

century discussion of the role of science in society remains flat-footed, barely cognizant of its previous history.

The young Turks championing the modern sciences lacked what Europeans always had, namely, the idea that there are objective techniques and logical means for getting at the truth, what the Greeks (and Newton) called natural philosophy. Such a position assumes that whatever is found out using such means transcends religious and “denominational” boundaries. The new Turks had to convince the traditional knowers (ulema, Turkish; ‘ulama’, Arabic) that there is such a thing as objective knowledge of the natural world (and how it operates), and such knowledge transcends “good and evil,” so that we do not have to question the religious commitments or moral standing of such seekers after truth. These deep philosophical questions elude the writer, who otherwise gives us a valuable starting point. ✂

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HODA A. YOUSEF. *Composing Egypt: Reading, Writing, and the Emergence of a Modern Nation, 1870 – 1930.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016. xv + 245 pages, footnotes, bibliography, index. Cloth US\$65.00 ISBN 978-0-8047-9711-5.

Composing Egypt is an impressive feat of sociocultural historical research, uncovering how practices of reading and writing cultivated at the turn of the twentieth century enabled Egyptian men and women to mediate their interactions in a modernizing world. This book breaks new ground in its unprecedented focus on literacy. Drawing heavily on the emerging field of literacy studies, it is also novel in its application of literacy as a “multiplicity of situated reading and writing practices bound by historical processes, social power structures, and cultural discourses” in understanding the intellectual, political, and cultural movements that arose prior to, during, and after the British occupation of Egypt (5).

Hoda Yousef explores the discourse on and practice of what she terms “public literacies,” arguing that reading, writing, and related practices were employed by all Egyptians, even those who were technically semi-literate or illiterate, through the use of petitions, scribes, and participation in communal readings of printed materials like newspapers and periodicals. The evolving nature of access to literacy allowed Egyptians to take part

in a national conversation of how to reform and improve their society. Crucially, Yousef takes both a top-down and a bottom-up approach, making use of macro-level data on literacy rates and postal and telegraph use, as well as printed texts (newspapers, periodicals, books), letters, telegrams, petitions, and bureaucratic and colonial intelligence reports. She effectively interprets these sources with an attention to reconstructing some of the “humbler origins and uses of literacies,” which are often missed when histories concentrate solely on literacy as it relates to education or on designations of literate versus illiterate (14).

In mapping the more ephemeral aspects of the multiple literacies practiced in public spaces, the scope of Yousef’s study is ambitiously broad. Through an introduction, five chapters, and a conclusion, she examines literacy from the perspective of its everyday practice, gendered access to literacy and its associated practices, literacy as it related to questions of education, literacy as used in political protest and nationalist formation, and the transformation of literacy into a marker of social progress, essential to the imaginings of Egypt as nation.

Yousef’s innovative approach is most evident in her tracing of the disconnect between the idealized functions of literacies as espoused by the educated and intellectuals in print and the everyday practice of literacies which enabled Egyptians to use them in both conventional and subversive ways. In the discourse on the scope of literacy and who should have access to it, the ways in which women and the lower classes should be excluded was a subject of great debate, often limited on moral and religious grounds. While the educated women who wielded the pen negotiated public and private spheres carrying the baggage of their societal limitations, Egyptians of the lower classes, despite often being semi-literate or illiterate, increasingly used practices of literacy to make their burgeoning anti-colonialist, nationalist, and reformist voices heard. Historians have privileged the voices of educated males who wrote in the newspapers, journals, and bureaucratic reports of the day. Yousef uncovers how many more Egyptians than these elite few were dictating their complaints to scribes, listening to newspapers, sending telegrams, and making formal petitions to engage with and transform their world. Perhaps the most evocative example Yousef uses in this regard is the role of public literacies in contextualizing the 1919 revolution, building on the work of Ziad Fahmy’s *Ordinary Egyptians: Creating the Modern Nation through Popular Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011). At a time when British military censors were monitoring Egyptian popular publications and means of communication, nationalists used the more subversive methods of petitions, printed notices, pamphlets, and circulars to inspire communal

readings, public gatherings, and street protests in both urban and rural spaces. Yet these performances of public literacies through the tool of visual print culture privileged the literate, as only those who could produce the written word could disseminate it to literate and illiterate Egyptians alike.

There is little to critique about *Composing Egypt*, though as can be expected for a work that strives to be so comprehensive, it suffers from a lack of organizational clarity. The chapters are categorized thematically rather than chronologically, and as such the temporal context for many of the examples discussed can be unclear, especially in the first three chapters. Further, chapter 3 deals with earlier discourse on literacies as related to education, and would be better juxtaposed with the final chapter on the emergence of the concept of illiteracy, and its role in underwriting the idea of mass education, crucial to imaginings of the new, modern Egypt. These are minor details; Yousef's work is a unique and important contribution, nuancing our understanding of literacy, but also gender, nationalism, and modernity at a time when developments related to the practices of reading and writing in Egypt, the literary center of the Arabic-speaking world, would have a wide impact on the greater Middle East. ✂

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