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The former publisher of Basic Books, Maguire published her first novel, *Thinner, Blonder, Whiter*, in 2002; she had completed this second novel when she died of cancer in 2006. Pitch perfect from start to finish, the book is couched as the memoir of once-popular writer Constance Fenimore Woolson (1840-1894): a manuscript left behind at her death to counter her image as "a long-suffering, martyred spinster." At its center is the vibrant, intriguing relationship between Woolson and Henry James, whom she meets in Paris in 1879. James calls her Fenimore (she's the niece of The Last of the Mohicans author James Fenimore Cooper), and she calls him Harry; theirs was, Woolson says, "[a] marriage not of bodies, but of minds." The stuff of conventional memoir is judiciously tucked in (Woolson's travels, her encroaching deafness, James's sister, Alice, and his circle), but with an immediacy, embodiment and frankness 19th-century memoir almost always lacks. Through Maguire's elegant pen, Woolson, a writer who was often pigeonholed as a mere verbal colorist, gets to establish her significance to James: "Whenever Harry left he always took something from me, a little piece of my own imagination," Maguire's vivid depiction of those complex exchanges is utterly absorbing. (June) Jump to ratings and reviewsThe Open Door is a landmark of women's writing in Arabic. Published in 1960, it was very bold for its time in exploring a middle-class Egyptian girl's coming of sexual and political age, in the context of the Egyptian nationalist movement preceding the 1952 revolution. The novel traces the pressures on young women and young men of that time and class as they seek to free themselves of family control and social expectations. Young Layla and her brother became involved in the student activism of the 1940s and early 1950s and in the popular resistance to continued imperialist rule; the story culminates in the 1956 Suez Crisis, when Gamal Abd al-Nasser's nationalization of the Canal led to a British, French, and Israeli invasion. Not only daring in her themes, Latifa al-Zayyat was also bold in her use of colloquial Arabic, and the novel contains some of the liveliest dialogue in modern Arabic literature. "Not only a great novel, but a literary landmark that shaped our consciousness." -- Abdel Moneim Tallima "A great anticolonialist work in a feminist key." -- Ferial Ghazoul "Latifa al-Zayyat greatly helped all of us Egyptian writers in our early writing careers."-- Naguib Mahfouz Book excerpt: a book unexamined is wasting trees Latifa Al-Zayyat and Marilyn Booth (tr.) The Open Door Al-Zayyat, Latifa; Marilyn Booth (tr.); The Open Door [al-Bab al-maftuh, 1960] American Univ in Cairo Press, 2002, c2000, 380 pages [pbok] ISBN 9774246985, 9789774246982 topics: | fiction | egypt | arabic | gender Book Review Undoubtedly one of my most powerful novels about a girl coming of age. That it happens in Egypt makes little difference -- though the cultural mores seem more restrictive (though India in the 50s was pretty much the same)... and the outside world is not that much different. Historical background set during Egypt's war of independence, 1946 to 1956, when the masses revolted against the monarchy established by the British in 1922. The insurrection culminated in the Free Officer's Revolution of 1952, and Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956, leading to an Israeli-British-French attack. The specific period covered in the open door starts on February 21, 1946, when there were massive demonstrations against the British (the Ismailiya square episode mentioned in the opening pages). Meanwhile the British continued to occupy the Suez Canal Zone, which by a treaty from 1936, should have reverted to Egypt in 1949. The continued unhappiness resulted in increased numbers of youth (including Layla's brother Mahmud) joining the civilian fedayeen in guerrilla warfare in the canal zone. The fedayeen youth were very highly regarded in Egypt, and were tacitly supported by much of the army and police. On January 25, 1952 the British army massacred dozens of weakly-armed egyptians at a police barracks harbouring some fedayeen in the town of Ismailia (on the Suez). The one-sided killings led to widespread riots, called the Cairo Fires, in which 750 buildings were looted and many of them set afire. This is the scene of Layla's insane rage after discovering Isam's relationship with the maid. Coming of age in troubled times The open-door is perhaps a forerunner in a long line of postcolonial literature featuring coming-of-age in troubled times. In recent years, I can think of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Half of a Yellow Sun, Shyam Selvadurai's Funny boy, Preetta Samarasan's "Evening is the whole day", Romesh Gunesekera's Reef, and from the same period as the Open Door, samaresh majumdar's kAlbeLa... Another interesting observation is how servants feature prominently in all these coming of age novels set in the developing world; indeed, the servant boy Triton is the protagonist in Gunesekera's Reef and his coming of age in war-torn Sri Lanka forms the core of the narrative set against the Tamil insurgency. (This insurgency comes closer in The Funny Boy). Preetta Samarasan also uses the servant Chillam to frame a good bit of her story set in riot-torn malaysia. In the Open Door, servants hover in the background, and except for the relationship one has with Isam, they do not enter the main storyline. As an aside, the presence of servants in these novels reminds one of victorian era novels - in which also it is the youngsters, like David Copperfield's Peggotty, who pay more attention to servants. Of course, it also attests to the disappearance of this sharp class divide in the west of today. While the turmoil and violence in the world around them gives a sharp edge to these stories, in the open door, in the end it is the universality of the conflict between the growing Layla and her parents that I found most fascinating. Background When Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser nationalized the Suez canal in July 1956, the Arab world heralded him as a hero... the moment ended a decade of turbulent political activity in Egypt that was trying to free itself from British oversight and the political system of the past... a decade of struggle, of disillusionment and hardship, a decade of youth activism and of popular optimism. This is the decade that Latifa al-Zayyat chronicles in her classic novel. ix In her autobiographical meditation, Hamlat tafatih: awraq shakhsiya, (Operation search: personal papers, 1992), al-Zayyat describes her childhood in the Delta cities of Dimiyat (Damietta) and Mansura... the rooftops of her childhood homes become mysterious because they are unattainable, then sites of desire, refuges, places of imagined freedom from the constraints of social existence. In one of her homes, the stairs to the roof is inhabited by a snake that will not succumb to snake-charmers. In another rooftop, the 7 year-old Latifa encounters the young poet (22) Sha'ir al-Hamshari (1908-38), who had perhaps rented the room on the roof from Aisha Taymur (1840-1902), in preface to al-Taimuriyya Says the one with the broken wing, Aisha Ismat, daughter of Ismail Pasha Taimur (1830-1895, khedive 1863-79): Ever since my cradle cushion was rolled up, and my foot roved the carpet of the world, ever since I became aware of where enticements and reason dwelt for me, I gre conscious of the inviolable space around my father and grandfather -- ever since that time, my fledgling aim was to nurse eagerly on the tales - I aged while still young trying to get to the root of the words of those who have gone before. I used to be infatuated with the evening chatter of the elderly women, wanting to listen to the choicest stories... Bearing the instruments of embroidery and weaving, [my mother] began to work seriously on my education. But I had no desire to become refined in the occupations of women. I used to flee from her as the prey escapes the net, rushing headlong into assemblages of writers, with no sense of embarrassment. Here Layla grows up with an elder brother, who is measured by completely different standards, the coming of age under an era of the liberation of women from centuries of oppression, mixed with with the liberation the country and the uplifting spirit it brings, makes for a powerful narrative. Excerpts chapter 1 [discussion on street after that morning's protest in Ismailiya Square - midAn Ismaileyya, currently known as Tahrir Square or midAn at-tAhrir. Tahrir = freedom; name given in 1952.] "Those boys were ripping off their gallabiyas, soaking them in gas, and setting fire to them. They were totally in flames, might eat up a guy's whole body but what did they care? They would just crawl along, bullets pouring down like rain, paying no attention, no, sir, went on moving, right to the attack. . . ." - p.4 [This square in Cairo continues to be the focus of protests. Here is an image from 2013 June, during a protest against president Mohammed Morsi in Tahrir Square.] photo from The guardian "Could there be any doubt?" [Isam says this, 2x on two pages - p.13, 14; later Fuad says "Is there any doubt?" - perhaps a colloquialism in Arabic?] "You know - you know when they slaughter a hen and the blood runs out" - his voice was a whisper - "And the hen goes on moving, just for a moment, and then falls down, boom, and that's it?" His eyes grew dark and his face went gloomy... "People died, lots of people - and that's exactly how they died." - p.12 [gets up early to get to the paper before her father or brother, has to refold the paper and keep it back as if new, "vexed at what what she had to do out of fear of her father's scathing remarks:" [girl adoration of maths teacher miss nawal, who "preferred mannish clothing", her "delicate lips would disappear whenever she tried to hold back a smile." p.16] [but she is weak in maths] In Arabic composition her mind worked just fine; one word brought another, and one sentence yielded the next, and her hand flew to keep up with her mind: a fitting bird, streaking through the sky far above the flock... But in arithmetic, where was she? With a grocer, selling sugar and buying oil. With a faucet, dripping X number of times per minute. With a basin, filling slowly to the brim with all those uncountable drops. She was with numbers that danced before their eyes without any beauty or sense. 19 [her first period,] "What is that bit of red on your pinafore, Layla?" her friend Adila asks. Gamila gently drew Layla away. In the school bathroom she cut away the red spot with a razor. 21 [I had understood the second sentence above to have occurred somewhat after the first, and that it was Layla who cut away the spot. But the "she" in 52 is Gamila, not Layla. From Joseph Zeidan: Arab women novelists: the formative years and beyond: bloodstain on Layla's skirt is removed by her cousin, not herself.] Her father would be happy to know [of her becoming a woman], she was sure, as he had been when Mahmud's chin had sprouted a beard. On that day, she recalled, her father had stopped Mahmud and had drawn him over to the window where the light was stronger... [but today] a sobbing wail - her father's tones... "Lord, give me strength! She's just a helpless girl! Protect us, Lord, protect us! Shield us from harm!" [insider her bedroom] Layla tugged at the coverlet, yaning it over her body, over her face, pulling it to the top of her head. p.23 It is only much later that she realizes why her friends had given her that melancholy gaze, or why her father had wept. To reach womanhood was to enter a prison where the confines of one's life weere cleared and decisively fixed... Prison life is painful for both the woman and the woman she imprisons... 24 Layla's father had outlined those confines as the family sat around the table, eating lunch. "Layla, you must realize that you have grown up. From now on you are absolutely not to go out by yourself. No visits. Straight from home to school." [Mahmud is told not to bring his girlie magazines and hide them.] The worst of it was that she never knew what might turn out to be "improper" or "inappropriate". A sudden laugh, straight from the heart, who "improper?" Too loud. Any frank or sincere statement was "out of bounds". Out of what bounds? The bounds of polite conduct. 24 And then there was the matter of sitting. "Goodness, Laylal! Either you sprawl across the chair like a know-it-all or you swing one leg across the other - what will people say?" If she refrained from going into the living room to greet guests, her mother accused her of being "a recluse - you don't like anyone." But if she did go in and greet them, her mother scolded her for not conversing animatedly. Yet if she spoke up, her mother said she was interfering in adults' business. If she stayed, sitting in silent politeness, her mother waved her out of the room. But whenever she tried to make a hasty retreat, her mother would say, "Why were you in such a rush?" "Mama I don't know what do do! You've completely confused me now. Everything I do turns out to be wrong, wrong, wrong!" "Whoever lives by fundamentals can't possibly go wrong." "So what are these fundamentals?" "The fundamentals are when one..." And so her mother would set new limits, new restrictions... They were like water dripping rhythmically onto a sleeping person, stealing the sleep from her eyes, drop by drop, hour after hour, day by day, year after year. And year after year, Layla grew. p.25-26 If she sat down she found it almost impossible to settle into any position. She never knew where to put her hands ; they seemed bodies apart, foreign to her. 27 In her room she could live, with her dreams and her joys, her bruises and her longings for far things she could not even define, desires that now and again she could feel cavorting through every speck of her being p.32 she would bury her open mouth in a heap of clothes and scream with all her might. 33 [they are being served sherbets at Samia Hanim's] She could see her mother's hand out, suspended in the air, while the sufragi who served them, suddenly realizing his blunder, stepped swiftly back from her mother with his full tray of sherbets, swinging around to offer them first to Zaynab Hanim, the guest of importance. The worst of it was that her mother had not even been angry. Her mother says later: "Everyone has their own slot in this world"... Layla. "And this Zaynab Hanim - what makes her better than you? Because she's rich?" Mother: "Yes, because she's rich. 34 [Samia H looks to L, praising the quality of a singer. L says that "the sound... like he's crying when he sings". 35 "He gets up and leaves in a huff."] Mother: If everyone said whatever was on their mind the world would have gone up in flames long ago. Layla: So people should just lie, you mean. M: That's not lying - that's being courteous. One has to make people feel good. Flatter them. L: even when you don't like them? M: even when you don't like them. 35 Her father raised objections even to the thought of Layla studying secondary school and if it hadn't been for Mahmud she would not have been able to go on with her studies. Let alone university! 36 Hindi films in Egyptian romance? the man she imagined, the man who would fall in love with her, would be nothing like Sidqi. Nor would he be like her father; in fact, he would not be like any man she had ever met... [But there is no alternative] Now supposing Sidqi were to fall in love with her... They would walk into the garden. The light of the moon would shimmer through the tree branches, throwing golden patches onto the garden path; the fragrance of narcissus would encase them. In an unsteady voice from which the usual arrogance had vanished he would say, "Layla...," as he gazed into her eyes. He would sound flustered; his voice would wobble. "Layla, there's something I want to tell you but I don't know where to start." She would simply laugh and run ahead of him, and when he had almost caught up she would whirl her head round and flash him a look out of the corner of her eye. "What is it you want to say, Sidqi Bey?" "Please, Layla, please stop this Bey business." She would shrug lightly and bend over the basin of carnations. She would pick one - a red one - and bring it to her nose. Then she would scatter the petals, one by one, tossing them into the air. [these origins of the romantic notion originated in persia perhaps - how completely Bollywood was well] ... but that was just Yusuf Wahbi in the movies. 37-38 [rare egyptian movies stereotyped on Bollywood dreams?] Fetching a price: Women as slaves [Layla collects Dawlat Hanim (aunt). She was 17 then. "No one's ever too young (for marriage). Stand up, Layla." Dawlat Hanim facing her, probing her. Pulling her closer. Dawlat Hanim ran her right hand slowly from top to toe, and then from bottom to top, stopping as it crept up to her waist and then again on her chest. "The girl has to have a proper dress, one that reveals her shape, and she needs a corset to lift her breasts and keep her middle in. As she is now, she is a disaster." "Shame on you," she faced Umm Layla sternly. "If she doesn't dress right, she won't bring any sort of price in the market." 41 Layla jumped up from bed. She was nothing but a jariya, a slave in the slave market. Layla sank into the cushions of the Asyuti armchair, hugging her legs to her chest. This was life. Whenever a girl was born, they smiled in resignation. [There is a lot of the body in her - which hand, which leg, how they sprawl, how they move...] They taught a girl to lie - to wear a corset that would pull in her middle and lift her chest so her price would go up in the market and she could marry. Marry whom? All old person; after all, "the only thing that can shame a man is his pocket." 41 Layla, to her mother, about Dawlat Hanim: Does she want to kill me like she killed her daughter? M: Hold that tongue of yours if you want to keep it. L (as if merely repeating a widely known fact): Didn't she kill her daughter? M: ...Where did you hear that? L: I just know. I know why she killed herself too, Mama. Did Dawlat Hanim make her swallow the poison? She was the one who poisoned her life, and closed the doors of mercy in her face. Safaa had nothing else - no alternative but poison. Her mouth wide open, Layla's mother hurried from the room 42 she heard that Safaa had killed herself by swallowing an entire bottle of sleeping pills, which she had been taking to help her sleep in the shadow of a husband whose pocket was the only thing that did not shame him. What L did not know then was that Safaa had died on the very night that she had gone in desperation to her mother. Dawlat Hanim had gone by the rules -- by those "fundamentals" - and had refused to shelter her. She had slammed the door in Safaa's face. So Safaa had returned to her husband's home and killed herself. She had learned after a time of the love story and the request for divorce and her husband's refusal... 43-44 At her wit's end, Layla struck her palms together soundlessly and got up to pace the room 44 Layla joins the demonstration The headmistress says, Woman's job is motherhood. Woman's place was in the home. Weapons and fighting were for men. A dark figure, her short curls bouncing, broke the ranks. She mounted the four steps and stood in front of the headmistress. Her voice shook as it came through the microphone. "Our esteemed headmistress says that woman belongs in the home and man belongs in the struggle. I want to say that when the English were killing Egyptians in 1919 they didn't distinguish between women and men. And when the English stole the Egyptians' freedom they did not distinguish between women and men... 48 The woman is 'Samia Zakl. In her prep year, science division". 48-9 [She joins the demonstration despite Gamila's objections] "Suppose your family sees you - your father, or Mahmud! 49 [in the demonstration] she felt an embarrassed shyness about her full body and was sure that every pair of eyes on the street was focusing on her. The rhythmic yells surged like waves... she felt a surge of energy. She felt alive, at once strong and weightless, as if she were one of those birds circling above. [her voice] seemed not her own, it united the old Layla with her future self and with the collective being of these thousands of people - faces, faces as far as she could see. 51 [this transcending feeling is like that of Bahiah in al-sadawi's movie. Two women in One ] [on returning home, her father beats her with sandals]. 51-2 Everything she did, she did with her whole heart, she pitched right in, heart and soul, and she always thought that was right, but to and behold, every time it turned out to be wrong. Everything she did - mistake upon mistake, and now, no one was left to love her. 54 Adila would have said: it was your mistake. You didn't speak up when they got on your case, because you're weak. In the end, you're just a feeble person. 54 [Isam comes to her room and is trying to pacify her.] He leaned down and put his hand gently on her cheek, stroking it from bottom to top, and pushing back a lock of hair that had fallen across her forehead. 58 "Listen Isam, I'm not a child"-- As asyraf and her voice was, she left her sentence incomplete as she saw Isam's face convulse as if he were in severe pain. Beads of sweat shone on his forehead, and his breath flew into her face. She felt his body touching hers, and stepped back as far as she could, until she was plastered against the window frame. Isam's features relaxed, his eyes softened, and they gazed in a way that pierced her body, a glow that came to rest somewhere unforthcoming inside of her... [59] [The confusion of Layla's generation of women who have been exposed to a broader education, is expressed by her friend Sanaa:] Our mothers were the harem - things possessed by their fathers, who passed them onto husbands. But us? -- we don't have any excuses. 77 Even animals choose their mates. For us the situation is so different, because the harem mentality has changed. Today's girl doesn't accept what her mother took as given... 78 Adila: Wallahi, we're the ones in a real bind! At the very least our mothers knew exactly what their circumstances were. We don't understand - are we the harem or not? We don't know whether love is haram, prohibited by religion, or permitted, halal. Our families say it's haram while the state radio day and night sings love love love, and books tell a girl, "Go on, you're free and independent," and if a girl believes that, she's got a disaster on her hands and her reputation will go to hell. 79 diff transl: u Our mothers knew their situation, whereas we are lost. We do not know if we are in a harem or not, or whether love is forbidden or allowed. Our parents say its forbidden, yet the government-run radio sings day and night about love. Books tell women they are free, and yet if a woman really believes that, a catastrophe will happen and her reputation will be blackened. - from [I think Booth is more lucid, and the reduplication love love love has a more Arabic ring to it] ch 5 83 Isam doesn't show up for many days. Then he comes. "But, you didn't come, Isam." He turns his face away. "I was afraid, Layla." Layla's hand fluttered uncertainly to her own chest. "Afraid -- of me?" "Afraid for you." "From what?" He hesitated. "From myself, and people, and circumstances..." 84 Mahmud: a man to marry he has to love, and also the girl, right? Isam: Now suppose, for instance, that Layla was in love. What would you do? Mahmud: Layla! My sister Layla? The colour drained out of Mahmud's face. I, just suppose. Mahmud let out his breath and shrugged: Suppose why? Layla's young, she doesn't pay attention to the details of the world. She's just a girl. Layla: I don't know. Mahmud: I must do something to prove to you how much I love you -- I want to die for you. M (taking her hand tenderly). I want you to live for me. Sanaa. Without you I am worth nothing. 211 -- The airplanes released more parachutists behind the wall of the airport, and the parachutes ballooned, one after another, white, like abscesses full of pus. 347 Characters Muhammad Effendi Sulayman, civil servant in the Ministry of Finance and resident of No. 3 Ya'qub Street 5 Saniya Hanim, mother - full figure and light skin is attractive. Mahmud - elder brother, Sulayman's unquestioned favourite Layla - young girl, good at Arabic, politically motivated Isam, Gamila - same age [mother's sister's son / dtr, live in same bldg] Husayn - friend of Mahmud, revolutionary Samia Hanim, Zaynab Hanim: aunts on mother's side Dawlat Hanim: Aunt - she follows the rules of society and marries her dtr Safaa to a rich old man. When Safaa runs away after being tortured, she refuses shelter. Yet has high status in society Adila : friend - tall, practical. Sanaa : friend - romantic, loving Layla, well-off remarks on the translation the translation starts off very well indeed, but it becomes patchy later on... Some plot aspects (e.g. how come Husayn knows Sana's so well) are never revealed. One can sense the translator dithering in whether to give the Arabic term or an english gloss -- halfway through the book, the friend umm starts appearing -- Umm Layla and Umm Gamrila (umm X= mother of X). There are also some ambiguities - e.g. who removes the bloodstain of her first period is a bit unclear in the translation (see above) from Joseph Zeidan: Arab women novelists: the formative years: father refers to daughter as wiliyyah, helpless girl. A huge wall moved stood between [her father] and her, as if they did not speak the same language --background history By 1881, the egyptian elite was tired of European intervention. After a restive demonstration by the Army, the British-supported king, Khedive Tewfiq dismissed his Prime Minister. However, the unrest went on and in April 1882, Tewfiq moved to Alexandria, which was protected by British warships. Eventually, his officials were ousted by nationalists, and army officers under Ahmed Urabi took over the government. However, Brits landed an army (called an "expeditionary" force) at both ends of the Suez canal, and by September, this army had defeated the Egyptians at the Hoda Sharaawi would in 1923, be the first to remove the veil in public, at a Cairo railway station. [The Hizb al-Wafd حزب الوفد (Wafd Party, wafd=delegation) was an influential political party in the 1920s and 30s, and were a key player in drafting the 1923 constitution which suggested a constitutional monarchy for Egypt.] Huda Sharaawi's book, "The Harem years" (mudhakkirat) (1987) is an account of a woman's life in an egyptian elite fami in the 20th century. Sharaawi was married off at 13, but eventually separated from her husband and was able to complete her education. [Badran, Margot. Feminists, Islam and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt. Princeton, NJ: Princeton U. Press (1995), pbok] J In 1922, faced with increasingly violent demonstrations, Britain declared Egyptian independence, establishing a Kingdom of Egypt under King Fuad. After his death in 1936, Farouk became king. At this time, Mussolini annexed Ethiopia, leading to widespread anxiety in Egypt. This was assuaged by the treaty of 1936, in which Britain theoretically withdrew from Egypt, though it retained control over the Suez Canal Zone, which was to be evacuated in 1949. After the ignominious Egyptian defeat in the 1948 Arab-Israeli war (al-nakba) there were widespread charges of royal incompetence and corruption. Fedayeen Widespread protests culminated in armed insurrections by small groups of fedayeen, who were tacitly supported by much of the army and police. These groups of civilians volunteers went to fight the British in the zone around the Suez Canal. On January 25, 1952, at Ismailia (on the Suez), a brutal one-sided suppression of a police barracks harbouring some fedayeen led to widespread riots, called the Cairo Fires, in which 750 buildings were looted and many of them set afire. On 22 July, an army coup led by Nasser evicted the King, Latifa al-Zayyat wrote the immensely popular al-Bab al-maftuh . (1960). In 1966, the American University of Cairo Press instituted the Naguib Mahfouz Medal as an award for untranslated works of contemporary Arabic literature, which would then be translated by the Press. Though al-Bab al-maftuh had been written decades ago, it was one of two books awarded in 1996, the inaugural year of the award. It was translated by Marilyn Booth in 2002, but is no longer available on the press catalogue author bio: Latifa al-Zayyat (1923-96) was born in the city of Damietta in the Nile Delta of Egypt where she received her schooling. Did her BA from Cairo University in

1946. As a student she joined the nationalist movement and was elected General Secretary of the Committee of Students and Workers, and took her doctorate in Arabic Literature from England and was a professor of English at Ain Shams University, Cairo. Two of her novels, *The Owner of the House* and *The Open Door*, have been translated into English. Excerpts from Obituary by Amal Amireh Al-Jadid magazine, Vol. 2 No. 12 (October 1996) Al-Zayyat came of age as a woman, artist, and intellectual through living some of the most defining moments in her country's modern history. She was shaped by events and she helped shape events, emerging in the process as a new model for Arab womanhood. A Moment of Transformation In 1934, an 11-year old girl stood on the balcony of her Al-Mansoura house looking at the street below. A battle was raging: on one side were fellow Egyptians protesting the British presence in their country and a corrupt palace complicit with imperial powers, on the other was the armed police. Open-eyed, the girl watched, and 60 years later, al-Zayyat described how she felt on that blood-stained day: I trembled with feelings of powerlessness, of misery, of oppression, as the bullets of the police killed fourteen demonstrators that day. I screamed for my inability to act, I screamed for my inability to go down to the street to stop the bullets from coming out of the black guns. I shed the child in me and the young woman came of age — prematurely — for I encountered knowledge that went beyond the home to include all of the homeland. My future fate was decided at that moment... Not long after, as a secondary school-student, al-Zayyat took to the streets herself, joining in the anti-British demonstrations. Her political activities would only intensify with time. As an undergraduate at Cairo University, she became involved with leftist groups on campus and in 1946 was elected secretary of The Students' and Workers' National Committee, which led Egypt's independence struggle during that period. The fact that the students and workers should choose a young woman to lead them attests both to the progressive nature of the national movement at the time and to the remarkable abilities of al-Zayyat herself. This early involvement in the national struggle affected al-Zayyat deeply and transformed the polite middle-class woman into a fighter. In al-Zayyat's words, "It was during those years that the timid girl, who had carried her plump body as if it were a sin, developed into a group leader: daring, confronting, arguing, making rapid decisions, and thriving with pride in her abilities." And for preferring the fiery speeches of the barricade to the polite conversations of the living room, al-Zayyat paid a price. She was imprisoned twice at the age of 26 and received a three year suspended jail sentence. But it was worth it. For her early political experience enabled her to form a sense of self that would guide her throughout the rest of her life. She discovered that through activist work, "the personal self dissolved only to be enriched by the collective one." Al-Zayyat described the effects of this dynamic relation between the individual and the group: "I was rendered an active responsible human being, open to my country and my people, and preoccupied with their concerns." She insisted that "paradoxically, one can only find one's self by initially losing it into a much wider issue than one's own subjectivity, into a reality bigger than one's own." *The Open Door to a Glorious Future "Al-Bab al-Maftooh"* (The Open Door , 1960), al-Zayyat's first (and for a long time only) novel, deals with the multiple layers of experience. While not strictly autobiographical, the author revisits her university days and creates a heroine after her own heart. The novel tells the story of Layla, a young woman from the Cairean middle class. Layla's psychological, social, and political growth takes place in the context of the years from 1946 to 1956 — years that witnessed the revolt against the British and the Palace, the Free Officer's Revolution of 1952, Jamal Abdul Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal, and the Israeli-British-French attack that followed. Layla's personal travails begin when she menstruates for the first time, an event which brings tears of humiliation and distress to her father's eyes. Determined to guard his honor against any future stains, he restricts his daughter's movement and arranges for her to marry her cousin. For al-Zayyat, the father represents not only an older generation unable to cope with the realities of life, but also a rotten middle class with no future vision to guide the country. Layla, however, is the New Woman who, thanks to the education her class gave her, developed a different sense of self from the one prescribed by her conservative upbringing. One of the women characters describes her generation's dilemma this way: "Our mothers knew their situation, whereas we are lost. We do not know if we are in a harem or not, or whether love is forbidden or allowed. Our parents say its forbidden, yet the government-run radio sings day and night about love. Books tell women they are free, and yet if a woman really believes that, a catastrophe will happen and her reputation will be blackened." Layla begins to feel empowered when she takes part in anti-British demonstrations: "She was fused in a whole, pushing her forward, embracing her and protecting her. She shouted anew in a voice different from hers, a voice which unified her being with a collective one." Eventually, she becomes a school teacher in Port Said. When the Suez Canal war occurs in 1956 she participates and gains the courage that allows her to break up with her conventional fiancée and attach herself to a revolutionary colleague. "The Open Door" is a pioneering work on many levels. According to the critic Farida al-Naqash it was an expression of a new wave in the Arabic novel, one that combines poetic realism with committed literature. In probing the relationship between nationalism and feminism — in showing their interdependence — al-Zayyat dealt with a complex issue that is still a hot topic of debate among Arab feminists. The novel expresses the optimism of the post-revolutionary period, when a young generation of Egyptian men and women looked forward to a hopeful future. The same novel is now "an impossibility," al-Zayyat said a few years ago. When she wrote it she shared with her audience a common language and a common vision. But things have changed. According to her, "roads to salvation are blocked; the common ground of shared values seem to break down into multiple different sets of values according to the varied social strata; the common sensibility and its language is no more; people lacking national unity are divided and subdivided until each is turned into an insular island." One Egyptian critic recently wrote that his female students don't see themselves in the heroine of "The Open Door. They no longer believe that what Layla achieves by the end of the book is possible for them." "The Open Door" was simultaneously a product of its time and ahead of it. This is perhaps why the cinematic version of the novel, directed by Henry Barakat and starring Fátin Hamama and Mahmoud Mursy, was a commercial failure when it was first released in 1962. Barakat attributes this failure to the audience's opposition to the theme of women's liberation (even though the film alters the ending by showing that the change in the heroine is brought about by the man with whom she falls in love). But the film is well-received now whenever it is shown on Egyptian television, which probably reflects the audience's nostalgia for the by-gone time of high revolutionary tide. Setbacks Ironically, al-Zayyat wrote her most optimistic book at a very difficult period in her life, as if she were turning to the past for help. During her thirteen-year unhappy marriage to Dr. Rashad Rushdi, a right-wing critic with ideological and political views diametrically opposed to hers, she wrote little and left political work altogether. In her autobiography, "Hamlat Taftfeesh: Awraq Shakhseyyah" (Search Operatoin: Personal Papers, 1992) she dissects herself with brutal honesty, describing her condition as one of "paralysis," in which she lost her ability to act. Such a state, she believes, was brought about by her desperate search for personal happiness, which led her to merge herself with her husband. But al-Zayyat discovers that happiness sought at the expense of the integrity and autonomy of the self is "illusionary happiness." "I realize now," she wrote in 1992, "that my love was a loss in the other and that this is an unforgivable crime because I was the one who committed it. For there is no worse crime than burying one's self alive. My hands are stained with my own blood." The marriage ended in 1965 with a painfully public divorce. After the divorce, al-Zayyat resumed her suspended activities. Between 1965 and 1968 she contributed a column on women's issues for *Hawa* (Eve) magazine, and in 1966 she wrote a three-act play called "Bay' wa Shira" (Selling and Buying). This play did not see the light until 1994; al-Zayyat felt that its theme, love versus possession, was trivial next to the horrors of the 1967 Arab defeat against Israel. In "Hamlat Taftfeesh," al-Zayyat wrote that she felt personally responsible for that defeat. A few days after the war, during a meeting attended by 50 of Egypt's most prominent writers, she pointed an accusing finger at her audience and herself: "Each of us is responsible for this defeat," she proclaimed. "If we had said "NO" every time a wrong was done, we would not have been defeated... If all the intellectuals said no, they would not have been able to jail us all." Overwhelmed with feelings of anger and guilt, al-Zayyat the artist stopped writing. "After the 1967 defeat, I hated words and, consequently, literature. I confined my readings to history and economics, and I wrote that a single bullet against the enemy was more significant than all the words in the world..." *New Beginnings* One of al-Zayyat's most important political activities was forming and heading the Committee for the Defense of National Culture, which spearheaded the efforts against the normalization of cultural relations with Israel. In 1981, along with 1,500 other Egyptians including her brother, al-Zayyat was thrown in jail by Sadat. There she learned that her house had been under surveillance for the previous three years. She also found that prison can be a rich experience, "provided one manages to discover her inherent human potential, and to hold to this with all the pride of a human being capable of adapting to all circumstances and also capable of surmounting all circumstances... this experience reveals that person's fundamental nature, either as clay (lacking in form and will), or alternately as ceramic revealing the human ability to shape the self and to create beauty." Prison seems to have rejuvenated al-Zayyat's creativity. She wrote her memoirs while incarcerated. Later, she published a collection of short stories called "al-Shaykhukha wa qisas ukhra" (Old Age and Other Stories, 1986), the novella "Al-Rajul al-lathi 'Arifa Tuhmatuh" (The Man Who Knew His Charge, 1995), and the novel "Sahib el-Beit" (The House Owner, 1995 — the English translation of this book is currently in press). Her autobiography is forthcoming in French, German, and English translations. But for now, the only work available by her in English is the short story "The Picture." "I don't have any regrets," al-Zayyat responded when asked to evaluate her life and achievements. She went on to say: "Perhaps it would have been possible for me to be a better writer, or a better fighter, or a better professor if I had confined myself to one role. But my languages are multiple. And it is through my use of these many languages that I have enriched myself and others." —biarb *The Open Door* is a landmark of women's writing in Arabic. Published in 1960, it was very bold for its time in exploring a middle-class Egyptian girl's coming of sexual and political age, in the context of the Egyptian nationalist movement preceding the 1952 revolution. The novel traces the pressures on young women and young men of that time and class as they seek to free themselves of family control and social expectations. Young Layla and her brother become involved in the student activism of the 1940s and early 1950s and in the popular resistance to continued imperialist rule; the story culminates in the 1956 Suez Crisis, when Gamal Abd al-Nasser's nationalization of the Canal led to a British, French, and Israeli invasion. Not only daring in her themes, Latifa al-Zayyat was also bold in her use of colloquial Arabic, and the novel contains some of the liveliest dialogue in modern Arabic literature. bookexcerptise is maintained by a small group of editors. get in touch with ust bookexcerptise [at] gmail [dot] com. This review by Amit Mukerjee was last updated on : 2015 Apr 02

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