The Egyptian press of the time perpetuated a certain vision of literacy for the literate public, elite women, and the growing body of students. However, beyond what the already literate were writing and reading about literacy practices, postal rates and examples of communal literacy practices indicates that these practices did indeed reach a significant portion of Egyptian society. As evidenced by educational petitions, many Egyptian were aware of the push for greater education and literacy and used this discourse to make their case for assistance. Furthermore, the flourishing press also impacted the petitioning tradition as groups of students, employees, and scholars used printed petitions to appeal to the broader public. Writing was increasingly becoming part of the public sphere.

This approach to literacy from the “ground up” is particularly useful in the quest to understand just how discourse and practice work together to influence social changes and cultural shifts. It is simply not enough to take elite accounts of the importance of literacy or education at face value, particularly when the consequences were so far reaching. In this era of Egyptian history, literacy was not an elite or literary phenomenon. Rather, as this chapter has demonstrated, literacy was quickly becoming a
part of the daily fabric of social life as letters, newspapers, public and private petitions, and a myriad of other practices permeated the lives of everyday Egyptians. The idealized image of literacy practices, the communal uses of literacy, the quantitative explosion in functional literacy, and the public display and exchange of printed materials all contributed to the written word as a new and dynamic force in Egyptian society.
Chapter 4

Literacies and their Discontents:
Mistresses of the Pen

Question 3: Some of our scholars do not allow teaching women to write and on this matter they narrate a hadīth, which is: “Do not teach women writing and do not let them sleep in rooms.” Oh skaykh, does this have a basis?....

--Al-Manār, 5 December 1903

Between 1903 and 1914, Rashid Rida, the religious reformer and editor of the magazine al-Manār, was asked several times about this spurious hadīth (saying of the Prophet Muhammad) on the propriety of teaching women to write. In 1903, the questioner himself argued that this hadīth did not seem to be in the spirit of a religion that encouraged both men and women to seek knowledge and conflicted with reports that at least one of the Prophet Muhammad’s wives was taught to write. Furthermore, in the words of the questioner, “writing is necessary for seeking knowledge, particularly in this era.”

So, how to reconcile this supposed religious edict with others that encouraged education? In 1903, Rashid Rida simply provided proof that this particular hadīth was narrated by a known liar and therefore not authoritative. When another questioner brought up the “do not teach women writing” tradition in 1904, Rida scolded

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him for reading books by authors who have no knowledge of religious law.\footnote{Taʾlīm al-Nisāʾ al-Kitāba.} However, by 1914, Rida’s response to this same hadīth carried much more commentary. He not only expounded on the weakness of this particular saying, but also cited Ḥafṣa and ‘Āisha, two of Muhammad’s wives, as the first of many female writers and scholars of hadīth, literature, and arts in Muslim history. Rida ended with the statement “one of the purposes of religious law is to take the Muslim nation (umma) out of illiteracy and to teach them writing.” What had been merely an allowance (women may write) became a religious duty that supported Rida’s revivalist notion of Islamic reform (the best Muslim women have always written). In this evolution, Rida reflected the slowly growing consensus among intellectuals that literacy could be harnessed for widespread social change. However, as evidenced by the nature of the questions themselves, perceptions of literacy did not always fit into the neat categories of good or bad, useful or useless, and beneficial or dangerous.

The progression of this one sliver of the literacy debate highlights the very real tensions between the high-minded promise of literacy promotion and the perceived dangers of these new skills for some segments of society. When it came to gender and class, the ambiguities associated with literacy promotion were most evident.\footnote{Race can also be a useful category by which to examine the exclusions literacy can reinforce. For example see Elizabeth McHenry and Shirley Brice Heath, “The Literate and the Literary: African Americans as Writers and Readers --1830-1940,” in Literacy: A Critical Sourcebook, ed. Ellen Cushman et al. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2001).} What is the purpose of reading and writing? Who needs to be literate? If a person can read, does he or she need to write as well? Was it necessary to promote literacy for women,
farmers, low-skilled and unskilled workers, etc? Does it matter if writing is a private or public act? These questions about the purpose, scope, and impact of literacy highlight the ways in which the ability to read and write were socially, religiously, and economically bounded and defined by the broader currents of Egyptian society. In this sense, reading and writing were not neutral abilities, equally wielded by Egyptians of all backgrounds. Rather, reading and writing (individually and in combination) each presented their own challenges to the perceived importance and usefulness of literacy. In the larger social context in which it existed, literacy was a far more nuanced and contested concept than the unrelenting push for increased literacy from many sides of the civil society would imply.

To begin this examination, I will start with the discussions from this era that emphasize the exclusions associated with language, education, and literacy based on gender and class. I will then turn to reading and writing each as separate concepts that were associated with different kinds of dangers, particularly for women. Finally, I will touch on one of the most contentious aspects of literacy for the public and private sphere: becoming publicly “visible” through the written word. The importance of this examination is that it highlights the fissures inherent in literacy promotion and its perceived impact on the established social order. Indeed, what emerges from this section of my study is the fractious nature of literacy debates when it came to some of the largest social changes of the time: increased female literacy, the growing demands for education among Egyptians of all classes, and participation of new segments of the Egyptian populace in public life.
Exclusions: Education and Literacy

At the turn of the twentieth century, the scope of literacy and who should have access to it was an open question. In this light, the intersection of gender and class is a useful framework through which to examine the particular literacies associated with groups that were traditionally uneducated. As James Collins and Richard Blot have shown, historically “women as a group are associated with different literacies.” As in many other places, in Egypt the contours of this “different literacy” were not only based on gender, but also inseparable from an individual’s position in society. This fact made discussions about different types of female literacy all the more potent and a kind of inflection point for wider debates about literacy. There were presumably many arguments that could be made regarding the need for an upper class woman to be literate. However, once it could be argued that a peasant woman should be literate as well, the necessity of universal literacy, along the lines of the early mass educational and literacy movements of the 1920’s and beyond, became a foregone conclusion. The similarities between gender and class-based apprehensions regarding literacy, while not always identical, were part of larger narrative about the necessity and utility of literacy for Egyptians who were not part of the educated male elite.

The questions regarding the content and purpose of education and literacy were still very much in dispute in Egyptian society and beyond. In fact, anxieties associated

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320 Collins and Blot, Literacy and Literacies, 89.
with the expansion of reading and writing skills to different social classes and women were prominent in the Western world throughout the 18 and nineteenth centuries.\textsuperscript{322} In many educated circles there was a deep disconnect between the desire to reform society from the bottom up and the realities of what class and gender-based education could mean for historically less educated segments of society. In the Egyptian case this dispute centered, on the one hand, on the general distrust of the “Egyptian home” and particularly the superstitious and ignorant women who presided over early home education.\textsuperscript{323} Schools could provide a disciplined, controlled environment within which children could get an education more suitable for their expected roles as citizens, workers, and progenitors of future generations of Egyptians. However, on the other hand, some Egyptians argued that education could have a disastrous affect on young men and women once they left the protective cocoon of schools and returned to their original, humble social situations. The specter of “tarboushed” young men in villages who had attended school and were no longer fit for manual labor and “arrogant” educated girls who put on airs in her husband’s home loomed large in critiques of


education for the lower classes. In both cases, education was seen as giving false hope or aspirations to students who were destined for much less.

Meanwhile, during this period, education for women had a very specific purpose. There was a general sentiment that women needed to be taught their duties to God, to their husbands, to their children, and increasingly, to their nation. In this sense there was very little disagreement: no one wanted “ignorant” or jāhil women. However, there was a substantial difference between those that advocated tarbiya education and those that advocated taʿlīm education for women. Of the two, tarbiya was the broader concept, encompassing the moral, physical, and intellectual development and upbringing of children. Tarbiya did not entail any specific course of study or content; rather it was context and results based. Any kind of “upbringing” that

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325 See Chapter 6 for more on the development of this argument.

326 Although they were sometimes used interchangeably, their connotations were undoubtedly different. One writer in Anīs al-Jalīs explicitly cites this divide among supporters of women’s education. See “Shaʾn al-Marʾa fī al-Tarbiya al-ʾUmūmiyya,” Anīs al-Jalīs 3, no. 10 (October 1900): 390. For examples of commentators distinguishing between good upbringing and schooling see “Al-Marʾa al-Misriyya al-Muslima,” 51; Marilyn Booth, “Woman in Islam: Men and the ‘Women’s Press’ in Turn-of-the-20th-Century Egypt,” International Journal of Middle East Studies 33, no. 2 (May 2001): 180. For a detailed discussion of tarbiya literature from this period see Shakry, “Schooled Mothers,” 135–156.

327 One articulation of the relationship between tarbiya and taʾlīm: “Taʾlīm is a branch of tarbiya because its purpose is to extend the abilities of the child in knowledge. As for tarbiya it includes strengthening his body, improving his morals, and enlightening his mind. So every time we raise him well (rabaynāhu) we teach him (ʿallamnāhu) something, but not every time we teach him something have we raised him well.” Hāshim, Kitab fī al-Tarbiya, 69. In her work on the discourse surrounding motherhood, Omnia Shakry provides this definition: “Crucial to the discourse of tarbiya was the indigenous concept of adab, entailing a complex of valued dispositions (intellectual, moral, and social), appropriate norms of behavior, comportment, and bodily habitus.” Shakry, “Schooled Mothers,” 127.
produced the desired results could be designated “good tarbiya.” Meanwhile, taʾlīm often specifically referred to the realm of formal education and intellectual development—the necessity of which was readily contested. Girls should undoubtedly be raised well, but did that necessarily include going to school or learning anything beyond her immediate duties as a wife and mother? In fact, at the turn of the century, it was a point of debate whether or not education truly “improved” the station of women or not.\textsuperscript{328} The frequent example in the context of women’s education was the superiority of an “uneducated” girl who nevertheless had a good moral tarbiya over the schoolgirl who had formal taʾlīm but who was “ignorant” of her duties as an Egyptian woman, wife, Muslim, mother, or citizen.\textsuperscript{329}

Within this schema of education, literacy had only a tenuous place. Reading and writing, while absolutely necessary for embarking on taʾlīm, was only tangential to tarbiya, depending on how this type of education was defined. Here, again, class was central. The kind of home, husband, and children a woman was educated to serve depended on where she was on the socio-economic ladder of Egyptian society.\textsuperscript{330} In the realm of literacy, it could be argued that an upper-class or elite woman must not only be

\textsuperscript{328} In 1899, the magazine \textit{Al-Jāmiʿa al-ʿUthmāniyya} posed this provocative question to its readers: “Does \textit{taʾlīm} make girls stronger morally, better in character, and give them more comfort than before \textit{taʾlīm} or if they had never been educated?” The answers from readers ranged from those who believed it was always beneficial to those who believed it never was. There was also a lively discussion about the content of beneficial education. See “Taʾlīm al-Banāt,” \textit{Al-Jāmiʿa al-ʿUthmāniyya} 1, no. 4 (May 1, 1899): 62-63; “Taʾlīm al-Banāt,” \textit{Al-Jāmiʿa al-ʿUthmāniyya} 1, no. 5 (May 15, 1899): 82-83; “Tābiʿ mā Qablahu,” \textit{Al-Jāmiʿa al-ʿUthmāniyya} 1, no. 6 (June 1, 1899): 103.

\textsuperscript{329} “Nisāʾ Al-Muslimīn wa Tarbiyat al-Dīn,” \textit{Al-Manār} 4, no. 22 (February 9, 1902): 842; “Bint al-Yawm,” \textit{Anīs al-Jalīs} 2, no. 7 (July 31, 1899): 268–269; “Taʾlīm al-Banāt,” 63. As a way to respond to these assertions that “educated” girls were corrupt, Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif claimed that it “was not knowledge which corrupts the morals of girls, rather it is insufficient tarbiya.” Nāṣif, Āthār Bāḥithat al-Bādiya, 80.

\textsuperscript{330} “Madrasat al-Banāt.”
literate in Arabic and possibly Turkish, but also in French and English, the better to
engage her husband and her European counterparts. Ideally, a middle class woman
would be literate enough in Arabic to glean beneficial knowledge from journals and
books regarding her household and childrearing tasks. A woman of more meager means
may not need literacy at all. Rather, an education in basic handcrafts and sewing, in
order to support herself and her family, was more appropriate.

The sporadic successes and failures of the Egyptian government’s first attempt
at girls education was due in part to the way in which class and gender were conflated
in early discussions of girls education. The first officially sponsored girls’ school in
Egypt, originally named al-Suyufiyya when it was opened in 1873, suffered from the
schizophrenic expectations of what girls of different classes should learn. In its original
incarnation, the school had the ambitious goal to teach “all the subjects that are
beneficial for women.” Initially, Suyufiyya teachers primarily taught Quran and
sewing, but as an indication of its appeal to the Egyptian elite, both Turkish and piano
were added a year later. After a few years of initial success and enrollment reaching
well over 300, a second school al-Qarabiyya was opened, intended as a “lower class”

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331 Turkish in particular was the language of the aristocracy and the official language of the Egyptian
government until 1869. For upper-class families where the mother was of recent Turkic or slave origin (as
opposed to those who had been in Egypt for one or more generations) Turkish could also be the language
of the home. See for example Hatem, Literature, Gender, and Nation-Building in Nineteenth-Century Egypt, 33.
332 For additional information on some of class issues regarding al-Saniyya and the Abbas schools see
Russell, Creating the New Egyptian Woman, 121–122, 139–140.
333 Initially plans included the subjects of Arabic, Turkish, history, geography, math, drawing, and
334 DWQ, Diwan al-Madaris, Sijjil 1655 & 1656, “Jarīdat Istḥqāqāt Ghadmat Madrasat al-
Suyūfiyya”(#4001-003253 and #4001-003253).
version of the Suyufiyya. The financial crises of the late 1870s resulted in the schools being combined in 1879 and the school was eventually turned over to the charitable wing of the waqf administration. The parent’s of upper class girls quickly abandoned the initiative and enrollment dropped to about a 100 students a year. The school came to serve as an institution to prepare orphan, deaf, and blind girls for basic employment and, needless to say, this preparation did not include piano lessons.\footnote{335} In 1889, the Ministry of Education revived the school under the name of *al-Saniyya* with the express purpose reforming the education and to attract students from the higher class.\footnote{336} However, since poor students as well as paying students both attended the school, there were some objections to the “mixing” of these two types of students.\footnote{337} In 1890, the newspaper *al-Ahrām* suggested the government open a school solely for those parents who could afford to pay tuition. According to the article, since the only option for these wealthy Egyptians were foreign or missionary schools, many would flock to a school within which their girls could learn the “language of their fathers and their Arab nation.”\footnote{338}

In 1892, the deputy Prime Minister of Education at the time, Yacoub Artin, authored a report on female education in an effort to bring order to the confusion

\footnote{335} A report in 1889 indicated that there were 60 girls in the main section of the school and 18 in the blind section. All 78 were in desperate need of clothes. DWQ, Majlis al-Wuzarāʾ, Nizārat al-Maʿārif, Box 6A, “Awrāq wa Madhakkirāt,” Folder 11 (#0075-044139). “Bi Ṭalāb Šudūr al- Amr bi-mā Yastaḥsin fi Masʿalat ma Yalzam li-l-Madrasa al-Saniyya,” (18 November 1889).


\footnote{337} Rizq, “Madāris al-Khawātīn al-Fāḍilāt,” 349.

\footnote{338} Ibid., 350.
regarding the purpose of this type of education.\textsuperscript{339} Much in line with the educational interests and policies of then consul-general, Lord Cromer, Artin tellingly chose to assess the needs of Egyptian girls based on class.\textsuperscript{340} He suggested no specific plans for either the extremely wealthy or extremely poor since upper class girls were best served by in-home tutors and the lower classes would only become educated when compulsory education was imposed from above—a far off prospect.\textsuperscript{341} As for the middle classes, he proposed a new school where no free students were allowed to attend.\textsuperscript{342} The education would be similar to male government schools with additional provisions for household training. In this middle class school, basic language education would be part of the curriculum, although unlike boys’ schools, foreign languages (English, French, and Turkish) would be optional. In this scheme, the upper classes could customize their language education as they saw fit, the middle classes would have a primarily Arabic language education, and the lower classes could be summarily ignored.

Early female activists largely followed Artin’s lead in their class-based assessments of education and literacy. In these class-conscious conceptions of education, literacy and schooling were not goals in and of themselves. Rather, their utility was the overriding concern and, as such, the kind of literacy promoted was directly related to the expectations imposed on the group in question. As a result, depending on how this utility was assessed, class and gender differentiations were


\textsuperscript{340} For the colonial policy on education and literacy see Chapter 2.

\textsuperscript{341} Ibid., 7-9.

\textsuperscript{342} This too seems to be another nod to Cormer policies regarding education. Ibid., 9-12.
weighted differently. As an example, we can examine a series of ten lectures on the proper tarbiya of girls and boys given in 1911 by the writer Labiba Hashim as part of the short lived “women’s section” at the new Egyptian University.\footnote{These lectures were published in Hāshim, Kitab fi al-Tarbiya.} In keeping with the comprehensive nature of the term tarbiya, she devotes her initial lectures to the proper physical and moral upbringing of children, before turning to their intellectual development. After mentioning in-home education and schooling, she makes a point to differentiate educational needs based on class.\footnote{Ibid., 78.} According to Hashim, the elite needed to educate their (male) children to undertake the “grand jobs” of society such as leaders, judges, and ambassadors. The purpose of middle class education was to produce artists, doctors, lawyers, and merchants. Meanwhile the “general population” needed to receive an education that would serve their need “to work with their hands to earn a living.” She emphasizes that educating people in what they do not need to know is merely a waste of time and that a “practical tarbiya that is in accordance with the general population’s station” was more appropriate.\footnote{Ibid., 80.} For the masses, language or literacy need not be a priority since it was not a practical need for these classes. However, when she applies the same argument to female education, she makes the case that actually all women need the same kind of education because their duties towards their families and children are the same regardless of wealth or poverty.\footnote{Ibid., 82.} In the context of her recommendations, this needs-based approach means that female education had to be justified as directly relevant to a woman’s social and domestic responsibilities. Women should learn Arabic,
but not focus too much on grammar or sophisticated linguistic concepts. They needed to learn about literature and develop a taste for reading in order to become better companions for their husbands and teachers for their children. Even learning the “fine arts” like music and hand arts can have a utilitarian rationale. For a rich woman, handcrafts are a good use of free time. For the poor woman, they can be a source of income and a means to support her home.

This utilitarian ethos regarding literacy education based on gender and class was evident in the writings of many women’s activists. To different degrees, and despite their strong commitment to schooling for upper and middle class women, many of these writers tended to reinforce class-based elements of literacy promotion when it came to the poorer segments of Egyptian society. On one end of the spectrum, Malak Hifni Nasif strongly advocated compulsory elementary education “for all classes” as early as 1910, while reiterating the need for more secondary and higher educational options for (presumably upper class) girls. In this tiered system, for example, her proposal for a full fledged women’s medical school would be open primarily to the wealthy. “If there are not enough wealthy women willing to attend this school, then it is possible to take

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347 Ibid., 82–84.
348 Ibid., 83. This particular description seems to imply that Hashim did not always really “see” lower class women as women. According to her previous assessment, a peasant or working-class man would not be literate himself.
349 Ibid., 86–87.
350 Although not always explicitly stated, the collective in their activism for “our rights” was most definitely those on the wealthier side of the spectrum. The lower classes, when mentioned, were often viewed as outsiders to the cause, as either subjects of charity or potentially nefarious elements of Egyptian society that needed to be guarded against. (Particularly those lower class women who were servants in households, with their undue influence on susceptible women and children).
students from among those who are on scholarship.” In Nasif’s vision, every girl and boy would receive a basic education in reading, math, and civics, with only the particularly wealthy or gifted going on to secondary and higher education. In other words, literacy would be universal, but advanced education limited.

In contrast, another educator and activist, Nabawiyya Musa held a very different opinion. Writing in 1920, Musa makes the case for a very broad-based literacy and education for women of the upper and middle classes, while asserting that that even the most basic literacy is of no use for the peasantry and servant classes. For elite women, a modern education that includes language, literature, science, etc, even if not directly relevant to their future roles as a mothers or wives, will ultimately help them overall by strengthening their minds. As for the lower classes, the country was wasting precious resources on people who already had enough “useful knowledge” to live respectably. In Musa’s view, literacy rates were simply not a measure of a people. Rather, there was no shame in having an illiterate peasantry if there are enough intelligent people to guide the country. She explicitly criticizes elite concern for basic literacy when there were clearly not enough primary, secondary, and higher level schools for middle and upper

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352 Nāṣif, Āthār Bāḥithat al-Bādiya, 126.
353 Ibid., 78–79.
354 Mūsā, Al-Mar’a wa-l-'Amal, 46. She also believed that women should enter the “profession” fields of law, medicine, etc. as well as be able to support herself if circumstances required it. Ibid., 68-73. ’A’isha Taymur also advocated for broad education for girls in article published in 1887. See Hatem, Literature, Gender, and Nation-Building in Nineteenth-Century Egypt, 74–75.
355 Mūsā, Al-Mar’a wa-l-'Amal, 51.
356 Ibid., 50–52.
class girls and boys.\textsuperscript{357} In Musa’s assessment of the utility of literacy through the lens of gender and class, gender was not the defining exclusionary category: class was.

**Reading versus Writing**

As the discussions about class and gender show, the importance of literacy to Egyptian society was not only in how the skills of reading and writing were used, but also in the exclusions it created. In mapping out these exclusions and how they translated to everyday usage, the distinction between reading and writing is particularly important. The “close connection between reading and writing” that we now assume dates back (at least in Europe) only to sometime in the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{358} As James Blot and Richard Collins argue, concepts like reading, writing, and speaking did not have stable meanings and were constantly “defined in changing relation to each other, according to historically specific institutional developments and cultural concerns.”\textsuperscript{359} These distinctions are perhaps even more relevant for a language like Arabic that does not have a single word that means “literacy,” but rather has a variety of terms like *qara‘a*, *itfala‘a*, *kataba*, *khaṭaba*, *ansha‘a*, *rasama* etc. that can mean reading or writing or something else entirely depending on the setting and context.\textsuperscript{360} In practice, the most common verb for “reading” a text (*qara‘a*) could equally imply oral recitation, study with a teacher, or silent reading comprehension. Similarly, “writing” as expressed by

\textsuperscript{357} Ibid., 55, 61.
\textsuperscript{359} *Literacy and Literacies*, 31.
\textsuperscript{360} A discussion of a few of these terms can be found in Messick, *The calligraphic state*, 91.
*kataba* could refer to composing prose or poetry, simple dictation, recording or registering a matter, or stipulating an order. Meanwhile, a noun like *khīṭāb* could be an oral lecture or a written letter, *rasm* can refer to handwriting or drawing, and so forth. The flexibility of these terms is very much a testament to the fungibility of oral and textual communication in Arab societies.  

For the purposes of this study, I will be examining the two categories of reading and writing in their most generic terms: consuming and producing written texts. Building on the thinker Michel de Certeau’s focus on consumption and production, we can examine the power dynamic inherent in each side of the literacy equation and the perceived passive nature of consumption versus the more proactive act of production. This distinction makes further sense given the fact that before the modern period, learning to consume texts always preceded (and sometimes superseded) the ability to produce them. Certainly in Muslim cultures, the traditional *kuttāb* schools (despite their linguistic affinity to the word for “writing”) were primarily focused on teaching students to memorize the Quran. Even in these educational settings, “reading”

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362 The idea that everyday practices (including literacy practices) are functions of production and consumption stems from Michel de Certeau’s work. Interestingly, he posits that the reading/writing dichotomy is a more generic version of consumption/production. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 2nd ed. (University of California Press, 2002), xxi.

in the conventional sense was not a necessity since Islam’s holy scripture could be memorized orally by students who never had to resort to the deciphered letters on a page.\textsuperscript{364} When the Egyptian government became interested in bringing these schools into the state fold as a first line of defense against illiteracy in the late 1890s, they had to face the startling fact that these schools were not remotely focused on literacy. Rather, they were focused on a particular kind of consumption (of a religious text) that made them, by the state’s new “modern” educational measures, abysmal failures. In a 1902 report of government inspected \textit{kuttābs}, the Ministry of Education determined that of 39,000 \textit{kuttāb} students, nearly 40\% did not know their letters and 80\% could not write properly.\textsuperscript{365}

References from other sources also indicate that the consumption and production of written text were taught and used as separate skills. Travelling through Egypt in the 1820s, Edward Lane reported that writing was only taught to \textit{kuttāb} students if there was reason to believe that they could use the skill.\textsuperscript{366} Otherwise the Quran and traditions of the Prophet were the mainstays of this type of education, with poetry, mathematics, and Arabic occasionally being included. A 1900 survey by the Ministry of Awqāf of the

\textsuperscript{364} For more on the role of memorization as a first step in traditional Muslim education, as a precursor to understanding later texts, and how it relates to reasoning, see Boyle, “Memorization and Learning in Islamic Schools,” 488–489.

\textsuperscript{365} Of 39,000 students, 15 thousand did not know their letters and 17 thousand had not started to write. A total of 31,000 thousand were determined to not be writing correctly. DWQ, Majlis al-Wuzarā’, Niẓārat al-Maʿārif, Box 2, Folder 15 (#0075-043777), Niẓārat al-Maʿārif, Taqrīr ʿan Ḥālat al-Katātīb fi Sanat 1902 (Cairo: Al-Maṭbaʿa al-Kubrā al-ʿAmīriyya, 1903), 24-25. Similar statistics were reported in 1904 when the Ministry inspected nearly 124,000 students. Cited in Russell, Creating the New Egyptian Woman, 118.

\textsuperscript{366} Edward Lane, An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians, Vol 1, vol. 1 (London: Knight, 1846), 92. For additional descriptions on the various combinations of reading and writing skills among students and tradesmen, see Edward Lane, An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians, Vol 2, vol. 2 (London: Knight, 1846), 22, 30.
endowments of 36 kuttābs that were administrated by various government agencies found that all of the endowments privileged the teaching of the Quran and/or its memorization among the subjects to be taught. Twelve of the 36 schools also specified some combination of handwriting (khaṭṭ) or copying (istikhrāj) as required subjects. Only five schools listed writing (kitāba) as a subject, which as mentioned previously, could mean anything from simple dictation to independent composition. One school, the recently opened Madrasat Khalīl Aghā, went significantly beyond these basic elements of traditional education by specifying Turkish, Persian, grammar, geometry, and math as subjects. Although these endowments only indicate the aspirations of their founders, and not necessarily the reality of the education ultimately provided, the focus on Quranic education does point to a systematic leaning towards certain types of consumption literacy over production.

In other circumstances, the focus on reading over writing represented not just a systemic propensity, but also a conscious exclusion imposed on particular groups. The consumption and production of texts each carried different implications and, in line with the question that opened this chapter, there was a distinction drawn between the more acceptable skill of reading and the more provocative skill of writing. However, as

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368 In Chapter 5 we will be looking more closely at the evolution of writing instruction across the spectrum of educational opportunities in Egypt. Even government schools, bastions of so-called “modern” education, relied heavily on traditional Qur’ānic teachers or shaykhs to teach Arabic. In other words, even “modern” Arabic education in all probability also skewed heavily towards a Qur’ānic literacy focused on consumption of religious texts.
we shall see, neither was without their dangers when it came to the potential newly literate segments of Egyptian society.

**Reading as Dangerous Consumption**

As we have already discussed, there were many writers and thinkers who were advocating literacy practices for society as a whole, particularly of the consumption variety: reading journals and newspapers and being good consumers of beneficial information. For the social reformer, this aspect of literacy promotion was very attractive. In order to shift the foundation of a society, improve its prospects, and raise its civilizational profile, increased literacy was seen as important mechanism for the diffusion of social reforms. The solutions for Egypt’s problems were within reach and understood by her elites, if only “the people” were educated enough to receive this imparted wisdom. The argument was similar for reformers interested in moral as well as material improvements. For many, religious and moral education was an obvious boon to society, however, the problem was dissemination and reaching men, women, and children before superstitious and immoral behavior set in. In this sense, it was not enough to be literate. Rather, the masses needed to channel this literacy into productive directions and the proper reading practices.

The importance of the *tarbiya* aspect of education was particularly relevant to how “beneficial” reading practices were perceived. Writers who used the term *tarbiya*

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often stressed the moral realm of education and the instilling of proper \textit{adab}, a word meaning both moral etiquette as well as literature.\textsuperscript{370} The relationship between these two disparate meanings of \textit{adab} is not accidental. According to Husayn al-Marsafi, a late nineteenth century literary critic, true eloquence in \textit{adab} (as literature) was in knowing the proper place for each and every word.\textsuperscript{371} Likewise, in the wider meaning of \textit{adab} (as moral etiquette), embodying correct \textit{adab} was in knowing the proper place for human inclinations. In both cases, correct placement of an element—whether linguistic or moral—was equated with perfection. For social reformers, the connection was even more explicit.\textsuperscript{372} Reading the proper literature had the power to influence the moral rectitude of the reader. Generally for middle and upper class boys, learning to read was the first step in their \textit{ta’lim} or schooling path. However, for girls or lower class children for whom reading had no presumable material benefit (neither farmers nor women would ever need to read bureaucratic reports), the moral benefits of \textit{adab} became paramount in their pursuit of \textit{tarbiya}.

In advocating reading practices for female audiences, writers often focused on the moral benefits and dangers inherent in the consumption of literature. In his book on \textit{tarbiya}, one of Egypt’s foreign administrators, Peltier Bey, encouraged reading for both boys and girls. The importance of language skills for boys stemmed from their future


\textsuperscript{372} In his work, Jacquemond makes the case that this link between the moral and literary component of \textit{adab} has continued to influence censors and the impetus to judge literature on its moral merits. Jacquemond, \textit{Conscience of the Nation}, 9–10.
role as leaders of the nation who needed to have a firm grasp of the national language. Girls needed to learn to read and write as well, albeit for the purpose of preparing them for marriage and motherhood. In this realm of women’s education, the moral implications of reading take precedent. In contrast with his discussion on male reading practices, Peltier emphasizes that one must be careful with female reading materials. They should be examined in detail to ensure that there is nothing in them that “would be shameful or lead them [girls] to leave even the smallest of their duties.” A slightly different tact can be seen in the pair of books published by Ali Fikri in 1900 and 1901 on adab (here meaning etiquette) for young men and women. In the male version of the book, schooling is discussed in detail as a means to not only get a respectable job, but also a way to raise the intellect and learn how to be “men who know what is necessary.” He follows this discussion with a section on the benefits of reading and how to select reading materials. Reading is of course praised as a way to “enlighten the mind and gladden the hearts,” although books full of lies and superstitions are a waste of time and bad for morals, so “stay away from reading them.” In the parallel section on schooling in the female version of the book, the etiquette of schooling is discussed primarily in relation to instilling good character and

373 Peltier, Al-Qawl al-Muntakhab fi al-Tarbiya wa-l-Adab [The Select Word in Education and Morals], 41–42.
374 Ibid., 63–64. For the pedigree of this kind of view in Europe see Pearson, Women’s Reading in Britain, 1750-1835.
375 ʿAlī Fikrī, Adab al-Fatā (Cairo: Matbaʿat al-Muwsuʿat, 1900); ʿAlī Fikrī, Adab al-Fatāh (Misr: Matbaʿat al-Luwaʿ, 1901).
376 Fikrī, Adab al-Fatāh, 30.
377 Ibid., 32.
moral *adab* in girls.³⁷⁸ Reading and writing are not mentioned, good or otherwise, other than the advice to beware when holding a pen lest ink get in ones hair or clothes.³⁷⁹ For female education, the *adab* of literature was not a consideration; it was moral *adab* that was the sole purpose of schooling. In so far as literature could promote moral rectitude it was encouraged and supported. However, depending on how “corruption” was defined, reading could be a dangerous *adabi* pursuit.

So what kinds of consumption were considered dangerous? The main culprits were novels and *al-gharamāt*, or love stories. In an 1894 article, the magazine *al-Fatāh* summarized the problem facing literate women who wish to pursue reading once they were no longer in school:

> They do not know which books to read, so they resort to reading novels. These are stories that are sometimes written for the author’s personal reasons and not for a moral (*adabiyya*) benefit. So these girls are lowered by that which they sought to raise themselves. And it is not hidden what a catastrophe this is ….³⁸⁰

The potential danger of reading novels was echoed by other writers.³⁸¹ Labiba Hashim, who was a very strong advocate of reading as a way to widen women’s understanding of the world, draws the line at stories that are corrupting or of low value for the same reason: they can harm instead of help.³⁸² She also recommends that parents pre-approve a girl’s reading material and not let her read stories until she has developed a good sense

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³⁷⁹ Ibid., 15.
³⁸⁰ “Fā’ida Adabiyya,” 446.
³⁸¹ In the words of one teacher, reading love stories “are the source of corruption, for whoever is exposed to rain will surely get wet.” Zaynab Mursī, *Al-Āyāt al-Bayyināt fī Tarbiyat al-Banāt* (Cairo: Matba‘at Aḥmad Karārah, 1912), 35.
of morality. After all, no matter how good a story may be, it will always have some intrigue and romantic storylines which can negatively impact a girl’s adabī development.383 This danger also provided fodder for those who opposed schooling for girls all together. In one publication, a girl who spends her early years in school is depicted as emerging “with a twisted tongue, idle hands, manly, opposing everything having to do with homemaking, and keen on reading stories, particularly love stories.”384 Even Nasif, who doubted that reading books or writing letters would ever distract a woman from her primary duties,385 still scolded women for reading only stories and not books on health and other beneficial matters.386 Nor were women the only ones susceptible to these dangers. Early on in his career, ʿAbduh noted with dismay the prevalence of books that did not “enlighten ideas and correct morals” and praised a Ministry of Interior ruling (undoubtedly futile or short-lived) that banned from printing all books that were “harmful to the intellect.”387

In contrast, Nabawiyya Musa was less concerned about moral adab and more interested in literary adab for young girls. Musa argued that all kinds of literature could be beneficial since even love stories had moral messages and only a truly evil person would take the wrong lesson.388 These books could in fact provide a way to teach children about shameful acts and their consequences. However, Musa did see other dangers in the “wrong” kind of reading. Perhaps as a consequence of her years as a

385 Nāṣif, Ṭḥār Bāḥithat al-Bādiya, 78.
386 Ibid., 87.
388 Mūsā, Al-Marʿa wa-l-ʿAmal, 93.
teacher, she had a particular distaste for the “low” language of colloquial and its propensity to upend all the work schooling attempted to achieve. For Musa, what made reading materials good or bad was not its moral content, but rather its linguistic value. She advocates the creation of more literature for girls to counter the dangers of these poor literary materials. She became one among many who called for better reading materials for women, even if, as we have seen, definitions of good and bad differed.

**Writing as Production and Power**

The flip side of literacy, the production of written texts, has a very different genealogy in the social fabric of literate societies. The ability and desire to produce writing can have many impetuses. Writing can be employed for business, household, personal, or community consumption. It may well have a large audience or none at all. It can be conducted in the privacy of a home or in the gaze of the public square. The final product can be sent, hung, published, or kept hidden away. What binds these distinct means, locales, and intents in producing the written word is a unique kind of discursive power. The act of writing is predicated on several assumptions:

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389 Ibid., 95–96.
391 This is not to be confused with “empowerment,” an association that assumes that literacy can serve as a kind of social panacea. What I’m referring to here is a much more basic concept of agency and the ability to affect change.
(1) a presumed blank space or tabula rasa, on which inscription operates; (2) a text constructed in or upon this place of blankness; and (3) a strategic intention to dominate or transform\textsuperscript{392}

In this characterization of the practice of writing, the actor (“the writer”), the acted upon (“the blank page”), and medium of action (“the text”) each have a deliberate position vis-à-vis each other. In times and places where peoples or cultures have been presumed to be “blank pages,” dominant ideologies (colonialism, sexism, racism, etc.) have taken the liberty to impose their own texts, histories, and practices in the language of domination. Subordinate groups—whether based on race, class, or gender—seldom participated in, although were often the subject of, the written act. Generally, women and the lower classes in Egyptian society seldom had the direct access to their own “blank” spaces and the capability to construct their own texts. However, with increased access to literacy, they too began engaging in the “strategic intention to dominate or transform.” But this pursuit of “the pen” was not without opposition.

For women, the issue of exclusion from particular kinds of literacies—and specifically writing—has a long history.\textsuperscript{393} In the case of Western societies, into the nineteenth century, women were not expected to create texts: “women were not to ‘take up the pen’ in public matters… Women might read, listen, be lectured to but were not to participate in public in speech or print.”\textsuperscript{394} This type of inert or read-only literacy\textsuperscript{395}

\textsuperscript{392} Collins and Blot, \textit{Literacy and Literacies}, 32. This is an elaboration on Michel de Certeau’s concept of “writing practice.”

\textsuperscript{393} There is also a long history of this on racial and class basis. For example, African slaves who could write were considered no longer truly African, but rather “Arab.” Allan Austin, \textit{African Muslims in Antebellum America} (London: Routledge, 1997). Also, as late as 1814 and 1823 in England, writing instruction for mass schooling was banned by the Methodist Conference. Cha, “The Origins and Expansion of Primary School Curricula, 1800-1920,” 64.

\textsuperscript{394} Collins and Blot, \textit{Literacy and Literacies}, 79.
seems to also have existed among women in Egypt. In her research on the early women’s press in Egypt, Beth Baron reported the cases of women and certain slaves who were taught to read, but not to write. Writing in the late nineteenth century, al-Tahtawi offers this summary of the common view of his time: “European women write, while Muslim women do not. Because it is considered unfitting and because of the corruption that is inherent in it.” Proverbs that asserted “teach women words of love, but not how to write” reinforced the limits of education for women. The reasons for this resistance to women writing were often cloaked in cultural, religious, and even economic terms.

Among some Muslim conservatives, the spurious hadith that Rashid Rida encountered repeatedly in his al-Manar seems to have some currency. In a particularly virulent response to Qasim Amīn, a writer by the name of Mukhtar ḍAzmi cited the “do not teach women to write” and went on to explain that writing is not absolutely necessary for true education. ḍAzmi’s argument was as follows: There is no shame in not knowing how to write. One need not look further than all the righteous people of history, like prophets, female and male companions, and scholars who were described

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395 Ibid.
396 There has of course existed “exceptional” women and many turn of the century reformers sought to highlight their contributions in Muslim and Arab history. See for example Hamza Fath Allāh, Bakūrāt al-Kalām ‘alā Huqūq al-Nisā’ fi-l-Islām (Cairo: Al-Maṭba‘a al-Kubrā al-Amīriyya, 1890), 90–93. Also, the work of Zaynab Fawwāţ as highlighted in Booth, May Her Likes be Multiplied.
397 Baron, The Women’s Awakening in Egypt, 80, 82.
398 A champion of opening schools for girls, Rifa‘a al-Tahtawi was asserting the general perception of women in the Muslim world in his article “al-Nisa’” (1873).
399 Badran, Feminists, Islam, and nation, 41. ḍA’isha Taymur also mentioned the resistance to teaching girls to write Hatem, Literature, Gender, and Nation-Building in Nineteenth-Century Egypt, 75. Nelly Hanna also cites one Muhammad Abu Dhakir who wrote in 1759 that husbands should teach their wives to read, but not necessarily to write. Hanna, In praise of books, 53.
as illiterate.\textsuperscript{401} In fact, the way in which blind and seeing students were taught in the oral traditions of Islamic society was far superior to Western ways. Once we understood how unnecessary it was to teach women to write then it becomes even clearer the folly of allowing “women to mix with foreign men in order to educate them or allow them to be raised by foreign women, especially those who do not know the morals of their own religion, let alone ours.”\textsuperscript{402} After all, there was no greater proof for the dangers of this education than the women in all the capitals of the Muslim world who “have been instilled with the disease of learning writing and languages and who mix with foreign women and take on their morals and character.”\textsuperscript{403} In this framework, the connection between writing, foreign education, and the resulting “disasters” for Muslim society were inexorably linked.

Along with this fear of foreign influence, the fear of increased female agency also animated at least one scholarly assessment of the “do not teach women to write” \textit{hadīth}. In an answer to an Indian Muslim about the permissibility of girls’ schools, an 1898 fatwa by Nu’man Khayr al-Din al-Alūsī entitled “Right Word in Preventing Girls from Writing”\textsuperscript{404} specifically took aim at the issue of writing. He acknowledged that the “do not teach women to write” \textit{hadīth} was fatally weak. However, he countered that reports that have to do with the wives of the Prophet Muhammad learning to write may

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\item\textsuperscript{401} Ibid., 64–65.
\item\textsuperscript{402} Ibid., 65.
\item\textsuperscript{403} Ibid., 64.
\end{thebibliography}
be applicable to those few, exceptional women. Al-Alusi proceeds to assert that in such a case, the scholarly principle “avoiding evil is better than achieving what is good” should be applied. There is undoubtedly some good in educating women, such as teaching them the Quran and moral principles. However, writing must be avoided because it will lead to the corruption of women in the fastest way possible. His only specific example of this potential corruption is the danger that women will begin to leave their homes claiming they are going to “write books.” As improbably as it may seem that women would use “writing books” as excuses to leave their homes, it does point to the association between increased public roles and the act of writing. The other subtext of the fatwa is exposed in his closing remark: In India, as in Egypt, it is best to use caution, since “as is known to everyone, the place is under the power of the foreigners who make equal the slave and the free, the woman and the man.” In other words, in the presence of a colonial rule which challenged the natural social order, caution and conservatism was needed when proposing changes that would impact gender roles.

Similarly, in his 1899 response to Qasim Amin, one Shaykh Muḥammad Būlāqī singles out learning writing (inshā’) and poetry, among many other subjects, as particularly dangerous for women. He divided educational subjects into basically four

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405 Library of Congress, Mansūr Collection, ms 5.683. Nu’man Khayr al-Din al-Allūsī al-Baghdadi, Al-
Isāba fi Man’ al-Banat min al-Kitaba, (11 February 1925), 10.
406 Muḥammad Būlāqī, Al-Jaḥīs al-Anīs: Fī al-Taḥdīr ‘Anmā fi Taḥrīr al-Marāh min al-Talbīs (Cairo:
categories: what must be taught (religion), what is explicitly forbidden to be taught (like music), what is neither forbidden nor encouraged (like mathematics, medicine), and, lastly, what is not forbidden explicitly, but which should be avoided because of the danger it presents. It is in this last category that writing and poetry fall into, mostly because of “the corruption they may lead to, like love poetry (ghazal wa nasīb), fairy tales, and lies.” One simply did not look at the act of writing in isolation. Rather, teaching women to write predicated other kinds of public and private acts that were considered unacceptable. Writing was in fact particularly subversive, because once women began composing written works, they could use this skill in unsanctioned ways.

Women who were engaged in writing encountered variations of religious and cultural resistance to their literary pursuits. The author of a compendium on famous women, Zaynab Fawwaz, reported a depressing encounter with a group of women at the celebration of the birth of a baby girl. Fawwaz began engaging some of the women in attendance in a debate about the merits of boys over girls. Fawwaz expressed her belief that if girls become educated they could be as useful as their male counterparts to the family. However, the women were aghast at the suggestion: “God forbid, are we to be like foreigners and educate our girls like men?” Among their many objections are that girls should remain in seclusion and that people were merely imitating Christians in

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407 This is an extension of the Islamic principles of permissibility: wājib (required), mustaḥab (encouraged), mubāḥ (permissible), makrūh (discouraged), and harām (forbidden). Here he considered religious education wājib, medicine and mathematics mubāḥ, and musical education harām. Writing and poetry would be either makrūh or harām because of their ability to lead to what is forbidden.
408 Būlāqī, Al-Jalīs al-Anīs, 10–11.
409 Ibid., 11.
410 Fawwāz, “Al-ʿIlm Nūr.”
opening girls’ schools. One woman finally proclaimed: “The truth is teaching girls to read and write is religiously detested (mākrūḥ) among us and is not allowed except for Christians. As for Muslims, it is not ever allowed …. The Prophet Muhammad peace and blessing be upon him used to hate women who could write and read.”412 As Fawwaz attempted to point out that the wives of the Prophet were considered authorities in the Islamic tradition, the conversation devolved into an ill-informed debate about the names of the Prophet’s mother and first wife. Fawwaz reports that she left the gathering fearful for the next future generations of girls raised “in these homes based on ignorance.”413

Even among the handful of elite women who received a (relatively) generous in-home education, writing seemed to have carried particular religious and cultural baggage. The story of how ‘A’īsha Taymur (1840-1902), a prominent nineteenth century female poet and writer, had to negotiate her entrance into the literate world became a well-known part of her biography.414 According to her telling, as a child Taymur was attracted to the storytelling of the elderly women of her family and the literary gatherings of her father. As a first step towards literacy, she used to imitate the

411 Starting around the mid-nineteenth century Coptic and local Jewish communities attended and opened girls’ schools at much higher rates than their Muslim counterparts. In some cases this was due to their openness to attend Western-run missionary schools, in other cases, local communities opened their own schools to compete with foreign missions that were targeting their communities. Russell, Creating the New Egyptian Woman, 114–116. Also see Heather J. Sharkey, American Evangelicals in Egypt: Missionary Encounters in an Age of Empire (Princeton University Press, 2008).
413 Ibid., 162.
414 For a critique of some of these biographies and their positioning of Taymur’s father as her “savior” see Hatem, Literature, Gender, and Nation-Building in Nineteenth-Century Egypt, 24–34, 42–47; Mervat F. Hatem, “‘A’īsha Taymur’s Tears and the Critique of the Modernist and the Feminist Discourses on Nineteenth-Century Egypt,” in Remaking Women, ed. Lila Abu-Lughod (Princeton University Press, 1998).
scribbling of writers on scrapes of paper. When she showed no aptitude or interest in the feminine arts of embroidery, her father proposed a compromise with her mother:

“Leave me this girl [so I can train her] for the pen and paper. You can have her sister to train in whatever wisdom you desire.”

Her father then proceeded to oversee her early education in Persian and Arabic. Later in life, Taymur would employ female tutors of language and poetic meter to polish her Arabic skills. However, throughout her life and writing, her position as a “writer” was opposed by some family members and critics of her work. Huda Sha’rawi (1884-1947) was not so lucky in her early attempts. In her memoir, Sha’rawi described her early love of Arabic and desire to learn how to read beyond the Qur’an and compose poetry. When she started lessons in Arabic grammar she was reprimanded by her caretaker with the words: “The young lady was no need of grammar as she will not become a judge!” She only learned the Arabic script through her study of Ottoman Turkish. As a young adult, she again began Arabic lessons with an older Azhar sheikh, however, once again she was not able to continue, this time due to the physical difficulty in having him brought into her female quarters. For these women, learning to write was fraught with barriers that, while not insurmountable, were subtly and not-so-subtly reinforced by a sense that writing was simply not a feminine pursuit.

Not all resistance to women writing had a strictly cultural or religious bent. In some cases, the opposition stemmed from economic concerns. Nasif seemed to be

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415 Hatem, Literature, Gender, and Nation-Building in Nineteenth-Century Egypt, 22.
416 Ibid., 44–47, 137–144.
417 Shaarawi, Harem Years, 39–42.
418 Ibid., 40.
particularly attuned to the fear that educated women would begin to seek employment in masculine fields and edge men out of the workplace. In her writing she simultaneously tried to assuage these concerns by insisting that women would not abandon their duties to home and family, while at the same time arguing that certain professions, like education and medicine, were better served when women attended to other women. On the whole, the idea of female educators for female student was accepted and considered preferable. However, in practice, the fact remained that language studies were largely the domain of male teachers. Indeed, religious institutions saw themselves as bastion of not only religious authority, but also linguistic excellence. In the early Suyūfiyya school, even as women comprised the majority of the teaching staff, men were specifically enlisted to teach Arabic and Turkish language classes. This “traditional” connection between Arabic studies and male teachers was maintained in the Saniyya School and nearly every other institution of female education, all which drew their Arabic teachers from either the Azhar University or the quasi-religious Dar al-‘Ulum.

419 Nāṣif, Āthār Bāḥithat al-Bādiya, 73–74.
420 Ibid., 126.
421 DWQ, Diwan al-Madaris, Sijjil 1656, “Jarīdat Istḥqāqīt Ghadmat Madrasat al-Suyūfiyya” (#4001-003253). As “shaykhs” designated as “Qurʾān teachers,” one can assume that for these girls, Arabic literacy was really an extension of Qurʾānic literacy. During this period it was very much the practice of the Egyptian government to enlist Azhar graduates as teachers for language classes, in both male and female schools.
422 Muḥammad ʻAbd al-Jawād, Taqwīm Dār al-‘Ulūm (Miṣr: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 1952), 312–313. Interestingly, this history of Dar al-‘Ulum written in 1952 prided itself the fact that all the male teachers for girls’ schools were married and “turbaned.” According to this history, the current, in the 1950s, situation with unveiled girls going to and from school without supervision came about only after the reliance on Dar al-‘Ulum ended. In other words, it was the presence of these male teachers which increased the propriety of girls’ education.
As one of the few female Arabic language educators in the government school system, Nabawiyya Musa faced this opposition directly. She reports in her autobiography the hostility she faced when she began teaching Arabic and how her writing ability proved to be both a lightening rod as well as a source of influence. The previous inspector of Arabic language for government schools, Shaykh Hamza Fath Allah, never allowed women to teach Arabic, although in his writings he did not oppose teaching women to write and even lauded famous Muslim women who had excelled in the fine arts.\textsuperscript{423} However, Arabic language instruction was the expertise of Dar al-ʿUlum graduates and when they got word of Musa’s encroachment on their traditional educational role, a campaign of harassment ensued. Musa reported that she became known as “a destroyer of men’s homes, a denier of their god-given earnings, among other things.”\textsuperscript{424} In addition, the other Arabic teachers began to complain of her teaching methods to the principal and even used her writings to the journal Miṣr al-Fatāh as proof of her subversive tendencies towards the political system. While their distress seemed to stem from economic concerns, their critiques of her style of Arabic instruction became quite ideological. In her autobiography, Musa positioned herself in opposition to these “shaykhs” and their antiquated methods of teaching and impractical approach to language in general. Musa writes that when these same teachers were asked to write a report on their own teaching methods, they refused to do so because they had no knowledge of the art of composition, a sad deficiency in both their education and in


\textsuperscript{424} Mūsā, \textit{Tārīkhī bi-Qalamī}, 93.
their style of teaching.\textsuperscript{425} Meanwhile, her report on the matter of teaching methods was so persuasive that it was then distributed to other schools. In fact, throughout her autobiography, Musa portrayed herself in a series of conflicts where not only her quick wit, but also her potent pen, brings her victory against adversarial forces.\textsuperscript{426} In many ways, she proved some of the fears of the power of the pen to be true: she used writing frequently as an extension of her will and as a way of transforming circumstances to her advantage.

**Mistresses of the Pen and Public and Private Space**

As we have seen from the fears of women going out to write books or beginning to compete with men in the workplace, the act of writing allowed women to in a sense “trespass” into spaces that had been closed to them. In fact, the increased public presence of women in the masculine public sphere was also occurring in other parts of Egyptian society as well. Starting around 1907, with the growth of the gramophone market and commercialization of music, women whose voices were once the purview of private gatherings became more prominent in much more public, and anxiety producing, ways.\textsuperscript{427} A career as a writer, while not quite as controversial as that of a singer, was nevertheless, another extension of the “female voice” into the public sphere. Early

\textsuperscript{425} Ibid., 94–95.

\textsuperscript{426} Ibid., 36–39, 47–50. She wins over recalcitrant schoolmates by offering to help them with Arabic and at times dictating for them their assignments and bests the older and far more acclaimed Malak Hifni Nasif in some writing contests.

\textsuperscript{427} The example of Munira al-Mahdiyya is particularly interesting since she parlayed her musical talents into full-scale business ventures by 1917 and positioned herself squarely in the nationalist camp with her anti-colonial lyrics. Gitre, “Performing Modernity: Theater and Political Culture in Egypt, 1869-1923,” 190–199; Fahmy, *Ordinary Egyptians*, 112–117.
women writers who published their works were entering a particularly masculine space: “In becoming tutors, poets, and religious scholars, women were warned that they risked losing their femininity and becoming masculine. Their social milieu continued to stress the irreconcilability of masculinity and femininity.” Negotiating a space within which women could serve as mothers, wives, and writers became paramount and women began to actively claim parts of the masculine literary space and create their own feminine spaces, both in private and public.

As the literary ideal became more prominent among a certain class of Egyptians, female writers began advocating the idea of women as *rabbat al-aqlām* or “mistresses of the pens,” a play on the common phrase “mistresses of the home.” Unlike average homemakers and wives, these mistresses of the pen were able to combine the domestic sphere with the pursuit of writing. In 1893, a female student praised the women of her generation who have become “mistress of the pen and writers” and command wide respect. Labiba Sham’un, herself the daughter of the famous Lebaness poetess Warda al-Yaziji, made the case that writing was in many ways a profession that was especially suited for women. Educated women were not trying to become blacksmiths, carpenters, or rulers of the country. Rather, writing could be pursued from the confines of the home: “What situation is more beautiful than seeing a woman in the kitchen preparing food one hour, then attending to the needs of her children another hour, and behind her

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428 Hatem, “‘Aʾisha Taymur’s Tears and the Critique of the Modernist and the Feminist Discourses on Nineteenth-Century Egypt,” 83. Also, Shady Hakim, “Re-Forming’ Men: Egyptian Masculinities in Early Twentieth-Century Feminist Writing” (Georgetown University, 2007), 8–9.

desk writing about the arts and science another hour?"  In this idealized landscape, writing becomes part of the domestic sphere without interference. In a similar convergence of the role of writer and housewife, Labiba Hashim asserted that women were created to be homemakers who “hold the needle, the pen, and the book.” The dominant masculine sphere of writing could be “domesticated” in service of not only women, but their homes and families.

Outside this domestic realm, writing could be particularly useful in reinforcing the “invisibility” of women even as they engaged the public or masculine spheres. As described in Chapter 2, women were active petitioners throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. On the one hand, this points to their ability to act on behalf of themselves and their families as they sought to improve their situations by appealing to local authorities. On the other hand, the act of writing that they engaged in was heavily mediated by men at both ends, by (most likely) male scribes and the government official addressee. In a way, letters and petitions of this sort allowed women to “travel” in this bureaucratic space to make their appeals where they otherwise may not have been able to. In the same way, the prevalence of anonymity in the women’s press also provided metaphorical cover for women venturing into the predominately male

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432 In one case, a woman by the name of Farida mentions her physical restrictions (a problem with her legs) as a reason she could not petition in person. In another, a woman is appealing for help in secret, without the knowledge of her husband. DWQ, ʿAbdīn, Box 377, “Iltamasāt, ʿIʿānāt” Folder 7 (#0069-007462). Letter from Farida Nazīf (16 April 1905); DWQ, ʿAbdīn, Box 490, “Iltamasāt, Ṭalab ʿIlīḥāq,” Folder 6 (#0069-009599). Letter from Karīma (14 October1917).
space.\textsuperscript{433} While announcing plans for a women’s magazine in 1893, Abdullah Nadim encouraged women to “send me their thoughts on matters related to them, what occurs to them of exceptional or beneficial moral incidents that come to them from behind the hijāb [seclusion]…\textsuperscript{434} He assures these women that their anonymity would be preserved if they so wished. Even in their seclusion, or perhaps because of it, women should be able to communicate with the outside world in a way that did not compromise their visibility.

‘A’isha Taymur, in particular, used this movement between the realm of the hidden to that of the visible to great literary effect. Aside from her literary ambitions, Taymur was very much a woman of her age and standing. As part of the Egyptian elite (of Kurdish-Circassian descent), she had married young, had several children, outlived her father and husband, and, for the most part, lived her life in seclusion.\textsuperscript{435} At points in her writings she criticized women of high standing who ventured outside the home, putting their reputations in danger.\textsuperscript{436} Yet, as Mervat Hatem has shown, Taymur seemed to harbor a certain ambivalence towards this social captivity.\textsuperscript{437} She was acutely aware of her authority as a woman speaking on women’s issues, but also at her lack of


\textsuperscript{434} “Al-Murabbi,” Al-Ustādh 1, no. 34 (April 11, 1893): 805.

\textsuperscript{435} During one period of her life, after the death of her father and husband, and before the tragic death of her daughter in 1875/1876, Taymur did serve as a translator and companion to the women of the royal Khedival court. Hatem, Literature, Gender, and Nation-Building in Nineteenth-Century Egypt, 37.

\textsuperscript{436} Ibid., 123–124.

\textsuperscript{437} Ibid., 157–163.
standing vis-à-vis the wider public, of mostly men, which she was addressing.\footnote{Ibid., 115–116.} Nevertheless, in her collection of poetry published in 1892, she proudly asserts the ability she had to move between both worlds:

\[
\text{With the hand of virtue I maintain my veil and with my chastity (ʿasmattī) I tower over my contemporaries,}
\]

And with brilliant ideas and a critical disposition my literary studies and good manners are complete.\footnote{Quoted in Ibid., 157. Hatem’s translation.}

In these lines, her boast is two-fold: she was able to maintain her separateness and invisibility, while still managing to become a recognized master of the literary arts.

Similarly, Taymur uses the ambiguous term of adab, which could mean good manners or literature, to assert her ability to master both:

\[
\text{My literature/good manners and education did not hurt me except by making me like a flower in a breast collar,}
\]

\[
\text{My seclusion, head cover and style of clothing did not offend me,}
\]

\[
\text{My lady like stature, the cover (khimar) draped over my body and face cover (niqab) have not been obstacles that prevented me from reaching the heights.}\footnote{Ibid., 159–160. Hatem’s translation.}
\]

Through these lines, Taymur depicts herself as a shining example of the kind of freedom that publishing could afford women writers without compromising their reputations, dignity, or, even, seclusion.

Not all women promoted this kind of invisibility, particularly, as women began claiming space in the press and publishing world as proprietors of new journals, contributors, and authors of books.\footnote{For a fuller discussion of the women’s press see Baron, The Women’s Awakening in Egypt.} As a writer, Zaynab Fawwaz, encouraged newspaper to have a section for female writers to specifically “pursue the art of writing”
and learn their familial duties. In order to encourage girls to contribute, in 1908, the journal *Al-Jins al-Latif* published a letter from a young reader. After several months with no other girls coming forward, the same young author reported on a discussion she had with a friend who objected to her writing for the journal. The young writer’s friend equates a girl “writing with her pen” to “displaying her wares to all the male and female readers as if to say, ‘come to me for I am available for marriage.’” The original authoress responds that writing in a journal was in fact no different than going out in public with an exposed face, another public act that had been previously (and still was) frowned upon for the same reason. The act of being publicly visible, in body or in word, were connected.

Despite the religious and economic resistance of some, there were others from traditionally conservative segments of Egyptian society that largely allowed and, at times, encouraged women to write. One finds that the “female voice” could indeed be rather useful to male writers and editors in the press, particularly when it supported their perspectives. So for example, even as the religiously conservative *al-Hidayya* journal criticized women’s education and their public presence in other forms, they did so through the voice of a women contributor, lending legitimacy to writing as a public act in which women could engage. Similarly, *al-Manar’s* early critiques of female

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443 ʿAzīza, “Ilā al-Banāt.”
445 For an interesting example of how the female voice made it into one early Egyptian publication, see Byron D. Cannon, “Nineteenth-Century Arabic Writings on Women and Society: The Interim Role of the Masonic Press in Cairo - (al-Lataif, 1885-1895),” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 17, no. 4 (November 1, 1985): 473–481.
education centered on the fear that allowing girls to leave the home for schooling would result in too much female autonomy and freedom. Nevertheless, the magazine did highlight the works of some female writers and took the aforementioned hard stance against the weak hadith some used to discourage teaching women to write. Among male editors and writers, there seemed to be a general recognition that women’s writing could be channeled into beneficial avenues for the national, religious, or journalistic good.

Just as the public life that writing promoted was debated, the ability of women to use writing to create other types of exclusive, private literary spaces was also scrutinized. After all, in most cases, writing was not an explicitly public act, but rather one that was used for correspondences and other personal, business, or administrative needs. For women, learning to write may have opened new opportunities to communicate with others in complete privacy, without scribes or help from literate family or friends. As an example, one woman petitioning the government to help her send her children to school found the medium of writing an important refuge for privacy, since her husband would not have approved of her letter. However, beyond a few anecdotes, it is difficult to define the contours of the private literary spaces that certainly would have existed among women. The discovery and study of private diaries

447 “Maṣār Tarbiyat al-Nisāʾ al-ISTAqlāliyya,” Al-Manār 6, no. 12 (September 8, 1903): 466-470.
449 For descriptions of what this kind of literacy could have looked like see, Shirin Zubair, “Literacies across Generations: Women’s Religious and Secular Identities in Siraiki Villages,” South Asia Research 23, no. 2 (November 1, 2003): 135 -151; Ahearn, Invitations to love. In particular, Zubair’s description of the inert or read-only literacy of older women in the village of her study may have not been too different from Egyptian women of this period.
or correspondences may yet provide a wealth of information on what and how women used writing in their daily lives.

What does come to the fore in public discussions were the dangers that these private feminized literary space could pose to the moral fiber of a literate female. Nabawiyya Musa mentions that learning to read and write, for a morally corrupt girl, just provides her another venue by which to “talk to strangers” and pursue her vices. In fact, such a girl is even baser than her illiterate counterpart because “she may record for herself a shame that cannot be erased.” The written word, although an extension of speech, serves as a more dangerous form of communication because of its longevity and the fact that it may not stay private. Meanwhile, in the press, parts of this private realm occasionally made an appearance as fictitious and real exposés of female private writing. In 1902, the journal Al-Jāmiʿa published several letters that were purportedly the correspondences of two young women and the subsequent discovery of those letters by a father and teacher. To add to its authenticity and establish the cloak of secrecy (despite its public appearance in the journal) the subtitle proclaimed “no one is allowed to read this except female readers.” The importance of this secrecy is then reinforced by the initial young woman who asks that her letter be ripped up after it is read and the second girl who wonders aloud whether the content of their letters is appropriate. In the next issue of Al-Jamiʿa, the article was continued, but this time by a teacher who was given the letters by one of the girls’ fathers. The teacher writes an impassioned plea

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451 Mūsā, Al-Marʿa wa-l-ʿAmal, 89.
452 “Murāsilāt bayn Banāt Shāriqiyāt”; “Murāsilāt bayn Banāt Shāriqiyāt.” Given its didactic nature, these are quite obviously not real letters.
453 “Murāsilāt bayn Banāt Shāriqiyāt,” 490.
to the daughter to rise above evil inclinations and become a morally exemplary woman.
The dangerous potential of female private literacy is thus tamed and redirected by
established authority figures (father and teacher) to its higher purpose: to establish good
moral character.

In another example from 1903, someone claiming to be a young Muslim man
put an ad in the magazine *Al-Musawwar* proclaiming his desire to begin a
correspondence with a girl under the age of 20. According to an article that appeared in
the women’s journal *Al-Anis al-Jalis*, the writer received 17 responses and decided to
publish them in order to “show, for your amusement, the *adab* of these female
writers.”

The writer then proceeds to critique the style and content of the writing
produced by the women who chose to respond. Throughout the responses, the critique
of their *adab* is doubly sharp: in some cases the women are considered ill-mannered due
to a lack of moral *adab*, in others, ill-spoken due to a lack of literary *adab*. In either
case, the author claims to submit these letters to public view as a way to “record for
history women’s writing from this era.” In bringing these supposed private letters
into the public sphere, the writer is claiming to shed light on the private lives and
thoughts of women.

As one final example, the issue of whether women’s correspondences should
remain private was addressed directly in a question proposed by the journal *al-Fatah* to
its readers in 1894: “Is a man allowed to read letters that arrive in the name of his wife,

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455 Ibid., 1554.
or not?" In his response, Antun Nawfal brings the moral character of women to the fore. While he asserts the basic equality of men and women, he faults the lack of female education for creating a situation where there are only three types of women: prostitutes, tyrants, or gems. As for the first two categories, there is not much a man can do. However, in the third case, if a woman is a true companion to her husband, a good mother to her children, and a caretaker of her home, then not only can he open her mail, but she can open his as well. In other words, only by fulfilling a very specific set of criteria and becoming “exceptional” in their domestic roles can women mitigate the dangers of writing and the secrecy that it may entail. In fact, in this idealized relationship, literary space would no longer be male or female, but rather shared. However, as we have seen throughout this chapter, the ability of women to partake in this literary space was predicated on their ability to uphold and improve their moral standing while maintaining the sanctity of their domestic responsibilities. The “corrupted” Egyptian woman with a foreign word on her tongue, a tawdry novel in her hand, and surreptitious letters awaiting her at home was quite consciously the foil for all the “benefits” of literacy.

Conclusion

A central contention of this chapter is that the different kinds of literacy that existed in Egyptian society cannot be understood outside the social and economic

456 “Suʾāl,” Al-Fatāh 1, no. 11 (March 1, 1894): 497.
458 Ibid., 549–550.
constraints within which they operated. When it came to segments of society that were traditionally considered illiterate, literacy was often promoted in terms of its practical utility. For some reformers, teaching reading and writing within schools was the key for social and economic reforms. For others, the wider goal of a “well-raised” society did not necessarily include schooling or even basic reading and writing skills of any kind. Rather, a practical education, defined to suit the ideals of those advocating it, was more fitting for those not destined for the upper echelons of society. Indeed, for those of the lower classes, the practicality and benefits of literacy were always an open question. To learn how to read and write were only helpful insofar as they could improve the material situation of the country as a whole. When applied to women, the utility and practicality of literacy was not always connected to the *adab* of literary pursuits. Rather, female literacy was largely defined through another kind of *adab*- moral refinement. This moral aspect of *adab* frequently became the defining paradigm through which female literacy and education was valued and judged. As a result, it was this particular utility that often defined female participation in both private and public literary spaces.

In a larger context, the importance of these literacies and what they meant for societal changes stems from the perceived power of the written word. For the turn-of-the-century Egyptian, the consumption of texts had the power to edify as well as corrupt. The production of texts could both be beneficial and, at times, detrimental to the structure of Egyptian society. Literacy was a means to participate in public discussions on the most fundamental notions of the self, morality, family, and society. It allowed entrance into and created exclusions within new literary spaces like the press.
Depending on how it was deployed, literacy could enhance either the visibility or invisibility of women in the public sphere. Ultimately, the power of the pen could be celebrated, feared, and co-opted. Specifically, as we shall further see in the next chapters, literacies could be put to work for larger bureaucratic and nationalist goals.
Chapter 5

The Art of Inshāʾ:
Schooled Literacies and Beyond

Introduction

When Qasim Amin’s *The Liberation of Women* (*Tahrir al-Marʿa*) was published in 1899 it was widely viewed as the opening salvo in a heated debate regarding the role of women in Muslim societies. By some estimates, his work generated over a hundred written responses from those who either opposed or defended his positions. While Amin was not the first to delve into these issues, his work was largely canonized (and vilified) as the most important.\(^{459}\) What was it about the appearance of this particular work at the turn of the twentieth century that allowed it to enter into the Egyptian consciousness with such force? It could have been the social upheavals brought on by British occupation, the economic interests of a newly-minted bourgeoisie, or a multitude of other factors in combination.\(^{460}\) However, the growth of *inshāʾ*, or composition, as a school subject, encouraged students and others to participate in particular social conversations that helped propel the “women” issue, among others, to prominence. In

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\(^{459}\) Interestingly, by the 1930’s, Egyptian government textbooks for secondary schools included a selection of Qasim Amin’s work.

essence, the ability to engage textually with the political issues of Egyptian society was encouraged within the classroom even as they were playing out in the public sphere.

Literacy training was, in many ways, the backbone of education reform from the late nineteenth century through the first part of the twentieth century. In particular, educators of all stripes were interested in finding a more “rational” way to teach the Arabic language. As the primary site of education increasingly moved from traditional kuttābs and the Azhari system to the elementary education of government and private schools, everything from teaching techniques to the mechanics of the writing process were subject to debate and, increasingly, considerable reform. This was the age of the Arabic nahḍa or renaissance.

Arab intellectuals were simultaneously renewing interest in the classical Arabic literature and working to adapt Arabic to modern uses. Accordingly, translating the achievements of the nahḍa into the education sphere became a priority for many educators and, in the process, produced a new type of written education for Egyptian schoolchildren.

An examination of schooled Arabic literacy in the context of public discourse is important for several interrelated reasons. First, as historians we have very little understanding of exactly how public discourses filter through and permeate Middle

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461 This concern has continued to animate conversations about Arabic instruction to this day. A recent United Nations Arab Human Development Report focused on the “Arab knowledge society” and how “the teaching of Arabic is also undergoing a severe crisis in terms of both methodology and curricula. The most apparent aspect of this crisis is the growing neglect of the functional aspects of (Arabic) language use.” United Nations Development Program, The Arab Human Development Report 2003, 7.

462 The exact beginning and end of the period of literary “awakening” or nahḍa is subject to debate. In general, scholars place its beginning around the French invasion of Egypt in 1798 and ending anywhere from the 1920s to the present. See discussions in Selim, “The People’s Entertainments: Translation, Popular Fiction, and the Nahdah in Egypt,” 35–36; Brugman, An Introduction to the History of Modern Arabic Literature in Egypt, 8–13.
Eastern societies. Other chapters in this work have looked at literacy practices across a broad spectrum of the population as a means of mitigating this challenge. However, in this chapter, I will be taking a careful look at schooling—an obvious “locale” of literacy—as a way to understand not only how students were taught, but also how they internalized and re-used this literacy in the public sphere. Second, the students that are the subject of this chapter hailed from a range of private, government, and religious schools. In other words, their “socialization” into publicly expressed literacy was not always government-sponsored. Rather, their education and the inducements to engage in public debates about social issues represented a whole range of ideological perspectives. This allows us to examine literacies that were very much in the service of multiple social, political, and religious agendas. Third, at a more general level, this examination serves to inform our understanding of the interplay of institutional and individual agency. Schools and their teachers were not monolithic in their approaches to literacy and neither were their students in their use of literacy. Rather than looking at textbooks and curricula in isolation, this chapter also sheds light on the “messiness” of the literacy that was deployed in the schools and moved into the public sphere.

Before beginning this examination, a word needs to be said about educational spaces and their role in the reproduction of societal structures. It is easy, perhaps too easy, to envision all the ways that state schooling can create disciplinary regimes for

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463 For an interesting discussion of this in the context of the late Ottoman period see Fortna, *Imperial classroom*, Chapter 1.
students and ultimately reproduce, not transform, structural inequalities. Indeed, the focus on subjects like literacy, hygiene, and national civics in many schools served a very particular social purpose: creating healthy, loyal citizens. However, schooling in this era was far from a monolithic entity and the teaching of reading and writing was particularly diverse. Schools run by private organizations, foreign missionaries, and religious institutions and charities educated far more students than the handful of elite government schools. Furthermore, these different types of schools had their own approaches and goals in advocating Egyptian education and literacies. Unlike fairly static subjects like personal health, reading and writing were dynamic skills which, as we have seen, can easily lead to “unsanctioned” practices just as easily as “sanctioned” ones. In other words, the form and content of writing practices in schools did not remain there. For the purposes of this study, I will be examining school environments as important sites of knowledge production and as rich sources on Egyptian literacy practices. However, I also plan to demonstrate that in spite of a kind of language instruction that, in many ways, enforced a particular linguistic ideal, the outcome was anything but predetermined.

Creating a Modern Language

Language is accorded a pivotal role by Egyptian nationalists as an instrument of modernization and as the object of modernization itself.

\[464\] As a corrective to this overly structuralized view of education, many anthropologists have started examining education as a process of “cultural production,” one that can account for the agency of students, educators, and communities in influencing the outcome and uses of education. For a good overview of these debates see Starrett, *Putting Islam to Work*, 10–15. As an example of this cultural production approach see Kaplan, *The pedagogical state*.
This view of the language invokes both its functionality and its power of symbolism.

---- Yasir Suleiman

The decades preceding and following the turn of the twentieth century were marked by an economic and political situation in Egypt that was intimately connected to language politics. Many of the leading nationalists of the time, from Rifa‘a Tahtawi (1801-1873) to Taha Husayn (1889-1973), were involved in the educational process and keenly interested in reforming and simplifying Arabic instruction for new generations of students. As detailed by Yasir Suliman, the power of language to “awaken the mind of Egypt” was “one of the most abiding themes in Egyptian nationalism.”

Meanwhile, the literary aspects of the nahḍa revolved largely around linguistic debates about the use of words, the simplification of style, and what degree new terminology could be incorporated into the language. At one level, the nature of the nahḍa had a profoundly disciplinary nature. In examining elite attitudes regarding “vulgar” forms of fiction and translation, Samah Selim highlights the way in which Arabic language proponents strove to define the boundaries of acceptable Arabic usage. At another level, the nahḍa did indeed make literary Arabic more accessible through the simplified styles of newspapers and journals. The influence of this literary access was compounded by the new economic opportunities opening for literate Egyptians as low-

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466 Ibid., 170.
level bureaucrats in the burgeoning government, as writers for journals and newspapers, and as teachers for schools at all levels of education.

In light of these changes, there was a growing consensus among Arabs that there needed to be a new, modern way to teach Arabic for the growing ranks of the educated.\(^{469}\) Journals that focused on literary topics, like *al-Hilāl* and *al-Jāmiʿa* led the charge in framing the necessity of an Arabic language that changed with the times. Without modernizing Arabic, the Arab nation was “shackled to the past like a blind person”\(^{470}\) and denying the basic need that “every age has its own way of writing that is well suited to its people.”\(^{471}\) Resisting these changes was no less than contributing to the “intellectual, moral, and social backwardness” of the Arab people.\(^{472}\) In fact, these writers argued that the traditional titans of Arabic literature had always been partial to simple and clear prose that they were now advocating.\(^{473}\) Within the Egyptian government school system, this kind of reform was viewed as no less than the savior of Arabic: “It is necessary to change the old way that was used in teaching this language. It is necessary to leave the method that has made its learning difficult and in its stead we

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\(^{471}\) “Al-Taʿlīf fī al-Lughah al-ʿArabiyya,” 543.

\(^{472}\) “Al-Ṣarf wa-l-Nahw al-Faransī wa-l-ʿArabī,” 517.

must use a method to save [Arabic] from its demise in the schools." Even the religious journal of al-Manār welcomed the new reforms in the teaching of Arabic.

Although a true mass education system was still a relatively distant prospect, the push for literacy at all levels meant that educators needed to create teaching materials to cater to schools (private and public) that wished to produce readers and writers on a large scale. This is an important point. Mass producing readers and writers of the Arabic language had simply never been attempted before and schools began in earnest to rise to the challenge. Starting in 1887 the Ministry commissioned several textbooks on Arabic grammar and language which attempted to simplify complicated rules, divide the subject into lessons, and incorporate various practice exercises. Over the next quarter century, Arabic language instructional textbooks represented the single largest category of commissioned works among all schools subjects. The simplified Arabic of the nahda and that of the classroom worked in tandem, both towards the goal of making written Arabic more palatable to the “modern” literate Egyptian: the textbooks users, the newspaper readers, and the consumers and producers of personal and business texts.

475 "Ināyat Nizārat al-Ma`ārif al-Miṣriyya bi-l-Lughah al-ʿArabiyya."
476 As discussed in Chapter 4, there is some evidence that reading and Quranic literacy, without necessarily writing, was more widespread than the modern definition of literacy that includes reading and writing as one, indivisible set of skills.
477 This series of textbooks was called Al-Durūs al-Nahawīyya and was authored by Hifni Nasif and a committee of several others. As late as 1917, this initial attempt to simplify grammar was being praised as “the best book authored in order to ease the teaching of the Arabic Language.” Sāmī, al-Ta`lim fī Miṣr fī sanatay 1914 wa-1915, 63.
478 Of 141 textbooks commissioned between 1886 and 1914, a full 43 were for Arabic language instruction, followed by mathematics with 28 textbooks, and scientific subjects with 20. Ibid., 106.
The time-honored guardians of Arabic language, the Azhar University, became a focal point of critique. In theory, the traditional study of Arabic was divided into twelve separate sciences that required years of study. However, even after this exhaustive study of rhetoric, grammar, style, and the like, there was no guarantee that a student would be able to compose written works. Two internal critiques of the Azhari system written by Muhammad Halabi and Muhammad al-Zawahari in the early part of the twentieth century singled out this inability of Azhari graduates to function as writers in an increasingly literate world. Halabi noted that students could spend years studying Arabic rhetoric (balāgha, literally “the study of eloquence”), but not be able to compose a basic treatise when need be. His contention was that the focus on the rules of rhetoric and the oddities of language precluded any real practical application of literacy. Similarly, writing in 1905, al-Zawahari criticized the writing style and ability of Azhari graduates, saying they were a source of derision in many circles. Furthermore, although writing is even more necessary in this era than others, “truthfully, many of the ‘ulama’ do not know how to write a normal letter half as well as a student in primary

479 Some scholars only divided the study of language into 8 subjects. However, the 12 sciences made famous by Al-Jurjani (d. 1078) were: philology (lugha), morphology (ṣarf), derivations (ishtiqāq), syntax or grammar (nahw), semantics (ma’ānî), figures of speech (bayān), prosody (‘urūḍ), rhythm (qawāfī), orthography (khatt), writing poetry (qard al-shiʿr), composition (inshā), literary history (tārīkh).

480 In practice, composition (inshā) was not taught as independent subject in Azhar before the twentieth century. Rather, according to Eccel, language education at Azhar focused on: syntax or grammar (nahw), morphology (ṣarf) and rhetoric (balāgha) which was made up of semantics (ma’ānî), figures of speech (bayān), and ornamentations of speech (badiʾ). Chris Eccel, Egypt, Islam, and Social Change: Al-Azhar in Conflict and Accommodation (Berlin: K. Schwarz, 1984), 150.

481 These critiques date back to at least 1865 when an Azhari rector complained that “few graduates, he said, were masters of grammar and able to write tolerable Arabic composition.” Abdul Latif Tibawi, Islamic Education: Its Traditions and Modernization into the Arab National Systems (London: Luzac, 1972), 57.

482 Halabi, Al-Ta‘īm wa-l-Irshād, 207–208.

483 al-Zawāhirī, Al-‘Ilm wa-l-‘Ulamāʾ, 190.
school and this is a shame …”\textsuperscript{484} Not unlike other proponents of literacy, al-Zawahari also saw this weakness as a communal blight: “the cultivation of writing is of benefit to not only to the writer but is of even greater help in raising up the rest of the people and in the advancement of knowledge and reaching its necessary perfection.” In essence, by not educating students in a way that allows them to produce clear and affective texts and ideas, Azhar was not only failing its students, but failing society as a whole.

Arabic instruction in newer government-sponsored schools was consciously positioned in opposition to the “traditional approach” of institutions like Azhar. Starting in the 1880’s, the Egyptian Ministry of Education viewed the reform of Arabic instruction as a way of breaking with the past.\textsuperscript{485} In practice, the Arabic language instruction of the early government school system, with its focus on reading and writing, was clearly based on French and English models.\textsuperscript{486} Furthermore, since the entire structure of Arabic instruction had to be rebuilt to accommodate beginner students and a year-by-year curriculum, most Arabic textbooks were patterned largely on Western lines. Several of the earliest Arabic language readers were either authored by Europeans or modeled on their work.\textsuperscript{487} Meanwhile, the new Arabic teachers’

\textsuperscript{484} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{486} Ministry of Education, Brūjrām al-Taʿlim al-Ibtidāʾi wa Brūjrām al-Taʿlim al-Thānī (Cairo: Al-Maṭbaʿa al-Kubrā al-Amīriyya, 1900), 58–59, 62–69. For secondary schools see Ibid., 124, 126.
\textsuperscript{487} For example: Peltier, Al-Hidāya al-Tawṣīqīyya ilā al-Muṭālaʿa a al-Ibtidāʾiyya: Premières Lectures Courantes: Morale et Leçons de Chose, 3rd ed. (Cairo: Al-Maṭbaʿa al-Kubrā al-Amīriyya, 1889). Also, another early reader used in government schools starting in 1899 was based on the work of the French orientalist Silvestre de Sacy. This textbook was originally commissioned by Yacub Artin and was a selection of de Sacy’s work, however, with additional notes and biographies. Nizārat al-Maʿārif al-
college, Dar al-ʿUlm, was often held up by its supporters as a modern alternative to al-Azhar and a source of new hope for the Arabic language.\textsuperscript{488} In his 1917 assessment of Dar al-ʿUlm, Sami Amin summarized the Ministry of Education’s policy regarding Arabic as follows: “to make this language, which is the language of the country, easy for the novice and the student so that they do not spend a lot of time in learning what is absolutely necessary for speech and writing.”\textsuperscript{489} In pursuit of this goal, Dar al-Ulum was suppose to support the “cure” for Arabic, a language that had stood still as the world changed, by providing the teachers who would spread a new simplified style of Arabic instruction to schoolchildren.\textsuperscript{490} Advocating the creation of an easy and basic Arabic literacy that could be disseminated to a wider public was a latent critique of the sort of Arabic taught in religious institutions; a literacy that took years to master, that was studied along with a retinue of linguistic subjects, and that resulted in style that was too cumbersome and turgid for the modern world.

In practice, Arabic instruction in government schools did not often live up to this high ideal and was, as such, itself often the subject of criticism on two fronts. On the one hand, some of the critiques leveled at government schools echoed those regarding Azhar, mainly that the teachers of Arabic represented an antiquated brand of pedagogy. As an example, Nabawiyya Musa, in becoming the first woman allowed to teach Arabic in a government school, recounts the stiff opposition she encountered to her teaching

\textsuperscript{488} See Aroian, \textit{The nationalization of Arabic and Islamic education in Egypt}, 2, 29. Also, Sāmī, \textit{al-Taʿlīm fī Miṣr fī sanatay 1914 wa-1915}, 96.
\textsuperscript{489} Ibid., 52–53.
\textsuperscript{490} Ibid., 53, 96.
techniques from the Dar al-'Ulum teachers.\textsuperscript{491} Ironically, due to their poor writing abilities, these male teachers were not able to articulate their complaints in writing and Musa won the right to teach a style that focused on “the connotation, style, and correct usage of words instead of spending time explaining inane linguistic proofs.”\textsuperscript{492} On the other hand, Arabic instruction in government schools was also viewed by some as too vocational, at the expense of true language literacy. Halabi saw the advantages of distilling Arabic instruction into lessons that could be taught in a matter of months rather than years.\textsuperscript{493} However, he maintained that what could be memorized in the form of a lesson, could not be as easily internalized. The students of the “new” Arabic lessons became little more than parrots, very good at repeating exactly what was in their textbooks, but without the ability to extrapolate or benefit from what they had learned.\textsuperscript{494} Nor was everybody a fan of these new textbooks, since according to their critics, they tended to err on the side of simplicity at the expense of good style. How were schools going to produce writers if all students were reading was uncomplicated, dull writing?\textsuperscript{495}

This two-pronged criticism underscored the problems that faced Arabic literacy instruction. How to create a functional literacy for the majority of Egyptians while still retaining the linguistic essence, beauty, and, yes, complexity of the language?

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\item[491] Mūsā, Tārīkhī bi-Qalamī, 93–97.
\item[492] Ibid., 97.
\item[493] Ḥalabī, Al-Ta‘īm wa-l-Irshād, 76–80.
\item[494] Ibid., 71–72, 80–81.
\item[495] Mūsā, Al-Mar’a wa-l-‘Amal, 94–96; Nāṣif, Āthār Bāḥīthat al-Bādiya, 150.
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**Dhawqī & Functional Literacy**

The debate between what was “useful” and what were deemed the “intangible” or “creative” elements of language instruction reflected different views on how to cultivate literacy in society. For many, becoming a true *adīb*, or man or letters, was a lifelong pursuit that relied on a deep understanding of good taste or *dhawq*. The process of learning to read and write properly as described by the literary critic Husayn al-Marsafi at the end of the nineteenth century was intrinsically labor intensive. He asserted that in order to learn Arabic one had to not only read, but also commit to memory, as many examples of eloquent language as possible. Only by assimilating the language through extensive exposure and rigorous memorization could one hope to speak and write the language well. One author of a manual on teaching writing acknowledged that only so much of the linguistic arts could be taught, because the most difficult elements of writing, that of good taste or *dhawq*, could only be obtained by “studying the yellowed works of great writers, reading the inhalations (*anfās*) of the eloquent, and taking them as an example.” In fact, just as sufis used the term *dhawq*.

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497 This parallels the concepts of embodiment that often accompany the desire for parents to have their children memorize the Qur’an. Boyle, “Memorization and Learning in Islamic Schools,” 489–494. At the other end of the spectrum, Jirji Zaydan did not believe that writing *dhawq* could be acquired through reading or otherwise, rather, it was a function of innate talent. See the following debate with a reader: “Al-Inshā’,” *Al-Hilāl* 5, no. 20 (June 15, 1897): 778-783. Also, “Malakat al-Inshā’,” *Al-Hilāl* 9, no. 5 (December 1, 1900): 151-153.
to describe direct or experiential knowledge of the divine, writers claimed that experiential knowledge of the written word was the truest means to achieving good linguistic taste. Al-Zawahiri made the comparison between sufism (taṣṣawuf) and rhetoric (balāgha) explicit. According the al-Zawahari, the art of linguistic eloquence could not be taught; rather, like spiritual pursuits, it had to be realized through experience. It was not unlike understanding the sweetness of honey by tasting it.

The traditional notion that memorization was an important means of developing the proper Arabic dhawq, wielded considerable influence on educational programs. In commenting on Azhari education, Abdullah Nadim made the case that those who had memorized the Quran had at their fingertips the most eloquent material, lexicon, and writing style available. In a similar vein, the writer Muhammad al-Muwaylihi suggested in 1893 that in order to embody and assimilate the ability (malaka) to write, students not only needed to know the mechanics of language, but also had to read and memorize copious amounts of poetry. Therefore, in order to teach students how to write, al-Muwaylihi suggested that school children be given a reader of poetry to memorize. In essence, the traditional process of assimilation could be used to cultivate the proper sense of language necessary for writing. Indeed, these booklets of “memorized passages” (mahfūẓāt) became a mainstay of modern Arabic instruction, in

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499 One definition: “The real meaning of dhawq is the best intellectual faculty of the soul which enables man to perceive what could not be perceived by other faculties of the soul.” Binyamin Abrahamov, “Al-Ghazālī’s Supreme Way to Know God,” Studia Islamica, no. 77 (January 1, 1993): 166.
500 al-Zawāhirī, Al-ʿIlm wa-ʿl-ʿUlamāʾ, 144.
501 “Al-Lughah wa-l-Inshāʾ,” 177.
contrast to that of English or French.\textsuperscript{503} Similarly, a private school established in 1911 made clear its commitment to Arabic instruction by advertising the reliance on “many memorized passages, in poetry and prose, to develop in students the proper Arabic \textit{dhawq}.”\textsuperscript{504} Needless to say, many kuttābs and religious schools also continued to use Quranic memorization as a foundation of language literacy.

However, even as this \textit{dhawqī} literacy continued to influence Arabic instruction, resources were increasingly dedicated to creating more streamlined ways of educating schoolchildren. In line with the particularly utilitarian bent of literacy advocates, the educational system was geared towards creating students who could become basic consumers, and not necessarily connoisseurs, of language. This functional kind of literacy, which would provide students with the ability to conduct everyday reading and writing tasks, was deemed well suited to large-scale educational projects. Even the physicality of writing was put in the service of functional literacy. Handwriting exams, which required students to master multiple scripts, were phased out in 1922 since “the purpose of secondary school is not to turn out amazing calligraphists … Rather what is needed of these students is that they have the ability to write clearly and legibly and that their letters are of a good quality and clear.”\textsuperscript{505} As we have seen, this need-based approach to Arabic instruction animated debates about education for the traditionally

\textsuperscript{504} DWQ, Abdīn, Box 230, Folder 2 (#0069-004462). Sayyid Muhammad, \textit{Al-Kulliyya al-Ahliyya bi Miṣr} (1911-1912), 27.
uneducated majority of Egyptians: rural inhabitants, the urban lower classes, and women. Insofar as education had a social benefit, it could be justified and encouraged. Beyond these questions of access to education and literacy, this functionalist ethos also influenced the contours of language instruction itself.

The most striking change was in the organization of language education in schools. Unlike a “traditional” education that began with reading (and sometimes writing) of the Qur’ān and culminated in the detailed study of specialized texts, schools were increasingly moving towards more general language classes that focused on basic literacy, sometimes termed simply *lugha ‘arabiyya*, or Arabic language. In the case of government primary schools, “Arabic language” for first-year students focused on learning their letters, reading, and dictation.\(^{506}\) Topics like basic grammar, memorization of texts, and composition were gradually added. Students of Dar al-‘Ulum\(^{507}\) received a more extensive Arabic instruction, largely based on the traditional sciences associated with Arabic (rhetoric, syntax, poetic meter, etc), however with the important additions of reading, composition, dictation, and handwriting.\(^{508}\) Indeed, these new subjects presented a particular challenge for schools more steeped in traditional education. After the 1908 reform laws that introduced “new sciences” to al-Azhar and other religious institution,\(^{509}\) a report on the religious schools associated with the Council of Religious Scholars of Alexandria highlighted the problem presented by

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\(^{507}\) At the time it was known as al-Madrasat al-Muʿallimīn al-Nāṣiriyya.

\(^{508}\) Ministry of Education, *Qanūn wa Brūjrām Madrasat al-Muʿallimīn al-Nāṣiriyya* (Cairo: Al-Maṭbaʿa al-Kubrā al-Amīriyya, 1903), 21–33. The shift from more specialized topics to general “Arabic language” can be seen in the classes offered, see Eccel, *Egypt, Islam, and social change*, 166–167.

\(^{509}\) Ibid., 191–193.
“modern sciences,” specifically in the subjects of language and composition (lugha and inshā’).\footnote{510} Ironically for a religious Muslim school, they reported difficulty in finding teachers able to teach these writing and language classes. They finally resorted to bringing together their own materials and following the curriculum of their government counterparts. As a religious institution they had the raw tools for language instruction, just not with the new, “modern” methods and techniques.

These new methods also played an essential role in the administrative and testing processes that were central to modern educational systems. At al-Azhar, exams (official and unofficial) were conducted completely orally. For the outside observer, this oral and ad-hoc system was just another example of the general chaos that reigned in the traditional education. Part of the many reform laws that were aimed at al-Azhar around the turn of the century were indeed attempts to introduce examinations that were not only regularly administered, but also written.\footnote{511} It seems that when that latter was finally instituted at Azhar in 1911, it created something of a debacle, since students were not trained in this “new science” of writing and had a difficult time adapting to the written exam form.\footnote{512} In contrast, the new bureaucratic systems of government and education were completely conceived of in a textual way; they could only function by ways of written exams, diplomas, and certifications. Within the exam systems of these

\footnote{510}DWQ, Abdīn, Box 230, Folder 2 (#0069-004462), Muhammad Abu al-Faḍl al-Ǧīzāwī, Al-Taqrīr al-Sādis an ‘A’mal Mashikhat ‘Ulama’ al-Iskandriyya (Alexandria: Al-Maṭba’a al-Misriyya, 1909), 27–28. Ironically, both, lugha and inshā’ were considered part of the traditional sciences of Arabic language. However, in practice, they did not develop into their own “science” or subject aside from the inshā’ literature associated with scribes and government secretaries.
\footnote{511} Eccel, Egypt, Islam, and social change, 152–153.
\footnote{512} Ibid., 152.
government schools, the complex constellation of Arabic sciences was condensed into two types of evaluations: a written composition (inshā’ tahrīrī) followed by an oral examination on grammar.\(^{513}\) Only students who had a passing score in the composition section were allowed to enter the oral exam.\(^{514}\) Not only Arabic instruction, but the very medium of evaluation was shaped by the new demands of a functional written literacy.

In addition to these structural changes, government schools strove to make the content of Arabic instruction as “practical” as possible. The official government curricula specified which grammar rules where to be taught each year, how many lines of dictation where to given to students, and what sections of textbooks were to be read. All material was designed to “accustom the novice to contemplation, correct his impulses and inclinations, reform his habits, and encourage seriousness, and accustom them to orderliness in their thoughts and deeds.”\(^{515}\) With regards to writing, composition topics were geared to “help in daily matters.”\(^{516}\) To this end, the primary school curriculum of 1900 suggested writing assignments that described objects, summarized readings, explained poetry or proverbs, depicted famous men, or were sample letters.\(^{517}\) Writing and reading topics were to explicitly avoid subjects like love and religious blasphemy.\(^{518}\) In a 1907 revamp of the Arabic curriculum for government school students, the Ministry of Education suggested that by the fourth year of primary

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\(^{515}\) Ministry of Education, \textit{Brūjrām al-Ta’īm al-Ibtidā’i wa Brūjrām al-Ta’īm al-Thānī}, 17. Also see Ibid., 83.

\(^{516}\) Ibid., 17.

\(^{517}\) Ibid., 18.

\(^{518}\) Ibid., 20.
schools, students should be writing on “subjects of general knowledge, like agriculture and trade.” More advanced students, destined to become Arabic teachers, were also encouraged to write on “useful” subjects like “education, trade, agriculture, and other things that will enlighten the student and his knowledge of everyday matters.” By 1913, what was “useful” was specified to include administrative and private correspondences (for example, how to request a vacation or ask a father for additional spending money), short works on the benefits of government services and companies, and as we shall see later in this chapter, much more.

Literacies that were deemed “beneficial” for the new social and economic order of the country became inscribed in the educational blueprint of Arabic instruction. In this new calculus, traditional religious instruction and cultivating lifetime mastery gave way to a functional, simplified, and systematic Arabic instruction that supported the social good.

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520 Ministry of Education, Qanūn wa Brūjrām Madrasat al-Mu’allimīn al-Nāṣiriyya, 27. As noted above, during this period Dār al-‘Ulūm had been renamed to Madrasat al-Mu’allimīn al-Nāṣiriyya.
From Scribes to Writers: The Art of Inshā’

The interest in promoting this new brand of functional literacy reflected the changing demographics of students and the uses of writing. The traditional “masters of the pen,” or arbāb al-aqlām, had been the religious scholars, elites, and a smattering of tradesmen and others with personal or professional interests in reading and writing. Throughout the Muslim world, an elite group of “men of letters” and works like Kalila wa-Dimna and Alf Layla were a continual influence on literary and popular culture. Furthermore, many writers like al-Jāḥiẓ from the 9th century, Ibn Khaldūn in the 14th century, and al-Jabarī in the late eighteenth century, used fiction, letters, history, and travel writing as vehicles for social commentary. However, what made the turn of twentieth century unique was the systematic training young students were receiving in literacy and the practices of reading and writing. Rather than relying on lifetime mastery or exceptional talent, a growing number of students in schools were expected to graduate with the ability to write and comment on their society.

In the pre-modern world, the closest profession associated exclusively with writing was that of the kātibs, the scribes and secretaries who composed letters, official

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522 I am borrowing this theme from the title of Richard Jacquemond, Entre Scribes et Écrivains: Le Champ Littéraire dans l’Egypte Contemporaine (Arles: Sinbad, 2003). In an analysis of Najib Mahouz’s Children of the Alley (first published in 1959), Richard Jacquemond traces the role of the narrator in the story as he navigates his dual roles: he “is at once a katib, in the modern sense of being a writer, and a katib, in the ancient sense of being a scribe, or functionary.” It is this privy position as a scribe, whom people go to with their writing needs, that allows him to tell the story of his community. Jacquemond, Conscience of the Nation, 4.

523 Usually called an adīb (pl. udābāʾ), literally men of adab or literature.

524 It is no accident that these writers were particularly highlighted in government school curricula.

525 Of course the artistry of these and other professions always existed. See Adrian Gully, The Culture of Letter-Writing in Pre-Modern Islamic Society (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008).
documents, and various literary works within both state and private settings.\footnote{A typical definition of the functionary aspect of scribes can be seen in the definition: “scribes are the pillars of the regime; it’s seeing eyes and support. Within them is the glory of the state and its organization …” Muḥammad Najjār, Kitāb al-Ṭīrāz al-Muwashsha fī Śīnā‘at al-Inshā’ (Miṣr: Maṭba‘at al-Ta’līf, 1894), 25.}

However, with the increased availability of functional literacy education and the economic opportunities it provided, the designation kātib no longer referred to a particular profession, but rather a new nebulous category of “writer.” In his work “A Period of Time,” originally published in serial form between 1898 and 1900, Al-Muwaylahi uses world play to demonstrate the changing meaning of the work kātib for his late nineteenth century narrator and the early nineteenth century ghost he encounters in a graveyard. The narrator introduces himself to the dead pasha as a kātib, meaning a writer and author. However, this “profession” seems to escape the pasha.

*Man from the grave:* “Well then, secretary ʿĪsā, where’s your inkwell and notebook?”

ʿĪsā ibn Hishāmī: “I’m not a secretary in the Treasury or Secretariat, I’m an author.”

*Man from the grave:* “Never mind! Go then, my good author, and look for my clothes and bring me my horse …”\footnote{Allen and Muwayliḥī, *A Period of Time*, 108.}

That the dead pasha mistakes the narrator for a “lowly” scribe begins their unlikely companionship throughout the narrative. This misunderstanding would have been quite expected. The transformation of the term for scribe and writer was a new phenomenon at the turn of the twentieth century as the rank of kātibs came to included storytellers, professionals (scribes, journalists, etc.), teachers, schoolchildren, homemakers, and anyone who was deemed literate. The art of inshā’, or composition, so long associated
with scribal pursuits, became normalized in schools, the press, and private life as an everyday practice.

Even as the category of “writer” was shifting, the art of composition itself was being transformed. In his study on pre-modern letter-writing, Adrian Gully notes that: “One of the ways in which letter-writing from the nineteenth century onwards differed from that of the Middle Ages was that it attempted to promote practicality rather than formality, and it drew less and less on the principles of communicative eloquence, in the context of which it had been taught or many centuries.”

In fact, this was true for most of the literacy practices that touched Egyptian society. Since, in the framework of literacy promotion, the basic skills of reading and writing were largely justified for their social and economic benefits, these skills were pursued in the most “practical” way possible. Meanwhile, Arabic balāgha, the art of eloquence, so long a foundational subject of Arabic instruction at the highest levels became subservient to a newly re-engineered art of inshā’, or composition, for the Arabic beginner. In the process, the established modes of writing instruction, which centered on private and bureaucratic communication and recordkeeping, also shifted to more public expressions of written sentiment.

One way to trace this shift in the practice of inshā’ is to outline the changes occurring in instructional literature of the era. A mainstay of Islamic culture for over a

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millennium, pre-modern inshā’ literature was characterized by manuals of style, often replete with examples of how to address rulers, colleagues, and friends and sample documents of marriage contracts, petitions, and other potentially useful texts.\textsuperscript{530} While strictly instructional materials existed,\textsuperscript{531} the majority of inshā’ works were aimed at a professional class of scribes and scholars.\textsuperscript{532} In the nineteenth century, the work on inshā’ by the Azharī reformer Hasan al-ʿAttar (d. 1835) was one of the earliest works published by the Egyptian government press, with numerous printings throughout the rest of the century.\textsuperscript{533} In form and content, ʿAttar’s Inshāʾ represented a typical writing manual. He addresses his work to those who were scholars of the literary arts or were in the service of rulers.\textsuperscript{534} His collection proceeds as a series of examples of how to address various groups of people in a style rife with poetry, rhyming prose, proverbs, and other literary “adornments.” He ends the book with a short section on recordkeeping and official documents for various kinds of settings, from establishing


\textsuperscript{531} For example, the 11th century writer Muḥammad Humaydī addressed his work on letter writing both the “elite and the general people.” Muḥammad Ḥumaydī, \textit{Tashīl al-Sabīl ila Taʿallum al-Tarsīl} (Frankfurt: Ma’had Tārīkh al-ʿUlūm al-ʿArabīyya wa-al-Islāmīyya fi Ḥījāʾ Jāmiʿat Frānkfurt, 1985), 2. Also see reference Gully, \textit{The Culture of Letter-Writing}, 21. There was also a long history of text on pedagogical issues in general, see Sebastian Günther, “Be Masters in That You Teach and Continue to Learn: Medieval Muslim Thinkers on Educational Theory,” \textit{Comparative Education Review} 50, no. 3 (August 2006): 367–388. Also see a 1550 text by al-Haythami regarding the problems of teaching students, as described in Hanna, \textit{In praise of books}, 60–61.

\textsuperscript{532} Two of the most famous were Ibn Qutayba’s \textit{Adab al-Kātib} and Qalqashandi’s massive work, \textit{Ṣubḥ al-Aʿshāʾ fi Ṣināʿat al-Inshāʾ}.

\textsuperscript{533} Lane, \textit{An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians}, Vol 2, 2:29. It was first published during ʿAttār lifetime and, judging from Lane’s commentary, was a work he was particularly proud of. Versions of this work were reprinted in 1855, 1875, 1882, and 1886.

\textsuperscript{534} The art of writing flows from the literary arts (al-ʿulūm al-adabiyya) ….” Ḥasan ‘Aṭṭār, \textit{Inshāʾ al-Shaykh Ḥasan al-ʿAṭṭār}. (Miṣr: Al-Maṭba’a al-ʿUthmānīyya, 1886), 2.
business contracts to conducting a marriage. In this construction of the subject of writing, communication and recordkeeping were the primary uses of inshā’. Gathering witty words and phrases, protocols, and examples in one place made his book one of the many resources available to those who had already studied the linguistic sciences of Arabic.

However, while most inshā’ literature was composted by scholars or scribes writing for other educated readers, by the end of the nineteenth century, a new type of author of inshā’ works emerged: that of the schoolteacher. The textbooks and pedagogical guides they created did not assumed a background in formal Arabic study (through Quranic elementary education or otherwise) and did not focus exclusively on letter writing or official documents. Rather, these teachers were interested in cultivating writing skills among the youngest students, in classroom settings, and for those who had little or no experience in the sciences of Arabic. On the one hand, these textbooks represented an inversion of traditional language education within which the art of composition grew out of experience and years of study. Rather, since basic literacy was a central goal of modern primary education, the skills of reading and writing were paramount from the earliest years. On the other hand, these works also had a deeply practical bent; they were, after all, created specifically for the school setting and, as such, reflected the goals of that education.

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535 Ibid., 61–72.
Perhaps the first such “modern” textbook was produced in Beirut in 1884 by Saʿid al-Khury al-Sharnuti, a teacher in a Catholic school. Shartuni draws from traditional inshāʾ works in his extensive use of examples and focus on epistolary and contractual documents. However, unlike previous works he addresses his work directly to students, citing the need to teach writing skills to young children. He also explicitly makes the point that his work is meant to address the “needs of the day” and asserts the necessity to communicate simply, clearly, and with as much brevity as possible. His 1899 work Kitāb al-Muʿīn fī Sināʾat al-Inshāʾ delved even deeper into the pedagogical issues of Arabic instruction, with student exercises, composition assignments, and mock scenarios.

In Egypt, a similar movement was underway. In a further departure from traditional inshāʾ manuals, in 1889, an Arabic teacher in the government school system by the name of Muhammad Diyab created his own textbook to teach writing called Kitāb al-Inshāʾ. Rather than focusing on examples of inshāʾ or advanced linguistic concepts, Diyab dedicates his work to what he called “theoretical” inshāʾ and the most

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537 Shartūnī, al-Shihāb al-Thāqib fī Ṣināʾat al-Kātib, 5.
539 Ibid., 22.
540 Muhammad Diyāb, Kitāb al-Inshāʾ, vol. 1, 1st ed. (Cairo: Al-Maṭbaʿa al-Kubrā al-Amiriyya, 1889). In his later work on the history of Arabic literature (completed in 1897), Diyab mentions Shartuni’s al-Shihāb al-Thāqib and his own Kitāb al-Inshāʾ, indicating he saw both works as part of the same progression in the development of inshāʾ literature. Muhammad Diyāb, Tārīkh Ādāb al-Lugḥa al-ʿArabiyya, 1st ed. (Cairo: al-Majlis al-Aʿlā li-l-Thaqāfah, 2003), 441.
basic elements of composition. He begins the textbook with advice on how to think through a writing project: mainly, extensive reading, contemplation, constructing ideas, and having a clear thesis. He suggests that ideas “are nourished by a lot of reading, reviewing, mixing with honorable people and by spending time with many good books, precious essays, and exemplary speeches. For that gives birth to new ideas …” Once the student is ready to write, Diyab offers advice on the proper choice of words and phrases, common mistakes, etc. Only then does he turn to a quick overview of the linguistic sciences of balāgha, with examples of rhetorical uses and devices.

Interestingly, when it comes to letter writing, Diyab basically disavows everything that had made Hasan Attar’s Insha’ popular. Like Shartuni, Diyab warns against overly ornate letters that were filled with fancy idioms or borrowed words and phrases from older works (like perhaps ‘Attar’s). Rather, writers should be clear in their expressions, direct in their intent, and provide only relevant information. In this inshā’ work, the linguistic sciences and rhetorical devices are in service of the art of composition and the goal of expression.

Diyab ends his work with a several sections directed to teachers on how to teach writing in the school setting. In the initial years of schooling, he acknowledges that writing compositions may be too advanced for young students. Rather, the teacher

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541 It is not clear if the second volume planned on ‘amālī or “practical writing” was ever published.
543 Ibid., 1:6.
544 Ibid., 1:25–51.
545 Ibid., 1:62–63.
should encourage the student “to speak and express what is in their soul.” 546 Once they do learn to write, Diyab then suggests a series of exercises that involve everything from descriptions of places or events to imagining the end of a story or the feelings of a person in a particular situation. 547 He even offers advice on how to grade papers and assign homework. 548 When it came to education in the secondary schools, Diyab offers a decidedly functional vision of writing instruction, much in line with the purpose of the government schools he served. Regarding the preparatory school, he cautions teachers to keep in mind that “the purpose of this school is to prepare young men for administrative jobs in the government, so [the teacher] should assign compositions relevant to the situation of the country.” 549 As for higher level schools, each should provide students with assignments pertinent to their future fields in medicine, engineering, law, and education. 550 Ultimately, Diyab’s work represents a deep interest in pedagogy and literacy training for a new generation of schoolchildren, but still with the overarching goal of socializing students in the literacies of their future professions.

Other schoolteachers took up the pen to expound on the best ways to impart the ability to write onto a new generation of schoolchildren. In a particularly interesting example from 1894, a teacher in both the Azhar and government school systems, Muhammad al-Najjar, decided to gather his knowledge of writing in one book he called Al-Tiraz al-Muwashsha fi Sina ‘at al-Insha’. In the process he produced a work that in

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546  Ibid., 1:59.
547  Ibid., 1:60–62.
548  Ibid., 1:63.
549  Ibid., 1:64.
550  Ibid., 1:64–65.
many ways drew from the traditional study of language, both in style and content. Like many before him, he focused on epistolary and literary examples. He reiterated the importance of the study of traditional sciences of language, from poetic meter to various stylistic forms. He himself used the high rhetoric and flowery language that had come to characterize pre-modern Arabic. However, it was also a striking departure from the centuries of inshā’ instructional literature as he consciously positions himself and his work in a “new age” within which the art of composition was re-emerging as an important skill for schoolchildren who were to become the next generation of “masters of the pen.”

To accommodate these new consumers of Arabic instruction, al-Najjar cites the call by the Egyptian Ministry of Education for scholars to produce more didactic works on the Arabic language and he frames several sections of his works around topics that were of interest to students of the government primary and secondary schools. In a similar vein, an Arabic teacher in a French-run school in Zagazig wrote a textbook called Madārij al-Irtiqā’ ilā Ṣinā‘at al-Inshā’ that drew upon Diyab’s work, among others. By the early twentieth century, a whole host of texts were in circulation to teach various aspects of writing as well as reading. All were geared

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552 Ibid., 13, 17.
553 Muṣṭafā Falākī, Kīṭāb Madārij al-Irtiqā’ ilā Ṣinā‘at al-Inshā’ ([Miṣr]: M.M. al-Falākī, 1897). Ironically, Falākī copies word for word Diyāb’s section on the importance of not simply coping text from other works. Ibid., 3–4.
554 For example, Ḥusayn Wālī, Kīṭāb al-Imlā’ (Cairo: Māṭba‘at al-Manār al-Islāmīyya, 1904); Ṣādiq, Al-Qawāl al-Muntakhab fī Ṣinā‘at Inshā‘ al-‘Arab.
towards creating a new generation of kātībs who would not serve as scribes, but as “writers” in the more general sense.

**Writing beyond School**

Requiring students to know trends in the development of the Arabic language, the 1913 curriculum for the Khidawiyya Normal School listed the following influences on the “state of contemporary Arabic language”: the language of the newspapers, the use of translations, the reform of orthography, and the school composition. The movement towards simplified prose and unambiguous writing along with the influence of European literary forms were all central aspects of the nahḍa. However, what wider affect did “school composition” have on the development on writing practices of the time? In this final section, I will focus on how schooled compositions became an important training ground for students to engage the larger social issues of their generation through the writing of articles and essays. Beyond the simplifications to Arabic instruction already described, school materials also begun to assimilate into their “lessons” matters of social and national importance. As a result, issue ranging from women’s education to national pride became an essential part of the Arabic instruction.

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557 Presumably, “taṣliḥ al-khaff” refers to the addition of punctuation marks to written and published Arabic texts.
558 Here *inshā‘ al-madāris*. [206]
system, encouraging students to use their writing for far more than bureaucratic reports, private letters, and business contracts.

Well before the appearance of Qasim Amin’s work, the issue of women in society had already emerged as a legitimate subject of school discourse. The earliest example is perhaps Ali Mubarak’s 1868 work, Ṭarīq al-Hijā` wa-l-Tamrīn `alā al-Qirā’a fī al-Lugha al-‘Arabiyya.559 Unlike other books that discussed education in general terms,560 this textbook was clearly designed as a school reader for young children. The preface gives teachers precise instructions on how to instruct students in reading and writing, from how to use chalkboards to how to organize a classroom.561 The textbook itself starts with individual letters, words, phrases and proceeds, in the second part, to mini-compositions on topics like love of country, the natural world, and the advancements of the current era. In a reading on women and girls, Mubarak offers the following advice:

[teach girls] what is appropriate for them of good knowledge. In addition to drilling them on how to raise children well, sewing and embroidery, and good homemaking since all this increases their beauty, chastity, and perfection.562

While the rest of the textbook speaks to students in familiar “us” and “we” terms, women are clearly the “other” in this school milieu. In a manner that reoccurs throughout schooled discourses on the “women question,” men are encouraged to write about ways in which to reform and improve the female “them.”

559 Mubārak, Kitāb Ṭarīq al-Hijā` wa-l-Tamrīn `alā al-Qirā’a fī al-Lugha al-‘Arabiyya, 1:
561 These precise instructions are a clear reference to the “Lancaster system” of education. See Mitchell, Colonizing Egypt, 69–74.
562 Mubārak, Kitāb Ṭarīq al-Hijā` wa-l-Tamrīn `alā al-Qirā’a fī al-Lugha al-‘Arabiyya, 1:82.
In another example, a magazine specifically aimed at schoolchildren, *al-Samīr al-Saghīr* (1897-1900), often highlighted girls as the subjects of educational lessons. In one series of articles, a “good” girl who was generous, patient, and hardworking was contrasted with a “bad” girl who was none of those things and was subsequently shunned by her peers.\(^{563}\) Furthermore, the future role of these girls as homemakers also received considerable attention. The magazine highlighted the work of Fransis Mikhaʾīl, who had studied home economics from French books and had authored several Arabic works on the topic.\(^{564}\) As a follow up, *al-Samīr al-Saghīr* held a writing contest open to all its readers on the following: how should the homemaker spend most of her time?\(^{565}\) The winning response enumerated the duties of the proper housewife in detail: she should keep herself busy organizing the home, ironing, and sewing clothes; she should not be lazy or sleep too much; if she has free time and the ability, she should read beneficial works and teach her children how to read; above all, she must be thrifty and avoid creating problems for her husband.\(^{566}\) On the whole, the magazine’s depiction of girls was much in line with the view Qasim Amin would espouse only a year later: girls were to be the subjects of intensive schooling and moral education in order for her to better serve her family and her country. In essence, this early example set the stage for

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\(^{563}\) “Malaḥ (?) wa ʾĀdāb,” *Al-Samīr al-Šaghīr* 1, no. 2 (November 1, 1897): 7.

\(^{564}\) Fransīs Mikhāʾīl, “Tadbīr al-Manzil,” *Al-Samīr al-Šaghīr* 1, no. 15 (March 11, 1898): 57-58. For a description of his quest to introduce home economics to the Egyptian school system see DWQ, Abdīn Collection, Box 655, Folder 13 (#0069-014326). Letter to Sultan from Fransīs Mikhāʾīl, January 1915.

\(^{565}\) “Masāʾil li ʾl-Ḥall: Inshāʾ,” *Al-Samīr al-Šaghīr* 1, no. 20 (May 1, 1898): 79.

\(^{566}\) “Tadbīr al-Manzil,” *Al-Samīr al-Šaghīr* 1, no. 34 (September 21, 1898): 134.
how the “newly educated,” mostly male (none of the responses I saw were authored by girls) generation of schoolchildren was suppose to write for and about women.\footnote{For a useful overview of cultivation of a particular ideal of womanhood and nationalism in Egyptian schools see Lisa Pollard, Nurturing the Nation: The Family Politics of Modernizing, Colonizing and Liberating Egypt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 100–131.}

Meanwhile, pursuant of the goal to make reading and writing education “useful,” government curricula and instructional works began including social issues as part of their suggestions for writing topics. In the 1913 curriculum for Dar al-ʿUlūm students, by the fifth year students were expected to write “articles” (maqālāt) on “social issues, like matters of home economics and the proper upbringing (tarbiya) of boys and girls.”\footnote{Ministry of Education, Minhāj Madrasat al-Muʿallimīn al-Nāṣirīyya al-Muʿaqat 1913, 11.} Students of the other teachers college were also expected to be able to “describe in detail the state of the Arab nation from different angles and have the language skills to express the Arab sentiment regarding this situation.”\footnote{Ministry of Education, Birnāmij Madrasat al-Muʿallimīn al-Khidīwiyya, 3.} Indeed, instructional literature also began including contemporary “articles” among their samples of writing. As an example, a 1909 book dedicated to teaching the principles of writing, al-Qawl al-Muntakhib fī Ṣināʿat al-Inshāʿ al-ʿArab, contained a whole section on “composition topics and articles,” in addition to the usual epistles, proverbs, and selections of poetry common in traditional inshāʿ manuals. In this articles section, the author includes short passages on a range of social issues from the necessity of literary organizations to the benefits and drawbacks of bachelorhood.\footnote{Ṣādiq, Al-Qawl al-Muntakhab fī Ṣināʿat Inshāʿ al-ʿArab, 59–79.} Among these “composition topics,” the issue of girls’ education is also not neglected. In the sample article, the author asserts that in order to become the future mothers and teachers of the

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next generation, girls did indeed need to be educated and receive good religious instruction. However, in pursuit of this education, girls should not “cross natural boundaries,” since her place is ultimately in the home. Well beyond the standard rubric of letters, contracts, or government reports, instruction literature increasingly encouraged the practice of writing on matters of public interest and asking students to actively put forth their opinions on these issues.

The most persistent public interest advanced by instructional and school texts was the cultivation of nationalism and loyalty in the youngest members of society. One of the earliest staple texts of the government-run elementary schools (kuttābs) was a textbook called al-Fawā’id al-Fikriyya, written by the then Minister of Education, Abdallah Fikri. The work contains a long section on “love of country,” within which Fikri makes a rather impassioned plea for students to serve their country, continue to spread education, and be always wary of foreign intervention. The duty students have towards their country is paramount: “As soon as a student understands good from evil, he must know the [nation’s] natural rights for the great advantages it has given. He must know he has a debt on his neck that he must repay over his whole lifetime, and that is serving the nation in any way he can …” Other early books on

571 Ibid., 64–65.
572 For an interesting survey of these goals with regards to elementary education and the kuttāb system see Nicolas Lavergne, “La Modernisation des Kuttāb en Égypte au Tournant du XXe Siècle [The Modernization of Kuttab in Egypt at the Turn of the 20th Century],” Cahiers de la Méditerranée 75 (2007): 74-89.
573 It was originally published in 1882 specifically for kuttāb students, but it continued to appear in primary and elementary school curricula as late as 1927. Ministry of Education, Murāqabat al-Tā’līm al-Awwalī (Cairo: Al-Matba’a al-Amriyya, 1927), 79.
574 Fikrī, Al-Fawā’id al-Fikriyya li-l-Makātib al-Miṣriyya, 105–120.
575 Ibid., 105.
pedagogy published in Arabic emphasized the importance of nationalism for young students. In 1907, an official school course on “national upbringing” was introduced to government schools. By 1912, the inculcation of nationalism became an official “topic” of textbooks like *Manāhij al-Adab* which explicitly modeled their approach on Western “civics” courses designed for primary and secondary school students. In this particular textbook, the rights and responsibilities of students towards their government and nation are spelled out through dialogues, enumerated lists, and summaries. The textbook includes exercises with questions like “How are the family and the nation similar?” and “Why are justice and goodness meaningless without the national collective (*al-jamʿiyya al-waṭaniyya*)?” Meanwhile, the 1913 curriculum for higher level schools included suggested compositions on topics such as organization, orderliness, and obedience to the powers that be.

Interestingly, government schools were not the only educational institutions using literacy training to further written practices that were deemed in the public interest. In a 1909 report, the Council of Religious Scholars of Alexandria described their efforts to incorporate *inshāʾ*, among other subjects, into their curriculum. For elementary school children, their goal was to get these students accustomed to writing

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576 For example, Peltier, *Al-Qawl al-Muntakhab fi al-Tarbiya wa-l-Adab* [The Select Word in Education and Morals], 41–42.


578 Given that by 1914 the book was already in its 5th edition, it was probably in use from around 1909. However, I only found records of purchase from the Ministry of Education starting in 1912. DWQ, Majlis al-Wuzarāʾ Niẓārat al-Maʿārif, Box 8, Folder 31 (#0075-064540). “Kashf,” May 1912. Also, see the course work for “moral and national education” (*al-akhlāq wa-l-tarbiya al-waṭaniyya*) in the 1927 curriculum for primary schools. Ministry of Education, *Manhaj al-Taʾlim al-Ittihādī li-l-Banīn*, 9–11.


580 Ibid., 1:131.

“about general matters” by their fifth year. In the final exam, advanced elementary school students were asked to write on “the place of the religious sciences in the social sphere and what is required to preserve it by peoples who care of the felicity in this world and the next.” One of the exam questions for secondary school students was:

A people without righteousness are miserable. In opposition to the teaching of Islam with regards to the principles of culture and civilization, some of the Islamic nations have fallen behind in their civilization. What is your opinion in this matter …

In no less than 10 lines, students were asked to expound on their vision of civilization, the decline of Islamic nations, and the role of religion in society. It was a tall order. However, it was obviously the kind of written discourse that this religious institution wished its students to engage in.

How many students who had written essays on religion and society, women’s education, or the centrality of the nation went on to follow these debates in the national press, write a letter to an editor, or decide to publish a written work expressing their own views? It is impossible to say. Unfortunately, students who did become teachers themselves, business people, bureaucrats, journalists, homemakers, or a myriad of other professions did not generally self-identify their written production or their reading practices as an extension of their school work.

However, we do have at least one example. In 1907, a recent school graduate by the name of Amir Mu’min al-Attar, wrote a short work called *Ayat al-Insha’ wa Hikmat*.

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583 Ibid., 54.

584 Ibid.
al-Munshiʿīn. He dedicates his work to the nationalist leader Mustafa Kamil who had championed education and whose boy’s school he had attended. Attar consciously positions his work “as the first production that has appeared from one of the students of [Kamil’s] majestic school.” The eclectic range of topics covered (over 60) and their relative brevity (usually no more than 2 short pages) suggests the possibility that this work was a revised version of Attar’s own classroom work. In fact, his book reads like a series of subjects that a teacher may assign: descriptions of places, letters between a father and son, the good character of famous figures in Islamic history, etc. However, the works also reflect the particular bent of a school founded by Mustafa Kamil. In addition to the pervasive theme of strengthening the nation, Attar also touches upon several educational issues that were points of contention between Egyptian nationalists and the British administrators of the country; in particular, the use of Arabic as a language of instruction in schools and the importance of adequate and affordable schools.

However, the most intriguing aspect of Attar’s work is the way in which he addresses other students and their future roles as producers of the written word. Attar frames the act of writing and publishing this kind of a work as an obligation he owed his nation, his language, and the sons of his people. Spreading the knowledge of writing to students “who wish to become men of writing” was a service that other students could in turn use and propagate as they too join the ranks of writers, poets,

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586 Ibid., 15, 18–19.
587 Ibid., 2.
letter-writers, and essayists. The “scribal” connotation of “writing” completely disappears; students are expected to compose for themselves in service of the nation and its people, rather than to compose for others in service of parochial interests. In his closing advice on writing, Attar gives the standard recommendations to read and memorize works of great literature and study the mechanics of language. However, he also asserts that the basis of the art of composition is in “knowing the situations of the people, being aware of the events of the day and what goes on at night.” In other words, in order to become a writer who “is celebrated by his compatriots and whose writing is cherished by loved ones,” writers must be able to speak about the events surrounding them.

Although Attar’s work is one example, it was probably not an isolated one. This particular student, excited with his new knowledge, had the means and connections to publish his first foray into writing. It is not unconceivable that many others also took their “writing” lessons to heart and began using their skills to articulate their views about the world around them. If the sheer volume of petitions written by the individual and groups of students discussed in Chapter 3 is any indication, students were not shy about using their writing skills to complain about grades, school regulations, unfair exams, and unreasonable teachers. It stands to reason, that these new cadres of

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588 Ibid., 3.
589 Ibid., 109.
590 Ibid., 110.
591 See the introductory reviews which indicate that he came from an important family with relations in al-Azhar and beyond.
592 At least 2 boxes in the Abdīn collection are dedicated to the petitions of students that were directed to the Sultan, mostly between 1902 and 1925 (Box 482 and 483). In addition there are several boxes
schooled children impacted the wider discussions circulating in the Egyptian public sphere.

**Conclusion**

In order to continue my examination of the development of public practices of writing, in this chapter I explored the history and growth of a particular kind of literary genre, school composition (*inshā’*), and its wider influence on writing practices. In pursuit of a simpler and more functional conception of the Arabic language, a wide variety of educational institutions began incorporating general language classes in place of the traditional system that focused on mastery of the finer aspects of the Arabic language. Specifically, the “reformed” Arabic of education allowed for a more “functional literacy,” with a focus on results and basic skills. However, this “functional literacy” also encouraged students to deploy their newfound skills beyond the confines of their schools. These changing methods of instruction influenced wider literacy practices by not only teaching students to write in schools, but also reinforcing certain types of interactions through the written word in the public sphere.

Historians of modern Egypt regularly cite the importance of the new, government schooling system in changing the fabric of Egyptian society. The “new elite” these schools produced are often seen as the fashioners, revolutionaries, and

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regarding petitions to enter particular schools, requesting the waiver of fees, and from students of al-Azhar.
drivers of the political, economic, and social changes that the country was going through at the turn of the century. However, little is actually known about how the education that they (and many others in religious, private, and foreign schools) received influenced the larger changes in the political and social system of Egyptian society. In other words, how did the “new” education of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century change the course of student’s lives and, in turn, that of the nation? In this chapter, I propose an answer: that we must look not only at education itself, but also at how the very fabric of instruction was designed, executed, and ultimately deployed. At the most basic level, both “modern” and “traditional” schools were introducing fundamental changes to how they taught Arabic language. They were emphasizing “practical” instruction, structuring lessons and exams around the skill of composition, and training students how to think, read, and write about their society. They were introducing particular literacy practices to a new generation of students. Ultimately, the power of these newfound skills was in their mutability. They allowed this diverse group of ex-schoolchildren to express themselves in increasingly public ways, respond to social and political debates, and assert their own (and their learned) attitudes about the future of the country.

Chapter 6
Illiteracy and the Discourse of Reform

Introduction

In 1944, when the Egyptian Ministry of Education set out for the second time to eliminate illiteracy in Egypt, they took special care in detailing every aspect of how to achieve mahw al-ʾummiyya, literally, “erasing illiteracy.” According to the Ministry documents, this erasure was nothing less than a national necessity: all attempts to reform Egyptian society failed because of the high rate of illiteracy. The Ministry instructed a legion of new teachers how to progress from single letters to words, what to write on the classroom board, and how to create a quantifiable record of literacy. The physicality, tools, and measurability of the transition from a state of illiteracy to literacy became paramount. So for example, the traditional slate boards (lawḥ, pl. alwāḥ) could only be used for the first ten weeks of the two year program and only as a precursor to the more stable tools of notebook and pen. The lawḥ was for the unpracticed hand and for the earliest attempts at writing. The notebook was for the “final” drafts and for

594 Laws passed in both 1944 and 1946 called for new initiatives on mahw al-ʾummiyya and mukāfiḥat al-ʾummiyya (erasing illiteracy and combating illiteracy). The details that emerged by 1947: The Ministry of Education, in addition to publishing a proclamation on how to fight illiteracy aimed to also provide financial incentive and training for teachers, new curricula, and more schools. DWQ, Abdīn, Box 236, “al-Taʾlim,” Folder 18 (#0069-004627). “Mudhakira” from the General Administration for Elementary Education and Combating Illiteracy, 29 March 1947.
materials that needed to be saved. As early as 1900, the Ministry had been advocating the use of notebooks, specifically because they could be subject to inspection at a moment’s notice.\(^{597}\) Instead of the transitory nature of the lawḥ – what was written and wiped away was gone forever—the notebook could serve as a written record of the lessons and dictations of the classroom. The concerns of the 1944 campaign were not new. From the late nineteenth century through the first part of the twentieth century, Egyptians started to view illiteracy as a fundamental problem of their society and were increasingly seeking bureaucratic solutions.

It is significant that the 1944 government initiative, like those before and after, was framed primarily as a campaign to eliminate illiteracy and not to spread literacy. Up until this point, we have been examining the contested nature of literacies in Egyptian culture, their relationships to political and social movements, gender and class dynamics, and the Arabic that appeared in classrooms and the public sphere. However, the more powerful discourse for the everyday realities of state education was literacy’s converse: illiteracy or ummiyya. The two opposing concepts—literacy and ummiyya—have very different pedigrees in Egyptian and Muslim society. There is no single word for literacy in Arabic. The phrase that corresponds most closely to a conventional definition of literacy was “fluency in reading and writing” (\textit{al-ilm\text{"a}m bi-l-qir\text{"a}a wa-l-kit\text{"a}ba}). This skill-base description of literacy is in contrast to the very rich and varied concept of ummiyya that had developed over centuries. However, as the twentieth century progressed, ummiyya became synonymous with increasingly narrow

\(^{597}\) Ministry of Education, \textit{Br\üjrâm al-Ta’lîm al-Ibtidā’î wa Br\üjrâm al-Ta’lîm al-Thânî}, 14.
and negative definitions. Ummiyya became the anti-literacy. And it was this anti-literacy, a definition that could be both measurable and actionable, that served as the backbone of a series of new reforms aimed at combating ummiyya.

With the growth of bureaucratic structures able to enumerate and define “official literacy,” literacy and illiteracy entered the public consciousness as part of a discourse of reform. Reforming Egyptian society had been a long-standing goal of activists across the political spectrum. However, the idea that the fundamental skills of reading and writing were central to the problems facing the country was new. With the advent of census figures and statistical aggregates that could tell a story of the nation in just a few numbers, literacy and illiteracy rates became a key touchstone for development, improvement, and reform. In this, the Egyptian case was not unlike what had happened in parts of Europe and North America in the nineteenth century. Literacy and illiteracy become part of an ideological discourse: “within an increasingly schooled society, literacy was equated with morality, economic prospects, and civic virtue. Illiteracy was paired with the opposites: criminality, poverty, and political apathy.” 598 Ultimately, this discourse became central to the creation of a compulsory mass educational system and to the successive attempts to rid Egyptians of their ummiyya.

Yet, even as this discourse of reform was aimed at improving the nation as a whole, its impacts were felt at the individual level. Combating ummiyya, while ideologically about the nation, in practice was squarely a person by person initiative. Each child who was not in school, each adult who could not write, and each community

598 Collins and Blot, Literacy and Literacies, 23.
without proper facilities was contributing to the problems of the nation. The fight against ummiyya had the power to mobilize the government in ways that created opportunities for many more of its citizens. The ability to read and write became a right of all Egyptians, not just the few who could afford or had access to “schooling.” However, the narrowing definition of literacy and ummiyya also had a negative side. Even as it created opportunities for many, “school literacy” became channeled through increasingly intrusive governmental and institutional entities. The flexibility of a multiplicity of literacies, where to attain it, and the kind of educated person it produced were lost.

This chapter traces the creation of the idea of ummiyya as a fundamental part of social reforms in Egypt. In the process, I will be touching upon several larger issues about literacy and illiteracy: the way in which their definitions shifted over time, their connection to state and bureaucratic ordering of society, and their centrality to creating a “schooled” society. In order to undertake this examination, I will be starting with the definition of ummiyya and how it was changing at the turn of the century. I will then turn to one of the main drivers for this change: the “counting” of illiteracy through the Egyptian census. Finally, I will examine the results of the discourse of reform that surrounded the new meanings of ummiyya, mainly the growth of the compulsory educational system and successive attempts to rid Egyptian society of illiteracy. I intend to show that, with its negative connotation, the construction of illiteracy was just as important as that of literacy.
The Boundaries of *Ummiya*

In the last third of the nineteenth century, the issues of literacy and illiteracy were not a priority for reform-minded Egyptians. Rather two other concepts were seen as paramount to the success of the country: the ability to spread *ʿilm* (knowledge) and fight *jahl* (ignorance). During this period, the idea of *ʿilm* was expansive, encompassing the “new” sciences of the West as well as the more “traditional” Islamic sciences of the Muslim world. As such, when Egypt’s first educational journal, *Rawdat al-Madāris*, appeared in 1872, it focused on *ʿilm* in its widest sense. Furthermore, although the journal was ostensibly aimed at the attendees of the new set of government schools, one got the sense that its editors were in fact addressing an idealized version of what an educated person should be. The possessors of *ʿilm* would be interested in astronomy and geography, the intricacies of biology or chemistry, as well literature and the Arabic language. The Egyptian government of the 1870s, as represented by *Rawdat al-Madāris*, aspired to the lofty goal of imparting this kind of *ʿilm* to all of the children of the schools; a grand objective, if not for the fact that only a few thousand students were in schools under government supervision. By the 1920s and 1930s, ambitious plans to spread *ʿilm* were replaced by a focus on combating *ummiyya*. For an expanding bureaucracy, combating *ummiyya* proved to be essential to nationalist aspirations, in large measure because eradicating illiteracy, in contrast to spreading knowledge, could

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600 For a chart of some of the various types of articles in the journal see Ibid., 114, Figure 1.

be achieved with the kind of basic education better suited for a mass educational system.

In order for this shift to occur, a particular definition of ummiyya had to become predominant. The words ummiyya and ummi (the word generally used for one who is illiterate or unlettered) were in wide use from at least the dawn of Islam. The term ummi appears in the Quran in several places, in reference to groups of people as well as the Prophet Mohammad. However, the label ummi had different connotations in each case. The Qur’an directly addresses itself to the “people of the book,” Jews and Christians, who had received divine revelation, as well as the pagan Arabs who were sometimes referred to as an ummi or illiterate people. Although the Arabs did have a written tradition and a rudimentary script, unlike their Christian and Jewish neighbors, they were ummi because, prior to the Qur’an, they had no written law or guidance from the divine. They were “illiterate” in what mattered most to the Qur’anic narrative. In contrast, Muslims have tended to interpret the Qur’anic references to the Prophet Muhammad as the illiterate or unlettered prophet (al-nabī al-ummī) to literally to mean that he could neither read nor write. Yet even this definition has been subject to much debate, with conflicting reports indicating that perhaps he could read, but not

603 Qur’ān 62:2.
604 Qur’ān 7:157-158.
605 This interpretation seems to have solidified during the second Islamic century. See Isaiah Goldfeld, “The Illiterate Prophet (Nabī Ummī): An Inquiry into the Development of a Dogma in Islamic Tradition,” *Der Islam* 57 (1980).
write, or that he was capable of both, but only after he had received the Quran.\textsuperscript{606}

Reports that the Prophet understood the written word and, even at times, edited written documents seem to indicate that his “illiteracy” was at the very least not absolute.\textsuperscript{607} In both the cases of communities and individuals, it is striking that while ummī certainly indicated a deficit of sorts, it did not imply a moral or intellectual deficiency. The Arabs were guided although ummī and the Prophet was the receptacle of revelation in spite of (perhaps even more miraculously due to) being illiterate.\textsuperscript{608}

Additionally, the ummī of Muslim and particularly Sufi literature was more often than not a wise or knowledgeable figure. In fact, it was not unheard of for prominent sufi shaykhs to be described as ummī, an expression of their humble backgrounds and/or exclusion from the religious elite who had been schooled in “book” knowledge.\textsuperscript{609} Additionally, insomuch as ummiyya was a prophetic trait, it could be viewed as a positive emulation of the Prophetic example. As Adam Sabra has noted:

Clearly, for many Sufis in the late Mamluk and early Ottoman Egypt, Prophetic inspiration did not end with the Qur’an, but lived on in the

\textsuperscript{606} For a study of the written works ascribed to the Prophet and the early tradition of writing in Islam see Sarah Zubair Mirza, “Oral Tradition and Scribal Conventions in the Documents Attributed to the Prophet Muhammad” (University of Michigan, 2010).

\textsuperscript{607} Ibid., 180–181.

\textsuperscript{608} Ibn Khaldūn saw the Prophet’s ummiyya as in fact an expression of his perfection. See Éric Geoffroy, “Une Grande Figure de Saint Ummî: Le Cheikh ’Alî al-Khawwās (m. 939/1532),” in The Development of Sufism in Mamluk Egypt, ed. Richard McGregor and Adam Sabra (Le Caire: Institut français d’archéologie orientale, 2006), 169.

\textsuperscript{609} Two examples are Alī Khawwās (d. 1532/3), the teacher of ʿAbd al-Wahhāb al-Shirʿrānī (d.1565) and ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz al-Mahdawī (d. 1224) Ibn ʿArabī’s teacher. Gerald T. Elmore, “Shaykh ʿAbd al-ʿ Azīz al-Mahdawī, Ibn al-ʿArabī’s Mentor,” Journal of the American Oriental Society 121, no. 4 (December 2001): 604–605; Geoffroy, “Une Grande Figure de Saint Ummî: Le Cheikh ʿAlî al-Khawwās (m. 939/1532).”

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persons of inspired figures whose lack of literacy and formal education only underlined their connection with the Prophet.610

Stemming from the root word for mother (um),611 ummiyya could be seen as a “spiritual virginity”612 in the mold of the Prophet Muhammad. So, for example, the great thinker and theologian Muhyi al-Din Ibn Arabi saw ummiyya as a primordial state which allowed a more perfect knowledge of the divine to emerge. Ibn Arabi valorized what he called al-ʾilm al-ummī, or unlettered knowledge.613 This knowledge came from direct experience of the divine, without the mediation of human reason or thought. As such, ummiyya represented a state of innocence and purity, a clean slate without the clutter of temporal “words” or knowledge.

The idea that ummiyya could represent a pristine state of being was even echoed by one of Egypt’s leading educators of the late nineteenth century. Ḥamza Fath Allah, an Arabic teacher at Dar al-ʿUlm and later an inspector for the Ministry of Education, describes the ummiyya of the Arabs this way:

Do not assume that the reason for the preponderance of ummiyya among the majority of Arabs or the austerity of the Bedouin is due to inability or the lack of means. Rather their extreme intelligence … is the reason for their abstention from writing and their reluctance to engage in it …614

By connecting the lack (or rather, active avoidance) of writing to their austere material culture, Fath Allah implies that the Arabs had no need for writing because of their

611 Edward Lane, “Um,” Arabic-English Lexicon (London: Williams & Norgate, 1863), 92.
612 Geoffroy, “Une Grande Figure de Saint Ummî: Le Cheikh ʿAlî al-Khawwâs (m. 939/1532),” 168.
simple civilizational needs. Rather, they had enough natural intelligence cultivated without pen and paper that reading and writing was not a necessity for the majority of them. It is an interesting argument, particularly since just a few decades later, the Ministry of Education would declare an all-out war against this simple and natural state of being in the name of modernizing Egypt. The idea that ummiyya was anything less than a societal blight, holding Egypt back, would not have occurred to the twentieth century reformer.

Indeed, for many late nineteenth century Egyptian thinkers and reformers, the true social enemy was not ummiyya. Rather it was the opposite of 'ilm: jahl or ignorance. The example of Abdullah Nadim (1844-1896), the journalist and outspoken political and social critic, is particularly instructive. He was one of the early public writers to advocate for widespread literacy and education in Egypt.615 As purveyor of two of Egypt’s first independent journals, Al-Tankit wa-l-Tabkit (1881-1882) and Al-Ustadh (1892-1893), he was supremely concerned with the reading public and access to the written word. Nadim advocated strongly for the supremacy of proper (fusḥa) Arabic language in official capacities and the school system.616 However, he actively defended his decision to write and publish some of his articles in Egyptian colloquial as a stop-gap measure to make his words accessible to more people. He wanted all children to learn to read and write, but he viewed it as a skill that should be achieved in the context

615 For more about his efforts see Herrera, “The Soul of a Nation.”
616 “Al-Lugha wa-l-Insāḥ,” 179–180; “Ra’ay Jumhūr min al-Afāḍīl,” Al-Ustādh 1, no. 11 (November 1, 1892): 244.
of learning a trade, not as an end in itself.\textsuperscript{617} The problem of \textit{ummiyya} was a subset of the general malaise of the society: “knowledge is very weak amongst us; it [the knowledge we have] does not protect us from superstitious and silly thoughts and our love for the people of \textit{jahāl} [ignorance] and doing everything that they say. This is due to the pervasive \textit{ummiyya} amongst us.”\textsuperscript{618} The idea of \textit{ummiyya} certainly indicated a shortcoming or deficiency, although not necessarily an individual’s inability to read or write. Rather, in Nadim’s depiction, the deficiency was \textit{jahāl} in the form of a lack of discernment; the failure to distinguish what was useful and true from what was harmful and false.\textsuperscript{619}

For Nadim the true culprit in Egyptian backwardness was the larger problem of \textit{jahāl}. In his writings, he focused on the superstitions and ignorance of the average Egyptian, seeing it as the primary burden hampering Egypt’s advancement.\textsuperscript{620} In Nadim’s play \textit{al-Wā’tān}, a personification of the nation talks to people from various walks of life trying to encourage them to improve the country.\textsuperscript{621} The main character decries the \textit{jahāl} of the average Egyptian, not just in the \textit{‘ilm} of books and sciences, but also in industry, trade crafts, and personal interactions. “The Nation” cries over its people because \textit{jahāl} causes disunity in the nation, allows injustices to prevail, and weakens the society as a whole. In fact, going “towards” \textit{jahāl} was a form of betrayal to

\textsuperscript{617} “Dārs Tadhīb,” \textit{Al-Tanḵīt wa-l-Tabkīt} 1, no. 4 (July 3, 1881): 55.
\textsuperscript{618} “Māmātak min Āṣlamak li-l-Jahālā,” \textit{Al-Tanḵīt wa-l-Tabkīt} 1, no. 11 (August 21, 1881): 174.
\textsuperscript{619} Ibid., 174–175.
\textsuperscript{620} “Taghfīla wa-Jahālahu,” \textit{Al-Tanḵīt wa-l-Tabkīt} 1, no. 10 (August 15, 1881): 162; “Māmātak min Āṣlamak li-l-Jahālā,” 173–175.
\textsuperscript{621} All that has survived of the play is the portion that was published in ‘Abd Allah Nādīm, \textit{Sulāfat al-Nādīm fī Muntakhabāt al-Sayyīd ‘Abd Allah al-Nādīm}, vol. 2 (Miṣr: Māṭba‘at Hindāyah, 1901), 33–63.
the nation, with reform only possible if jahl is forced to die.622 The solution is establishing more schools and focusing on economic industries. In the words of the title character: “knowledge is in the schools and the workshops.”623 Widespread education was part of the solution,624 however, the particular skills of reading and writing were just a few of the many skills that Egyptians needed to acquire.

Significantly, for Egyptians, jahl had none of the potential ambiguities associated with illiteracy. In 1896, the literary journal al-Hilal proposed a question to their readers: “Is the position of women raised higher by knowledge or money?”625 In their defense of knowledge (ʿilm), many of the readers who wrote to al-Hilal argued over the appropriateness of different types of literacy for women: literacy that was taught in school, reading or writing foreign language, etc. However, whether arguing from secular or religious positions, many writers expressed their dismay at women’s jahl being left untouched.626 For some, a woman could be completely illiterate, but if she was taught the useful ʿilm of housework, she would not be considered “ignorant.”627 In a similar tone, a set of 1899 letters to the journal al-Jāmiʿa al-ʿUthmāniyya, while often expressing reservation about the type of education women receive, nevertheless,
generally thought that women should be people of ʿilm (ʿālimāt), not people of jahl (jāhilāt).628

Of course, not knowing how to read or write could be a form of jahl. An article in the children’s journal, al-Samir al-Saghir, referred to mothers who were jāhilat al-qirāʿa, or ignorant of reading.629 Unlike their literate sisters, these women could neither read the proper moral and educational books, nor teach their young children to read. Yet, even these illiterate women had a responsibility to learn what they did not know (mā tajhalahu)—presumably by other means—in order to benefit themselves and their families. Inversely, those who could read or write were not necessarily free of jahl. Nabawiyya Musa thought that a girl who learned the basics of homemaking, sewing, reading, and writing in Arabic was still “ignorant” because she did not have the requisite knowledge to expand her mind.630 Others would argue that “simple reading” would not make a person less ignorant.631 In fact, the “wrong” kind of reading could be morally corrupting and thereby increase a woman’s jahl.632 In other words, jahl was more fundamental to a person’s circumstances and values than the ability or inability to read or write.

628 “Taʿlīm al-Banāt,” 82. Also see “Taʿlīm al-Banāt.”
629 “Tadbīr al-Manzil.”
630 Mūsā, Al-Marʿa wa-l-ʿAmal, 39–41.
632 See discussion in Chapter 4.
Counting Ummiya

Over the first half of the twentieth century, the idea of ummiyya began to change on two interrelated levels. First, it became synonymous with the inability to read and write and, by extension, became the inverse of a narrow, skill-based definition of literacy. One of the ways to track the promotion of this particular definition of illiteracy is to follow its development through the process of enumerating illiterates in the Egyptian census. On a second level, the process of counting ummiyya, in turn, produced data and reports that fueled public awareness of ummiyya as a type of anti-literacy. As a result, both bureaucrats and reformers would see this anti-literacy as having social consequences far beyond the ummi individuals themselves. Increasingly, ummiyya began to take on moral shades of meaning similar to jahl, in the sense that ummiyya became a social scourge that expressed itself through the ignorance of an uneducated individual, not simply a descriptive adjective of ability.

In Timothy Mitchell’s work, Colonizing Egypt, he describes the process by which the colonial and local bureaucracies in Egypt were increasingly interested in ordering Egyptian society on every level. Applying Michele Foucault’s ideas on disciplinary power, Mitchell argues that the Egyptian government of the late nineteenth century was engaged in “modern strategies of control … to infiltrate, re-order, and colonize.”633 However, bureaucratic attempts to re-order the educational system, public hygiene, and even the fabric of the urban landscape required detailed information on the population it wished to supervise. By 1897, the census bureau became a permanent

633 Mitchell, Colonizing Egypt, 35.
fixture of the government with the hope that accurate censuses would allow the state to undertake reforms more efficiently. As was noted in a circular distributed by the 1917 census:

The information collected by the Census permits the Government to find out whether its action in the past has been profitable to the country; to throw light on points that demand its particular attention, to avert and remedy possible mistakes and injustice, to ascertain the needs of the people and to endeavour to satisfy them. Thus the country will progress and rank with the other civilized countries.  

By 1927, the government used newspapers and even mosque Friday sermons to encourage people to do their duty to the nation by cooperating with the census.  

The history of census data gathering and use often mirrored the intent of those who ordered the massive government initiative. The French during their brief occupation attempted a census of all individuals in Egypt in 1801 as an extension of their “cataloguing” of Egyptian life. Muhammad Ali (ruler from 1805-1840), as early as 1821, used the number of homes as an estimate of population and by the 1848 census, the Egyptian government began counting individuals, primarily to levy taxes and conscript troops. Starting with the 1882 census, the government began implementing European methods and shifted away from data on individuals to

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634 Egypt, *The Census of Egypt Taken in 1917*, xxvii.  
aggregates on the village, provincial, and national level. So instead of maintaining detailed information about a local widow and her children, one family’s information became a part of a wider picture about the nation as a whole. While earlier nineteenth century attempts to gather information were part of a “policing” of sorts (to determine who owes the government what), the aggregation of data displayed another type of discursive power: the use of statistics. In a sense, the individual faded away. What was important was what the census said about the nation as whole.

This emphasis on statistical knowledge is clearly evident in how literacy was measured during the first half of the twentieth century. Prior to 1897, censuses did not record literacy rates. However, according to a survey of the census registers from the 1840s to the 1870s conducted by Kenneth Cuno and Michael Reimer, at least some records included information about whether or not children were in the traditional schools (kuttābs), working, or unemployed. Although school attendance was not a direct measure of reading and writing ability, this gives us an indication of what was important to the census-takers: the economic activity which children engaged in, and not their abilities or educational level. In contrast, starting in 1897, the census began tracking the ratio of ummiyya explicitly under the banner of gauging the nation’s level of education or “cultivation and refinement” (al-tathqīf wa-l-tahdhīb). In fact, the

639 For other examples of the import of statistical knowledge to the state bureaucracy see Mitchell, Rule of experts; For a discussion on the census in particular see El Shakry, The Great Social Laboratory, 150–153.
641 This was the title of the literacy section for the 1907 census. Egypt, The Census of Egypt Taken in 1907 (Cairo: National Printing Department, 1909).
censuses of the first half of the twentieth century divided the population along only one measure of education: those who can read and write and those who were ummi. The illiteracy rate became one of only three variables, along with gender and religion, which would be consistently tracked in the census for the next one hundred years.  

Exactly how ummiyya was measured differed over the years. Yet, one thing remained relatively consistent: censuses used a narrow definition of literacy (the ability to read and write) as a way to determine the population’s intellectual capital. By extension ummiyya was defined in comparable terms and the ambiguities of literacy (its uses, knowing how to read but not write, etc.) were all subsumed in the statistical dichotomy of literate versus ummi. For the 1897 and 1907 censuses it is unclear just how census takers determined whether a person was literate or ummi. The 1897 census only gave the final counts for those who could “read and write” and those who could not. The 1907 census, which was closely based on the 1897 one, also simply asked if individuals “have knowledge of reading and writing or not.” Interestingly, the 1907 census used the terms “reader” and “educated” interchangeably for the term literate, while those who were illiterate (and presumably not readers or educated) were simply labeled ummi. The 1917 census was more specific in its definition of literacy. Each census taker was instructed to pose two questions to each person, especially women and

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children over the age of five: in they can read a printed paper fluently and if they could write a short letter by themselves or from dictation. In asking these two questions separately, the original census forms would have identified individuals who were able to perhaps read but not necessarily write. However, in the final coding and reporting, these alternative modes of literacy disappeared. Unlike post-1960 censuses that included various educational levels (primary, secondary, etc.), the Egyptian populous was divided into two groups: the “readers and writers” or simply “readers” in one grouping and the ummiyya in the other.

The reports that resulted from these censuses did not go unnoticed. In the first place, the census bureau actively used newspapers to disseminate information about an upcoming census. In turn, when the reports became public, newspapers would publish the results with much fanfare. In 1927, al-Ahrām even conducted a contest among its readership to guess the final total population. Meanwhile, the literacy rate, since it was first measured, has continued to be a subject of intense interest and apprehension. Two analyses that were offered after the 1897 census are emblematic.

644 Egypt, The Census of Egypt Taken in 1917, xl, xliv. For some reason the English translations of these French instructions did not include the emphasis on asking women directly.
645 Ibid., Census Form No. 2.
646 See Chapter 4 for a more detailed discussion of this type of literacy.
647 It is a little ambiguous what designation was attached to those with only one of the literacy skills. There is a suggestion in the way the coding was suggested to change for the following years that those who could “read only” or “write only” were considered literate. Egypt, The Census of Egypt Taken in 1917, xlvi.
650 The bemoaning of the illiteracy rates of the country seems to be a fairly regular occurrence for newspapers. “Al-Ilṣā’ al-Miṣrī”; ʿAbd Allah Imām, “86 ’Āmān min al-Ḥarb Ǧidd al-Ḥaṣa,” Rūz al-
of the grave concerns that were voiced by many in the educated classes (and particularly those invested in the newspaper business). An article that appeared in the women’s journal *Anis al-Jalis* estimated that there were 3 million adult women in Egypt, of which only 31,900 could read.651 Furthermore, the census measured only the simplest kind of reading, not “that which could remove *jahl* or turn away harm.”652 The author of the article feared there were perhaps no more than 100 women in a million who could read well enough to be considered learned. Furthermore, the article continued, although the newspapers have been reporting the dismal statistics for both men and women, the leaders of the country, the shaykhs of Azhar, and the populous in general seemed complacent. With this “deadly *jahl*” prevalent in Egypt, people needed to demand that more education be provided for citizens.653 A parallel article in the journal *al-Bayān* was equally alarmed.654 The 9,266,519 *ummī* in Egypt represented the “most obscene kind of *jahl*” which was not seen in countries that have awakened to “modern civilization.” It was the government’s duty to lead people out of the darkness of “*jahl* and *ummiyya*” or risk leading the country to “a quick decay and complete destruction.”

*Ummiyya* was no longer an individual’s problem. Aggregated to the national level, literacy statistics framed *ummiyya* as an obvious social problem on par with the dangers of *jahl*.

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651 According to the final official census report that appeared after this article 10,264 and 24,930 foreign women could read and write. “*Nisāʾunā wa-l-Qirāʾ,*” 13.
652 Ibid., 14.
653 Ibid.
654 “Al-Iḥṣāʾ al-旻īrī.”
With the emphasis on ummiyya as the opposite (and negative) of literacy, ummiyya entered the lexicon of reformist thought in a thoroughly new way. An example can be seen in the writing of Labiba Hāshim. In more than one place in her book on education, she uses the term “ummiyya jāhila” or “jāhila ummiyya.” She deploys this compound descriptor to depict women who either have gone to school or have learned perhaps to embroider, play the piano, and speak a foreign language, but who nevertheless make poor decisions or act inappropriately. In other words, these “learned” women were no better than ignorant illiterates. In this usage, being ummiī is a marker of someone who is ignorant and does not know any better, not necessarily someone who simply cannot read or write. Ummiyya becomes the antithesis of the kind of conduct and society a reformer like Hāshim wished to encourage.

Similarly, as reformers across the political spectrum began to employ a discourse of reform, the problem of ummiyya started moving to the fore. In particular, the intrawar years of the 1920s and 1930s saw the increased focus of government initiatives on the three ills of Egyptian society: poverty, jahl, and disease. Ummiyya played a role in each. If more of the Egyptian populous could use the written word to their benefit they would make better decisions, achieve more material success, and allow the nation as a whole to move forward. In a 1946 report, the Ministry of Education described its efforts to fight illiteracy as an essential part of national reform. The ability to read and write was seen as a sort of social, economic, and moral panacea;

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655 Hāshim, Kitab fī al-Tarbiya.
656 Ibid., 6, 9.
without literacy “every effort to put forth reforms is ruined.” Whereas Ibn Arabī coupled ummiyya with the ideals of ʿilm, for the twentieth century reformer, ummiyya was more likely to be associated with jahl.

**Implications of Anti-Literacy Ummiyya**

For a community that still valued memorization and oral skills, the push to see ummiyya as a fundamental deficiency had profound effects on certain segments of the society. As an example, it was always possible in Muslim societies to be ummī (illiterate in the written sense), but still be educated. Particularly, in the realm of religious education, the physicality of reading from a page, while important, tended to serve as a complement to the primarily oral nature of texts and teaching. The Qur’an had always been considered a “recitation” first, and only second as a physical “book.” Knowledge of import, whether the technicalities of Islamic law or the subtleties of Sufī spirituality, was ideally transmitted from teacher to student directly; books and reading materials served as supplementary aides. Succinct tracts of poetry in everything from grammar to theology were meant to be memorized by the student, while the teacher expounded and explained their meanings. In this system, the written and oral traditions worked hand in hand, allowing for a spectrum of literacy to flourish.

As an example of the different kinds of literacy that could co-exist, one can look at the 1915 petition of a group of religious functionaries who were employed as reciters

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659 Messick, *The calligraphic state*, 90–92; Boyle, “Memorization and Learning in Islamic Schools.”
at one of the royal graves at the mosque of ʿUmar ibn al-Fāriḍ. Signatures are a notoriously unreliable way to gauge literacy. However, as an exploration of plausible kinds of literacies, we can use the diversity of signatures as a possible indication of the range of writing abilities. In this particular petition, at least 3 of the 13 signatures had very shaky penmanship. The signature of one ʿAbd Allah Ahmed al-Far was polished with a flourish in the shaping of the first name. However, the lines are shaky, indicating that perhaps writing was difficult or had become difficult with age or due to some other infirmary. In contrast, the signature of ʿAbd Allah al-Janrārilī (or Jazāyirlī) was child-like, without the sophistication and simplicity of the naskh script, a script that was usually taught once students completed the basics of Arabic orthography. Most of the signatures accompanied a personal stamp or seal, each bearing the name of an individual. However, several of the names that accompany these stamps look like they may have been written by the same writer—an ambiguity which tells us very little about the writing ability of these reciters, other than they chose not to write by hand. In other words, of this group of thirteen ʿulamāʾ, some signed their names, others made their marks, yet others signed with difficulty, and at least one had very basic written training.

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660 These reciters would be commissioned (usually through a religious endowment) to read the Qurʾan or religious texts at a particular grave and dedicate the blessings of the recitation to the soul of the deceased. In this case, these reciters were entrusted to read the Qurʾan, Sahīḥ al-Bukhārī, and Dalāʾil al-Khayrāt. This would have been a respectable, although not particularly prestigious, position. DWQ, Abdīn, Box 502, Folder 3 (#0069-009968). Letter 7 (7 January 1915).

661 The use of signatures to estimate European literacy rates have undergone a lot of scrutiny. In the Egyptian case during this period, there was no official need to use signatures on government documents relating to individuals (for marriage, court appearances, etc.). Even the use of a stamp to make an individual’s mark was not an indication of illiteracy, since owning a stamp could just as easily be an indication of high status.
The signatures potentially indicate a wide range of written literacies, although all would have been considered educated.

It is not inconceivable that at least some of these reciters represented one end of the literacy spectrum that had particularly a lot to lose from the anti-literacy definition of ummiyya: the blind. Blind youths were often encouraged to go into the religious sciences as a way of gaining a livelihood, and in so doing, often became more “literate” than many in their communities.\(^662\) Even those with minimal education, at the very least, could become professional reciters of the Qur’an and perhaps eek out an independent existence through their newfound “literacy”.\(^663\) As Sara Scalange has shown for the case of early modern Syria, blindness was often associated with special skills: powers of memorization, observation, and vocal expression.\(^664\) Of course not every blind or nearly-blind person was able to avail him or herself of these opportunities or had a natural aptitude. Nevertheless, on the whole, the blind seemed to have been well integrated into the intellectual cultures of their societies. According to the 1917 census, of the 68,381 males of all ages who were blind in both eyes, roughly half were employed and half of those worked in religious institutions—most probably as teachers

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\(^662\) Perhaps the most famous example (as well as exception to the rule) was the blind Taha Hussein, who chronicled his education in his autobiography Al-Ayyām. Although Hussien was originally encouraged to take the “traditional” route of religious education, he went on to become a noted public figure, university professor, writer, and government official. Also see the 1889 report which acknowledges Azhar’s ability to integrate these blind students. DWQ, Majlis al-Wuzarāʾ Nizārat al-Maʿārif, Box 4J, “Mawdūʿāt at Mukhtalifa,” Folder 19 (#0075-044028). Ministry of Education, “Rapports sur la Situation des Écoles des Filles des Aveugles et Sourds-Muets et de Cette de Rosette” (12 Feb 1889). For early modern examples see Sara Scalenghe, “Being Different: Intersexuality, Blindness, Deafness, and Madness in Ottoman Syria” (Georgetown University, 2008), 140–145.

\(^663\) As an example, a government report on the blind sections of some government kuttābs mention that the most useful study for these students was Qur’an, precisely for economic reasons. See DWQ, Majlis al-Wuzarāʾ Nizārat al-Maʿārif, Box 2, Folder 15 (#0075-043777). Ministry of Education, Taqrīr ‘an Hālat al-Katātīb fi Sanat 1902 (Cairo: Al-Maṭbaʿa al-Kubrā al-ʿAmīriyya, 1903), 10.

or reciters of the Quran.665 In fact, these religious institutions were the single largest area of employment for the blind. Blindness was most certainly not an automatic disqualifier for education or literacy.

However, the blind or otherwise disabled had a difficult time conforming to new standards of the twentieth century that put an emphasis on written skills. In fact, almost all the attempts to bring Egypt’s multilayered educational systems under government control contained a caveat: that all personnel (and in some case students) be “healthy of body and eyesight” (ṣaḥīḥ al-badan wa mubṣiran).666 It is a curious requirement considering the historical prominence of blindness in education. On the one hand, “wholesome bodies” were seen as an extension of moral and educational health.667 A blind teacher did not fit the model of the type of person that represented modern education: someone free of moral, mental, and physical defects.668 On the other hand, when written literacy became paramount, it is much harder to see a disability like blindness as anything short of a fundamental deficiency. To be blind was a priori to be

665 Egypt, The Census of Egypt Taken in 1917, 618–622.
666 Many of the new regulations for teachers in government schools as well as kuttabs under government inspection required teachers to undergo medical examinations. Eyesight was one of the criteria. The earliest example I found was from 1892. DWQ, Majlis al-Wuzurāʾ Niẓārat al-Maʿārif, Box 16, Folder 2 (#0075-045116). “Tarjama Lāʾiḥa” (16 July 1892).
667 See, for example, Wilson Chacko Jacob, Working Out Egypt: Effendi Masculinity and Subject Formation in Colonial Modernity, 1870–1940 (Duke University Press, 2010), Chapters 2 and 3.
668 One of the critiques of kuttāb education leveled by Lord Cromer was that these schools were “directed by teachers who are not in a few cases blind and almost illiterate.” Report on the Finances, Administration, and Condition of Egypt, and the Progress of Reforms (London: Harrison and Sons, 1896), 20.
Once ummiyya had no room for alternative types of knowledge or literacies, then blindness and the like became disenfranchising conditions.

This tension affected both employees and students. A 1923 petition by a group of blind Azhar students complained that medical exams prevented them from entering into teaching specializations at Azhar. In particular, they note that they, unlike their seeing brethren, are already limited in what they can do – they cannot undertake written or juridical duties—so they were requesting particular consideration to be allowed to teach, become imāms, and give sermons. They also cited the most famous exception: Taha Hussien, the blind educator and writer, who had received a doctorate in France and was lecturing at the Egyptian University (1919-1932) despite his blindness. Other such exceptions were made, for example in the 1913 case of a longtime Arabic teacher in a government school whose eyesight had weakened. He was allowed to continue teaching on the condition that he would be subject to additional medical exams, lest his eyesight weaken even further. As a general rule, being able to read and write became a fundamental part of the fitness of teachers and students. The anti-literacy dimension of ummiyya had consequences.

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669 Several attempts to create an Arabic Braille were attempted during this period, although none seemed to have really caught on. Oral and not book literacies were still the predominate way for the blind to integrate into scholarly or educated life. Lesley Kitchen Lababidi, *Silent No More: Special Needs People in Egypt* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2002), 8–9.

670 DWQ, Abdīn, Box 502, Folder 5 (#0069-009970), Letter # 12. 3 November 1923.

Combating Umniyya

The development of a mass educational system has been one of the quintessential hallmarks of the modern nation-state, with Egyptian initiatives towards centralized education coming at the tail end of a global process. European Enlightenment ideals that saw education as the key to perfecting both the individual and the society of which they were a part became almost universal by the end of the nineteenth century. Reformers in Egypt, as elsewhere, began advocating educational reforms as part of their vision for an improved society. Meanwhile, governments began a very deliberate process of centralizing every aspect of educational policy and thereby becoming the dominant educational provider for their populations. This push by reformers from one side and the pull of government centralization on the other made mass educational systems a foregone conclusion for modernizing societies. While some reformers may have called on individuals and local communities to create schooling opportunities for their children, by the early twentieth century, the assumption that central governments needed to provide schools, teachers, and curricula for their citizenship was assumed.

673 There are several dominant theories that seek to explain this expansion of mass schooling. For overview see Bruce Fuller, Growing-up Modern: The Western State Builds Third-World Schools (New York: Routledge, 1991), 29–60.
674 For an interesting example of the former see “Iqtirāḥ ‘alā al-ʿUlamāʾ.” Also see Muhammad ʿAbduh’s 1881 article, “What is the True Poverty of Nations.” He concludes his discussion a statement about the limits of government and calls upon the wealthy to support national growth. ʿAbduh, Al-ʿAʾmāl al-Kāmilā 3, 3:48.

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Egyptian bureaucrats and reformers saw educational policy as an important vehicle for what can only be called social engineering: a way to create the “proper” citizens, workers, mothers/fathers, and nationalists for Egypt’s future. The roots of this vision came from the nineteenth century Saint Simonian heritage in Egypt and the accompanying positivist view of social reform. Reformers influenced by this legacy (both within and outside the government) held that there existed scientific laws that governed a society and its development. A society could be transformed by gathering information and translating it into action through techno-bureaucratic management and regulation. Education was seen as an indispensable part of this formulation, a fundamental tool of reform that could be wielded to usher in modernization, economic prosperity, cultural changes, and even moral excellence.

What can be termed “schooled literacy” also played a special role in the centralizing of mass education, both as a measurable index and a sanctioned discourse. Education and literacy are notoriously hard to gauge. In Egypt, census questions that produced straightforward statistics on literacy were measured using inherently subjective measures like fluency in reading and the ability to write a short letter. However, institutional practices like school attendance were much easier to measure and regulate. Although literacy may have been one of the goals of mass educational systems, the efficacy of school systems could be measured in years of schooling and attendance rates. The presence of students in schools could then become

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675 For two recent studies looking on the affects of these schools of thought on modernization projects, see Abi-Mershed, Apostles of modernity; El Shakry, The Great Social Laboratory.
676 Collins and Blot, Literacy and Literacies, 74, 93–95.
a substitute for the standard definitions of literacy as reading and writing. If a child is in the right kind of school, they are literate; if not, they are not. Furthermore, in a state-run educational system, the kind of literacy in which students would engage was state-approved and monitored: “outside” literature, particularly if it was corrupting (politically, morally, or otherwise), was actively banned. In a way, accessing literacy outside of school created curricula was just as dangerous as illiteracy. A person in a state of ummiyya was not just removed from the abilities of reading and writing, they were removed from the literacy and schooling of a state-run educational system.

As Egyptians marched forth into the twentieth century, a new set of positivist projects to reform society on a national scale were undertaken. In the realm of education, a focus on combating illiteracy made these new initiatives quite different from previous attempts at educational reforms. Earlier educational projects were necessarily limited in scope due to a fundamental assumption that in a largely agrarian society, broad based government-sponsored education was only necessary for a small segment of society. Muhammad Ali opened a series of government schools to train military officers, medical staff, and bureaucrats, essentially promoting selective education in service of the state. Later reforms under his grandson, Ismail, included a more wide-ranging primary education for students and allowed a more diverse

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677 As we shall see in the discussion on Qur’an schools below, creating government schools that promoted “schooled literacy” required that kuttabs be co-opted.
678 The Qanūn Nizām al-Madāris that set forth the rules governing Egyptian government schools stated: “No books or printings are allowed in the hands of students, or to be sold to them, without permission from the Nizāra.” In 1910 it was amended to the following: “No books or printings are allowed in any school, nor their distribution or sale, to the students without permission from the Nizāra. In addition, it is of upmost danger for the students of any grade to enter the school with books, tracts, newspapers, or printings that have a political nature.” DWQ, Majlis al-Wuzarā’ Nizārat al-Maʾārif, Box 24, Folder 1 (#0075-045582). Ministry of Education, “Mudhakkira” (10 June 1910).
employment for graduates who became lawyers, writers, teachers as well as government employees. However, despite several proposals to open government school throughout the country, the attendees of these government-sponsored schools continued to be dwarfed by the numbers of students who attended local *kuttābs* (Qur’an schools) or went without schooling all together.

Once the eradication of *ummiyya* became the driving force for reform—as a social ill that had to be extinguished for the good of the country—the calculations about educational reforms changed. Instead of a few schools to encourage a small professional class, literacy had to be spread to all classes of society through a compulsory and free educational system. The government was no longer responsible for promoting *ʿilm* for the few; rather, they had to battle *ummiyya* in all strata of society. As a result, at a bureaucratic level, initiatives aimed at spreading *ʿilm* were often recast as fights against an insidious *ummiyya*.

**Compulsory Education**

The drive for compulsory and centralized elementary education in Egypt was fueled by popular demand as well as governmental initiatives. Both in and out of the government, the discourse surrounding the necessity of mass education drew upon a deep distrust of the average Egyptian home as a safe environment for the crucial task of raising the nation’s future generations. An 1897 report on one of the earliest proposals envisioned schools throughout the countryside. Yet, even these proposals were modest in that they suggested one school per city—hardly enough to educate all the children of an area.

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679 Most notably the 1880 commission on education envisioned schools throughout the countryside. Yet, even these proposals were modest in that they suggested one school per city—hardly enough to educate all the children of an area.
government schools for lower class girls (the ‘Abbās school) encouraged girls to start
school at younger ages to stave off the corruption of their home environments:

The one purpose of education is to instill the spirit of industriousness, organization, and wisdom (ijtihād wa al-nizām wa al-ḥikam). These good qualities in particular are lacking in Egyptian girls because they do not get practice in these qualities in their homes where they see the women of the house without work to do …. The intelligence of the girls is cured in the time they are under our notice in school, however, we fear that their life in the homes after they leave school not only stops the growth of their intellect, but also weakens it.680

Similarly, journal articles advocating the opening of more schools often saw compulsory education as the only solution to the nation’s malaise. In an article on “schooling” education, the journal al- Al-Jāmiʿa made its case that children (particularly boys who were coddled if they stayed at home) had to be sent to schools in order for them to become functional members of society.681 It was a “national duty” that women enroll their sons in schools and it was the nation’s duty to its citizens to provide an education that is free and compulsory:

The immense duty (wājib) of the individual is that they learn and the immense duty of the society which is to teach them. The first duty requires compulsory education and the second requires free education … whenever compulsory education is required, then it must be free.682

A similar argument was made for the education of boys and girls in the public press, speeches, government reports: the fate of future generations could not be left in the care

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682 Ibid., 513.
of chaotic households. They needed to be given a good education and parents would need to be forced to send them to school in order to ensure that.

The idea of specifically promoting Arabic literacy also played a part in calls for compulsory education. The state of Arabic instruction in the Egyptian school systems was, by all accounts, dismal. At one level, schools like Dar al-ʿUlum and other specialized teaching schools were considered think-tanks for best practices in Arabic instruction and the producers of future Arabic teachers. However, beyond these measures, there was recognition that among the general public many wanted the government to expand Arabic language instruction as part of its mandate to provide education for the nation. As one example, a new private school that was opening in 1911 declared itself a stop-gap measure for a true “nationalist” (waṭaniyya) education. This school saw itself as part of a process towards the long awaited day of “nationalist, wide-spread and compulsory education.”

One of the central missions of this school was to “strengthen students in the noble Arabic language” through memorization of

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684 Ṣalīb, “Al-Marʿa wa-l-Taʾlīm.”

685 From an 1880 commission to Amīn Sāmī’s 1917 report, there was a concern about Arabic instruction. See discussion in Chapter 2.

686 Sāmī, al-Taʾlīm fī Miṣr fī sanatay 1914 wa-1915, 52–53. Also see Aroian, The nationalization of Arabic and Islamic education in Egypt.


prose and poetry, constant practice in writing, and training students to read properly.\textsuperscript{689} Those advocating an ideal of a mass educational system for the good of the nation often saw Arabic literacy as an indispensible part of this “nationalist” education.

The 1868 Organic Law and an 1880 Commission to Reform Public Education were the first government attempts to create a national educational system.\textsuperscript{690} In response to an ambitious goal to create a completely literate electorate in 30 years (still a limited subset of the Egyptian populace to be sure), the 1868 law sought to unify all Egyptian schools, private and public, under the control of the newly re-instated Ministry of Education.\textsuperscript{691} The law decreed that the ubiquitous, local Quranic schools (called \textit{kuttābs})\textsuperscript{692} would be subject to the regulation of the Ministry, that new schools would be built in each province, and that the government would finance the entire project, albeit with appeals to help from private donations. The entire scope of the project was never realized, however, over the course of the next decade dozens of new schools were built in the major cities and provincial capitals. In 1880, a commission of prominent Egyptian and European administrators was appointed in order to reexamine the state of education in Egypt. In framing their report, the Commission to Reform Public Education compared Egyptian initiatives in public education with that of Europe. They found that Egypt was behind by any measure, but they believed that with increased

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{689} Ibid., 27.
\textsuperscript{690} See DWQ, Majlis al-Wuzarāʾ, Niẓārat al-Maʿārif, Box 5A, Folder 3 and 4. Also see Sāmī, \textit{al-Taʿlīm fī Miṣr fī sanatay 1914 wa-1915}, 36–45.
\textsuperscript{691} The literacy goal was abandoned in 1888. Cochran, \textit{Education in Egypt}, 10.
\textsuperscript{692} Kuttābs also existed among the Coptic communities of Egypt and focused on their own religious teachings. However, since the vast majority of kuttābs were run for by Muslims, the kuttābs I am referring to were those focused on Qurʾānic memorization.
funding and help from local communities, the government could begin opening schools in every village with over 2,000 people. However, with the British occupation in 1882, only a handful of schools were actually completed.\footnote{Sāmī, \textit{al-Ta‘līm fī Miṣr fī sanatay 1914 wa-1915}, 46–47.}

Officials in the Ministry of Education began looking at other, cheaper ways to expand the educational system. Early on, ministers like Ali Mubarak saw the \textit{kuttābs} that already existed throughout the country as a potential resource for government initiatives. In an 1890 memorandum to the Khedive, Mubarak cited the \textit{kuttābs} as the best way to fulfill the elementary educational needs of the country.\footnote{DWQ, \textit{Majlis al-Wuzarā'}, Nizārat al-Ma‘ārif, Box 2, Folder 12 (#0075-043771), ‘Alī Mubārak “Surat Taqrīr” (9 June 1890).} However, since these schools were in need of reform (due to dilapidated buildings, unqualified teachers, and limited curriculum), the Ministry believed it was best to bring them under their own administrative control and run them like government primary schools.\footnote{The Ministry of Education was given (once again) nominal control over the kuttābs, but not the funding they requested. Mubārak originally envisioned opening an addition 500 schools over the next 10 years, however, only a handful were actually built. Sāmī, \textit{al-Ta‘līm fī Miṣr fī sanatay 1914 wa-1915}, 68–70.} In 1895, the Ministry of Education began inspecting \textit{kuttābs} and created a subsidy program for schools that met Ministry standards.\footnote{The system was modeled after grant-in-aid programs used in India. \textit{1895 Report}, 20.} In return for a financial subsidy based on the number of students, approved \textit{kuttābs} would need to fulfill curriculum and teacher qualification requirements. The subsidy program was a relative success, unlike other proposals that were ambitious, but seldom got beyond the planning or preliminary execution stage (See Table 4). Eventually, in 1916, these \textit{kuttābs} were converted into

\begin{table}
\centering
\caption{Subsidy Program for \textit{kuttābs}}
\begin{tabular}{ll}
\hline
Item & Description \\
\hline
Subsidy & Financial aid based on student enrollment \\
Curriculum & Meets Ministry standards \\
Teacher qualifications & Qualifications meet Ministry standards \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}
basic “elementary” schools (as opposed to the elite “primary” schools the government had been running for decades).  

**Table 4: Kuttāb Inspections and Subsidies (1898-1905)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of <em>kuttābs</em> under inspection</th>
<th>Number of schools that got subsidy</th>
<th>Total amount of spent on subsidies (LE)</th>
<th>Male students</th>
<th>Female students</th>
<th>Total students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1895</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>113</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1896</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>159</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1897</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>27</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1898</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>495</td>
<td>6,938</td>
<td>598</td>
<td>7,536</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1899</td>
<td>403</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>719</td>
<td>9,839</td>
<td>568</td>
<td>10,407</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>383</td>
<td>246</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>11,318</td>
<td>997</td>
<td>12,315</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>925</td>
<td>507</td>
<td>2,138</td>
<td>24,691</td>
<td>2,140</td>
<td>26,831</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1902</td>
<td>1,346</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>3,145</td>
<td>36,142</td>
<td>2,993</td>
<td>39,135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1903</td>
<td>2,623</td>
<td>1,512</td>
<td>6,752</td>
<td>70,702</td>
<td>5,526</td>
<td>76,228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1904</td>
<td>3,698</td>
<td>1,944</td>
<td>9,503</td>
<td>115,871</td>
<td>8,615</td>
<td>124,486</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1905</td>
<td>4,859</td>
<td>2,665</td>
<td>13,164</td>
<td>136,083</td>
<td>9,611</td>
<td>145,694</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With the government’s foray into mandating the curricula for *kuttābs*, the type of literacy these schools were supposed to promote became crucially important. *Kuttābs*

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697 Elementary school graduates, unlike primary school graduates, could not go on to secondary or other higher education in the government system.

698 DWQ, Majlis al-Wuzarāʾ, Niẓārat al-Maʿārif, Box 2.
had traditionally been the domain of local teachers who focused on memorization of the Quran above all else. Learning to read or write was secondary, if achieved at all. In this regard, the goals of the Ministry and of the local population were at times at cross-purposes. Early reforms of state-inspected kuttābs tended to minimize the teaching of the Quran; the curricula did not include guidelines for how much needed to be covered and, unlike for reading, writing, and arithmetic, none of the evaluations included measures of how much Quran students had memorized.699 This created something of an outcry among parents and the Ministry of Endowments who accused the government of stripping these schools of their original intent.700 For some, what could be termed an alternative, Quranic literacy was exactly what these kuttābs were designed for. The Ministry of Education responded in 1906 by adding lessons based on the Hadith (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), having inspectors track the number of students who had memorized the whole, ¾, ½, or ¼ of the Quran, testing students in the religious material they are suppose to take, and including these statistics in their evaluation of the school’s subsidy. By including Quranic memorization in their metrics

699 Early regulations on the kuttābs and their teachers made no mention of religious studies of any kind. DWQ, Majlis al-Wuzarā’, Nizārat al-Ma’ārif, Box 2, Folder 8 (#0075-043767). Ministère De L’Instruction Publique, Règlement Relatif Aux Subventions Annuelles a Accorder aux Kouttabs (Cairo : Imprimerie Nationale 1898); Ibid., Ministère De L’Instruction, Règlement pour L’examen des Fikis et des Arifs (Cairo: Imprimerie Nationale, 1900).

700 The 1906 changes to the subsidy program mentioned deference to “public opinion” in making their changes. Also see DWQ, Majlis al-Wuzarā’, Nizārat al-Ma’ārif, Box 4D, Folder 3 (#0075-044043), Sa’d Zaghlūl. “Ijāba Nizārat al-Ma’ārif ʿan al-malḥūẓāt al-laft waradat fi maḥḍar Majlis Shura al-Qawānīn” (25 May 1907). Similarly, in 1900 the Ministry of Endowments objected to waqf money going to fund schools whose primary purpose was no longer the teaching of the Qurʾān, as their endowments specified. The Ministry of Education responded that students were indeed memorizing the Qurʾān in addition to the other subjects that were added. See DWQ, Majlis al-Wuzarā’, Nizārat al-Ma’ārif, Box 2, Folder 1 (#0075-043760).
for evaluating *kuttāb*, the Ministry was able to co-opt the fears of a decrease in religious literacy by making it an official part of the sanctioned and measureable school literacy.  

With regards to learning how to read and write Arabic, the Ministry of Education recognized the discrepancy between *kuttāb* education and the skills associated with a measurable literacy and tried to minimize it. The main problem was that *kuttāb* attendance did not translate directly into less *ummiyya*. Estimates as far back as the late eighteenth century based on the number of *kuttābs* in Cairo, suggest that approximately 1/3 of the men in the city may have attended *kuttābs*. According the estimates by Dor Bey in 1880, roughly 40% of male children of school age were getting some kind of education. More conservatively, a survey of *kuttāb* schools in 1897 estimated between 21 to 37% of males had received an education in the *kuttābs*. However, if the literacy rates of 8 to 11% among males reported in the 1897 census are to be believed, the kind of literacy these students were gaining in the *kuttābs* was not measurable by census’s standards. So for example, in 1902, when there were 39,135 students in the *kuttābs* under Ministry inspection, the Ministry found that roughly

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701. DWQ, Majlis al-Wuzarāʾ, Nizārat al-Maʿārif, Box 2, Folder 9 (#0075-043768), Nizārat al-Maʿārif “Mudhakira Marfūʿa min Nizārat al-Maʿārif” (29 April 1906). By 1907 the Ministry was even increasing Qur’ānic studies in primary (not just the *kuttāb*) schools. “The primary (ibtidāʿīyya) education program has been redone, especially the program of the Quran, and religious principles, Arabic language, and Islamic history in order to be in accordance with the needs of the umma and its desires.” DWQ, Majlis al-Wuzarāʾ, Nizārat al-Maʿārif, Box 4D, Folder 3 (#0075-044043), Saʿd Ṣaḥḥīlūl. “Ijāba Nizārat al-Maʿārif ‘an al-malḥūẓat al-latī waradat fi maḥḍar Majlis Shura al-Qawānīn” (25 May 1907), 3. Also see Starrett, *Putting Islam to Work*.


704. It was higher in the north, and lower in the south. Sāmī, *Taʿlīm fī Miṣr fī sanatay 1914 wa-1915*, 85–86.
15,000 didn’t know their letters and 31,000 could not write correctly. In other words, nearly 80% of these students would have been considered ummi by the census definition of reading and writing. This is not to say that kuttāb education was not useful for students. There is evidence that what children were taught in kuttābs was “transferable” to other sorts of literacy skills in economic and social life. However, kuttāb education was not a type of “schooling” that was conducive to testing, inspection, and enumeration. To counter the inherent plasticity of kuttāb education, one of the main priorities of the Ministry was to include more reading, writing, and arithmetic into these schools through teacher education, inspections, and new standardized teaching materials. The Ministry requirements went into minute detail about how to teach children the Arabic language. In fact, these guidelines were echoed almost word for word in later instructions on how to combat illiteracy, like the one that opened this chapter.

Starting in 1917, several national plans were proposed to spread elementary education and literacy to all Egyptians. In his report on the state of education in Egypt, Amin Sami noted that nearly 2 million children of school age, or 70% of boys and 93% of girls, were not receiving any education, be it in government, foreign, or elementary

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706 Nelly Hanna notes that kuttāb educated men in the eighteenth century would use literacy in an unofficial capacity, for personal memoirs, commercial pursuits, etc. Hanna, In praise of books.
708 DWQ, Majlis al-Wuzarā’, Nizārāt al-Ma’ārif, Box 2, Folder 8 (#0075-043767), Ministère de l’Instruction Publique, Règlement Relatif Aux Subventions Annuelles a Accorder aux Kouttabs (Cairo: Imprimerie Nationale 1898), 8-10.
He ended his examination of the status quo with an appeal to create nearly 20,000 new schools in order to serve the needs of the entire population of Egypt and to focus on basic elementary education for all. The high census illiteracy rates in 1907 and the fear that so many children were “deprived of education” (maḥrūmīn min al-taʿlīm) were cited as the rationale behind the need to expand the scope of education. In light of this new initiative, the government hoped to achieve a true mass educational system within 20 years.

In the policies that emerged in the wake of the 1919 revolution and the end of the British protectorate in 1922, the connection between mass education and literacy became explicit. The 1923 Egyptian constitution included an article that stated that all children between the ages of 7 and 12 must attend school and that the schooling would be provided in free elementary kuttābs managed by the government. The constitutional article gave the government 10 years to ramp this program up, which was later extended to 15 years. To fulfill this mandate, in 1925, the Ministry of Education proposed several plans for mass elementary education that strove to combine the needs of the largely agricultural population with the goal of compulsory education. The problem was merging the ‘ilm education of the schools (tarbiya ‘ilmīyya) with the practical education (tarbiya ‘amaliyya) of craft making or farming. At a bare minimum, the ‘ilm for the mass educational system of elementary schools had a very specific purpose: to “purify

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709 Sāmī, al-Taʿlīm fī Miṣr fī sanatay 1914 wa-1915, 118–121.
710 Ibid., 127.
712 Yūsuf, Mathaf al-Taʿlīm, 209.
students of ummiyya.”\textsuperscript{713} The compromise agreed upon was half day schooling in elementary schools, which allowed “the students to be purified from illiteracy while allowing them to work in agriculture or some other craft.”\textsuperscript{714} The half-day solution also had another benefit. The schools could have separate morning and afternoon sessions and thereby “speed up the vanquishing of illiteracy and bring closer the day that we will realize the conditions and means necessary for compulsory education.”\textsuperscript{715} Despite the ambitions of this 1925 initiative and its successors, ummiyya has yet to be vanquished.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have traced how a discourse of reform relied upon a particular definition of ummiyya. Rather than an idea that could just as easily connote a deficit in knowledge as a purity of soul, ummiyya became the antithesis of two specific skills: reading and writing. Yet, even as the definition of ummiyya narrowed, its import to social reform only increased. Ummiyya became a social problem that changed the way education and the educated were conceived. Census statistics and increasingly ambitious government campaigns made ummiyya a focus of attention. Ummiyya that could be defined and measured could also be fought. By 1925, a discourse of reform that required a perpetual war on ummiyya, defined as the anti-literacy, was fully formed.

\textsuperscript{713} DWQ, Abdif, Box 232, Folder 5 (#0069-004497). Nizārat al-Ma‘ārif, “Mashrū‘ al-Madrasa al-‘Āmila” (4 March 1925), 3.
\textsuperscript{714} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{715} Ibid. The Ministry of Education proposed building 650 new elementary schools each year for 10 years starting with the 1926-1927 school year. DWQ, Abdin, Box 237, Folder 7 (#0069-004643).
This shift away from a knowledge versus ignorance dichotomy to that of literacy versus illiteracy represents the narrowing definitions of bureaucratic literacies, with significant consequences for educational and social reforms. Due to the linguistic limits of the term “literacy” in Arabic, almost all literacy campaigned are framed completely in the negative: as a fight to eradicate illiteracy (*ummiyya*). In the process, positive *ummiyyas* and alternative literacies fall by the wayside. It is no longer possible to be unable to read and still be knowledgeable or to eschew writing and still be educated. In a sense, this brings the practices and discourses of literacies discussed in this work to their logical end. As literacy becomes more important in the public sphere, particular practices become more widespread, and, finally, institutions like censuses and mass education system apply their statistical and bureaucratic methods to the challenge of “social reform,” the multiple literacies that have been highlighted throughout this work seem to condense down the most basic of definitions: reading and writing physical words.

However, that is still only a part of the story. The new conception of *ummiyya* was useful to the bureaucratic world of the nation-state because it could be measured and fought. However, as the rest of this work has demonstrated, literacies of all types were nothing if not mutable in the hands of those who wielded them.
Conclusion

“Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order. At least spare us their morality when we write.”

—Michel Foucault

Literacy is a particularly important lens through which to view the power of discourses and practices to mutually reinforce each other and ultimately influence the contours of public and private life. One of the primary themes of this work is that the written word provided central “spaces” of exchange and expression for growing numbers of literate, semi-literate, and illiterate Egyptians between the 1870s and 1920s. Perhaps the greatest impact of these new literacy spaces was that they so easily traversed physical distances, traditional “intellectual” locales, and gender and class barriers to provide Egyptians with new ways and more public places to voice their grievances, ideas, and aspirations. This development of public literacies was no accident, as elite discourses and everyday practices worked in tandem to promote and utilize these new spaces to maximum effect. In Chapter 2, I examined how literacy was heavily promoted by intellectual elites, religious reformers, bureaucrats, nationalists, colonial administrators, and women activists as a way to recast the future of the nation in their own image. Government institutions not only held sway in their own elite schools, but also sought to influence the basic literacy many Egyptians received in kuttābs or traditional Quran schools. Other types of schools— religious, missionary,

716 Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, 19.

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and nationalist—all pursued types of literacy education that they deemed important and necessary for the next generation. Everyone, from religious scholars to women activists, saw in certain types of literacies the means by which to fulfill their vision for Egyptian society. The public call for literacy promotion became almost a mantra of the “discourse of reform” that so many Egyptians were grappling with as they sought to elevate their nation morally, economically, and socially.

In Chapter 3 and 4, I introduced the practices that reflected, and in some cases challenged, these official discourses of reform. Individuals of all backgrounds, irrespective of their own ability to read and write, began taking advantage of the growing postal system and sent letters in unprecedented numbers. Communication by way of the postal system not only crisscrossed the countryside at an increased rate, but also spanned the literacy divide as people of all educational backgrounds found ways to draft and send their words across narrowing distances. The increased number of newspapers and journals in circulation made their way into gatherings and conversations as one person read (and many listened) to the latest news, jokes, or social commentaries. In petitions sent by individuals and groups to government officials, the medium became almost as important as the content. Yes, worried parents sought ways in which to steer their children towards better educational opportunities by mirroring official discourses and in essence offering their children as the potential “perfect citizenry” so often cited as the end goal of literacy promotion. Yet at the same time, petitioners also began using printed petitions that could be mass produced and distributed in order to protest government policies that threatened their livelihoods.
education, or sense of justice. These public petitions highlight the powerful ways in which literacies were becoming more visible in the public sphere.

Meanwhile, women in particular, were also pursuing literacies that augmented a different sort of visibility. Women who could read, and more so, write, were using this skill to assert themselves in traditionally masculine spaces—sometimes under the cloak of anonymity—but more often than not, in the full light of the public press. This increased public presence was encouraged by some and reviled by others. On the one hand, women writing in the confines of their own homes represented the quintessential “modern women”—devoted to their families and raising the next generation, yet “worldly” enough to engage in larger communal debates. On the other hand, reading the “wrong” type of materials, consorting with too “worldly” a crowd, or using the transitive power of the written word for illicit correspondences all made the potential of female literacy a lightening rod. Some opponents of female literacy went so far as to suggest that women as consumers of texts (readers) could be tolerated and, even in some cases, deemed beneficial. However allowing women to become producers of texts (writers) set a dangerous precedent—as a sort of usurpation of public authority from the traditionally male, educated elite. Indeed, the issue of public authority was one that gave many reformers pause. Reading and writing have always been associated with discursive power and the ability to manipulate, record, and create histories, narratives, and realities for individuals and communities. In the case of early twentieth century Egypt, this authority was being challenged as new groups of Egyptians began participating in literacy practices that had the power to influence their wider society.
Chapters 5 and 6 of this work detail the attempts at institutionalizing various literacies for the purposes of harnessing their social and educational power. In Chapter 5, we are introduced to the new mainstay of Arabic language instruction in governmental, private, and religious schools: the subject of Arabic composition (inshā'). This focus on composition as a fundamental skill represented a substantial shift away from classical education that relied upon years of experiential exposure to good writing to that of lesson-based and classroom-friendly writing exercises. The new subject of “composition” was designed in order to get students at the youngest ages in the habit of expressing themselves through the written word. This shift in educational priorities directly translated into the public sphere. Schools demanded that compositions be “useful” for students, which in practice, often meant that assignments touched upon social issues that dovetailed nicely with the aspirations of the particular school. Government school students were encouraged to write about the wonders of civic society, religious school students about the role of Islam in public life, and nationalist school students about the necessity for national autonomy. In essence, these school compositions trained students for the new vehicles and spaces of public literacies, encouraging and guiding them in the practice of public expression in order to debate issues of social import.

The utilitarian nature of this type of schooling literacy extended beyond the subject matters they addressed to the language itself. Concomitant with the discourse of reform, Arabic literacy was seen as a central measure of social reform and it needed to fulfill its purpose in the most efficient way possible. As widespread literacy became a
goal of reformers of all kinds, the archaic features of Arabic had to give way to a modern version of itself, one that was better suited for the needs of mass educational systems, a new generation of print textbooks, and the new tools and techniques of modern education. The expansion of literacy projects by the government and private institutions hastened the development of a reformed language which came to be known as modern standard Arabic—one that could more easily fulfill its influential educational role in a modernizing country.

In the final chapter, we see the maturation of the discourse of reform and its influence on educational policy. While illiteracy was largely a neutral or positive term in the pre-modern world, it increasingly became seen as a blight on the economic and social fabric of the country. Censuses that recorded and classified Egyptians according to their ability to read and write only enhanced the importance of this “measure of reform.” By 1925, basic education was enshrined as an aspiration of the first Egyptian Constitution. As a result, the groundwork for a true mass educational system was laid as literacy came to be seen as the catalyst for improving the nation, starting with its youngest citizens. However, this narrow, utilitarian, and measurable definition of literacy also created exclusions. So for example, blind students, who had historically been encouraged to pursue religious studies (or at the very least memorize the Quran), were no longer considered quite as “literate” as their seeing brethren. The shift to written exams and medical requirements for degrees and employment meant that non-written literacies were no longer part of a continuum of learned scholarship, but rather
an exceptional and deficient form of education—one that did not fit with the physical and mental perfection projected by “modern” institutions.

However, even as this narrowing of literacy was certainly a growing reality, it was never absolute in its reach when it came to everyday practices. In fact, the other central theme of this work has been the fractured nature of literacy practices in society. Literacies always existed in the plural, in multiple spaces, and in the service of various communal and individual interests and throughout this work I have questioned the efficacy and power of institutions (governmental, educational, etc.) to truly control the outcome of literacy in society. As such, I want to take this final opportunity to emphasize just how difficult it was, in practice, to enforce this “narrow” vision of literacy.

Two works that were composed in the 1920s, at first glance, seem to reflect perfectly the bureaucratic narrowing of literacy and literacy concerns. Around 1921, an individual named Ahmad Khalil al-Husayni drafted a manuscript of a book he entitled: “Teaching the Illiterate in Two Months.”717 In 1928, a former teacher and elementary school principal by the name of Muhammad al-Tukhi decided to publish a short book describing his (self-described) innovative teaching style entitled “Reading and Writing Arabic in Three Lunar Months.”718 Both works focus on the newly defined problem of illiteracy. Furthermore, both authors provide the rather attractive promise to rectify the problem of illiteracy in record time, within just two or three months.

718 Muḥammad al-Ṭūkhī, Al-Kitāba wa-l-Qirāʾ a al-Arabiyya fī Thalātha ʿAshhur Qamariyya (Miṣr: Al-Maṭbaʿa al-Raḥmāniyya, 1928).
Yet, these two booklets in and of themselves represent the multiplicity inherent in literacy and the discourse of reform. Neither book was officially commissioned by governmental offices. The published work of al-Tukhi, with its frequent reminder that official copies needed to be bought from the publisher or author, seemed to suggest the real driver of this work was a desire to economically benefit from the growing “crisis” of illiteracy. Illiteracy and literacy reform were not necessarily always state-guided initiatives, but could also be private and commercial enterprises. The manuscript of al-Husayni, meanwhile, was a work that seemed to aspire to publication (with blank pages for students to write on), but was itself not particularly “polished.” It is unlikely the following dialogue between two students on the necessity of literacy and education would have survived an editor’s pen:

Zaki said to Ahmed: Come let us go play in the morning.
Ahmed replied: No, I do not play in the morning like dogs do. Rather, I will go school (al-maktab) and I will play in the afternoon. Indeed, those who prefer playing over school will remain like donkeys, not knowing how to write or read …

The comparison of children who play and do not learn their letters to dogs and donkeys reflects popular colloquialisms and, overall, rather crass language that would not have been seen as particularly “educational” by most educators. Nevertheless, for this would-be author, having a pen, paper, and the ambition to write, made the practice and discourse of literacy (and combating illiteracy) equally as accessible to him as anyone else. Literacy practices and discourses pervaded many contexts: educational and commercial projects, private manuscripts and published works, and the highly “literate”

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and the more “colloquially” inclined. Ultimately, reading and writing, for people along the literacy continuum, were polymorphous technologies.

In 2009, I presented some of the basic research of this work to a gathering at the American Research Center of Egypt and read excerpts from many of the educational petitions I had come across from the early 20th century. I noticed several Egyptians in the audience nod with acknowledgment. The frustrations and questions of a century ago seemed strikingly similar to those of today. How do we educate our children? How do we find the type of education that will secure their future? How do we coax official institutions to meet our needs? How do we instill in younger generations a love of language? Indeed, which language? And yet there was another, underlying question on their minds: How do we make our voices heard? The idea of petitioning, publishing and distributing grievances and the fact that, in the end, not much has changed, was both inspiring and yet deeply dismaying. As I spoke to a few people afterwards, their question was: Does anything ever change? Less than two years later, the protests of the January 25th Egyptian Revolution seem to have answered that question. Yes, things change. Public discourse and the public “square” (figuratively and physically) still wield incredible influence and literacies continue to play their crucial role, albeit in a new form.

In fact, the numerous ways that literacy was deployed by Egyptian men and women during the crucial period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is particularly instructive as language and literacy have yet again expanded to new formats.
and technologies in the electronic age. The new kinds of literacies that are being used by young people all over the world are barely recognizable to older generations as communication, let alone literacy. Yet, in the Arab-speaking world, even with the near ubiquity of aural and visual technologies (telephone, broadcast and satellite television, radio, the internet, etc.), written communication is still immensely important. In fact, cell phone texting (and not calling) is perhaps the single most important form of peer-to-peer communication among young Arabic speakers. In this new world of communication, some of these same concerns from a century ago about the diffusion of authority and the right to speak (or to blog, text, or tweet) for and about communities has become a matter of governmental and civil concern. As the most recent upheavals in Egypt and elsewhere indicate, literacies are still powerful human technologies that allow people to redefine society, simply, with words.
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