

# ANĀ ḤURRAH (I AM FREE) FROM NOVEL TO FILM: WITNESS TO THE 1952 EGYPTIAN REVOLUTION

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*This article analyzes the differences between the novel *Anā ḥurrah* (I Am Free), published in 1954 and written by the Egyptian author and journalist Iḥsān ‘Abd al-Quddūs, and its adaptation to the cinema, released in 1959 and directed by the Egyptian filmmaker Ṣalāḥ Abū Sayf. The article studies how the profound social and political changes that took place in the intervening five years in Egyptian society affected the perception and representation of the plot. While the film retained the primary story line, major variations in background elements and secondary characters reflected the new post-revolutionary political and social Egyptian milieu, especially after Ḡamāl ‘Abd al-Nāṣir became president. The article shows how the story became politicized in its cinematic adaptation to fulfill the requirements of a post-monarchical Egypt in search of a new national identity.*

## 1. Introduction

The novel *Anā ḥurrah* (I Am Free), first published in 1954 but set in pre-revolutionary Egypt, describes the struggle of a young Egyptian woman to be free, to unchain herself from tradition and demand her right to take her own decisions. The story begins when she is thirteen, living with her aunt’s family in Cairo, and ends when she is over thirty, after having achieved her dream of higher education and economic independence, and tied to the man she has always loved.

*Anā ḥurrah*’s plot is consistent with a trend in other stories by Iḥsān ‘Abd al-Quddūs (1919-1990) who wrote a number of works of fiction in which women struggle to reconcile themselves with the world around them, and battle to find balance in their lives. ‘Abd al-Quddūs’s stories consistently sold well when they were first published and many were adapted to the cinema, as were works by other contemporary authors of popular fiction such as Naḡīb Maḥfūz or Yūsuf al-Sibā’ī<sup>1</sup>. *Anā ḥurrah* was directed by Ṣalāḥ Abū Sayf, who also directed six other adaptations of ‘Abd al-Quddūs’s fiction.

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<sup>1</sup> For some examples of literary works adapted to the cinema, see Faṭḥī al-‘Aṣrī, *al-Qiṣṣah wa ‘l-ḥiwār fī aḡḡal mi’at fīlm miṣrī*, in *Miṣr, mi’at sanat sīnimā*, i’ḡād wa taqḡīm Aḥmad Ra’fat Baḡgat, Maḥraḡān al-Qāhirah al-Sīnimā’ī al-Dawlī al-‘Iṣrīn, al-Qāhirah 1996, pp. 219-221.

The movie was produced in 1958 and it was first released in January 1959, in Cairo and Alexandria.

A careful comparison between the novel and the film reveals fundamental differences between them. Some variations may reflect simplifications for cinematic convenience, but others almost certainly reflect Egypt's changing political climate and social mores between 1954 and 1959. Among the changes which visually abbreviate complex situations in the novel for cinemagoers, in the film, the main character, a young woman named Amīnah who lives with her aunt, has only one cousin, whereas in the novel, she has three. In the novel, Amīnah has a boyfriend while studying at the American University in Cairo (AUC) and only towards the end of the novel is she able to converse with 'Abbās, the man who has dominated her thoughts since her childhood; in the film, 'Abbās has a speaking role from the start and Amīnah does not have a boyfriend at AUC. These changes, which reduce the number of characters and clarify relationships, may have originated from nothing more profound than the director's desire to simplify the plot and reduce expenses.

However, there are other differences between the film and the novel that reflect the growing and deepening social and political implications of 'Abd al-Nāṣir's supremacy after Egypt's 1952 revolution. Making the film in 1958 offered the director a chance to portray Egyptians' dissatisfaction with their society during pre-revolutionary times, and thereby to support the revolution's ideals and goals, and to strengthen 'Abd al-Nāṣir's regime.

Differences between the film and the novel also include the distortion of certain elements of the novel's pre-revolutionary setting that are no longer present or accepted in Egypt's new society. For example, by 1959 most Jews had left Egypt, an exodus in the aftermath of the Arab-Israeli war of 1948, Israeli raids into Gaza in 1955, and the Suez Crisis of 1956. The Jewish elements of the story, which play a major role in the novel, are altered and negatively portrayed in the movie.

The article studies the differences between the novel and the film that were motivated by the political changes that Egypt experienced after the 1952 revolution, both at the national level and on the international scene. It provides an example of how film adaptations can be politicized through changes in the characters and in the background setting, transmitting a political message that was not intended in the original story from which the movie took its plot.

## 2. Anā Hurrah: *Novel and Movie*

*Anā hurrah*'s author, Iḥsān 'Abd al-Quddūs, was born in 1919 in Cairo and was the son of Muḥammad 'Abd al-Quddūs, actor and writer of plays and poetry, and Fāṭimah Yūsuf, best known as Rūz al-Yūsuf, an actress and later

publisher and editor of the magazine “Rūz al-Yūsuf”. ‘Abd al-Quddūs grows up in his paternal grandfather’s home after his parents separated. His grandfather was very religious and conservative, contrasting with the more liberal society in which his parents lived. His mother’s behavior and life contradicted and opposed the values in which his grandfather intended to live. He was therefore exposed during his childhood to two extremes of the Egyptian society of that time, the conservative society of his grandfather’s household and the liberal society of his parents. ‘Abd al-Quddūs himself wrote that exposure to these two types of life left a fundamental impact in the formation of his personality and his mentality<sup>2</sup>.

The writer’s childhood environment deeply affected not only his personality, but also his writings. It is not difficult to associate the figure of his mother, Rūz al-Yūsuf, a liberated and independent woman, with the struggle for independence of many of the female protagonists in his novels and short stories. Most of ‘Abd al-Quddūs’s heroines are young women who refused to follow traditions, who tried to make their own decisions and to be the designers of their own lives. Many women who lived in the Egypt of the 1940s and 1950s also experienced the tensions between tradition and modernity and could easily relate to the writer’s heroines. This, together with the simplicity and clarity of his style, made him the most popular writer in the Arab world, as he sold more copies of his works than any other writer of his generation<sup>3</sup>.

‘Abd al-Quddūs made a name as a journalist as well as a fiction writer. He worked and wrote for “Rūz al-Yūsuf”, “Aḥbār al-yawm”, and “al-Ahrām” among other publications. ‘Abd al-Quddūs was especially interested in political issues and he was very critical in his opinions, both in the pre-revolutionary period and the post-revolutionary period. His articles about the defective weapons used in the Arab-Israeli War in 1948 are good examples of his political activism through his journalistic writings. His criticism against the British took him to prison in 1945 and, despite his personal friendship with president Ḡamāl ‘Abd al-Nāṣir and future president Anwār al-Sādāt, he wrote three articles against the Egyptian Revolutionary Command Council in 1954 that made him spend over three months in an isolated cell in a military prison<sup>4</sup>. ‘Abd al-Quddūs was also a target of at least two assassination attempts, one of which, in 1975, was attributed to Libya’s then-dictator Mu‘ammar al-Qaḍḍāfi<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Nirmīn al-Quwaysnī, *Iḥsān ‘Abd al-Quddūs. Ams. Wa ’l-yawm. Wa ḡad<sup>am</sup>*, Dīyāsīk, al-Qāhirah 1991, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> R. Allen, *The Arabic Novel. An Historical and Critical Introduction*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse (NY) 1982, pp. 95-96.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Abū ‘Awf, *Iḥsān ‘Abd al-Quddūs bayna ’l-ṭaqāfah wa ’l-rivāyah*, al-Maḡlis al-‘Alā li ’l-Ṭaqāfah, al-Qāhirah 2006, pp. 63, 79.

*Anā ḥurrah* was ‘Abd al-Quddūs’s fourth published fictional work and his first published novel. When it appeared on bookshelves, Egypt was entering a new political era after the abolition of the monarchy of King Fārūq following the Free Officers’ takeover in 1952. The novel takes place before the revolution, however, and social rather than political issues dominate its pages. ‘Abd al-Quddūs wrote in the introduction of the second published edition, in 1959, that the story’s background had been taken from his own life, with places and people that could be recognized from his past. The ‘Abbāsiyyah neighborhood of Cairo, where most of the novel is set and which almost becomes a character with a life and personality of its own, was the neighborhood where ‘Abd al-Quddūs lived during his childhood.

The plot of the novel, despite the abundance of characters and events, is straightforward. The main character of the story is Amīnah, a young woman whose divorced parents left her in her aunt’s home as an infant. Since her early childhood, she rebelled against her host family, opposing the ideas, customs and restrictions in their household. She adopted a defensive attitude and contradicted all that was expected from her. In her teens, she escaped from her neighborhood of al-‘Abbāsiyyah, which she saw as backward and oppressive, and spent most of her free time with her Jewish friends in al-Zāhir neighborhood. After Amīnah refused a marriage proposal, her aunt refused to lodge her any more, and she moved in with her father and pursued a degree at the American University in Cairo. There, the young woman started a relationship of convenience with one of her male classmates, but the two broke up as soon as they graduated. Apparently successful and liberated, she found a position at an American company and attained financial independence. But Amīnah realized that she was a slave of her job, especially after contacting her childhood neighbor ‘Abbās, now working as a journalist. Their relationship developed into a love story and Amīnah gave up her high-paying, time-consuming job for a simpler one in order to be able to spend more with her beloved, whom – in the novel – she never marries.

Like ‘Abd al-Quddūs, the director of the cinematic version of *Anā ḥurrah*, Ṣalāḥ Abū Sayf, was born in Cairo in the second decade of the twentieth century, in the working class quarter of Būlāq. Abū Sayf started his career in the cinema industry in 1934 in *Studio Misr*, and in 1939, he became the assistant to Kamāl Salīm in the production of *al-‘Azīmah* (Determination), considered one of the most famous movies in Egyptian history<sup>6</sup>. Abū Sayf directed his first movie, *Dā’im<sup>an</sup> fī qalbī* (Always in my Heart), in 1946, but did not achieve commercial success until his sixth solo effort, *Laka yawm yā zālim* (Your Day will Come), directed in 1951 and written in collaboration with

<sup>5</sup> Nirmīn al-Quwayasnī, *Iḥsān ‘Abd al-Quddūs. Ams. Wa ’l-yawm. Wa gad<sup>an</sup>*, cit., pp. 265-266.

<sup>6</sup> O. Leaman, *Companion Encyclopedia of Middle Eastern and North African Film*, Routledge, London-New York 2001, p. 90.

Nağīb Maḥfūz<sup>7</sup>. Abū Sayf is known as «the realist moviemaker»<sup>8</sup>, being one of the pioneers of the Egyptian cinematic realism<sup>9</sup>.

Abū Sayf's eighteenth movie, *Anā ḥurrah*, was produced by Ramsīs Nağīb in 1958 but first released in Egyptian theaters on January 11, 1959<sup>10</sup>. 'Abd al-Quddūs's novel was transformed into a screenplay by Nağīb Maḥfūz, and Lubnah 'Abd al-'Azīz and Šukrī Sarḥān were its main stars, playing the characters of Amīnah and 'Abbās.

The movie *Anā ḥurrah* preserves the main plot points of the original novel, albeit with some variations. As in the novel, Amīnah lives her early life and adolescence with her aunt's family in the 'Abbāsiyyah neighborhood. When she refuses to marry a suitor because of ideological disagreements and insists on earning a university degree, she moves in with her father and becomes the master of her own life. After graduation, Amīnah starts working in a private company and renews her relationship with her childhood neighbor, 'Abbās, a journalist who writes political articles against colonialism and the corrupt regime. At the end, both Amīnah and 'Abbās are arrested for his political activities and, as a final scene, they get married while imprisoned, three days before the July 23 revolution.

### 3. *Politicization of the Environment: Modifications that Reflect the Change of an Era*

Abū Sayf's movie, released four years after Ğamāl 'Abd al-Nāṣir assumed the presidency of Egypt in 1954, politicizes the final events of the story to make the main characters supporters and partisans of the revolution. Offered to the public in 1959, the film portrayed the story as clearly opposing the monarchical regime, anticipating future events (from the characters' points of view) and participating in the formation of the viewers' more modern and fundamentally better Egypt. Although 'Abd al-Quddūs was a brazen political critic throughout his journalistic career, in this particular work of fiction, *Anā ḥurrah*, 'Abd al-Quddūs the novelist does not focus on a political message.

<sup>7</sup> Abū Sayf and Maḥfūz worked together for many years and, during this period, Maḥfūz wrote the script of some of Abū Sayf's movies. Some of Maḥfūz's literary works were also adapted to the cinema by Abū Sayf, such as *Bidāyah wa nihāyah* (Beginning and End, 1960) and *al-Qāhirah 30* (Cairo 30, 1966), adapted from Maḥfūz's novel *al-Qāhirah al-Ġadīdah* (1945).

<sup>8</sup> Kamal Ramzi, *Les sources littéraires*, in Magda Wassef (sous la direction de), *Egypte. 100 ans de cinéma*, Éditions Plume: Institut du monde arabe, Paris 1995, p. 226.

<sup>9</sup> O. Leaman, *Companion Encyclopedia of Middle Eastern and North African Film*, cit., p. 90.

<sup>10</sup> For all the details about the movie and its production, see *Miṣr; mi'at sanat sīnimā, i'dād wa taqdim Aḥmad Ra'fat Bahğat*, cit., p. 136.

Social topics dominate ‘Abd al-Quddūs’s novel, while political issues drive the story in Abū Sayf’s film<sup>11</sup>. The key elements of *Anā ḥurrah* the novel reflect social rather than political tensions, as Amīnah struggles to liberate herself from traditional social restrictions on women rather than political disenfranchisement. The following sections analyze changes present in the movie which clearly reflect the politicization of the story.

### 3.1 Revolutionary Symbols

Most of the differences between the novel and the movie influenced by Egypt’s political transformation are directly expressed in the portrayal of revolutionary symbols in the movie. The differences include both imagery and the characters’ roles.

#### *Amīnah and ‘Abbās*

‘Abbās, Amīnah’s love interest, is one of the main characters in the story. In the novel, love represents an object of obsession and source of frustration for the young lady. The first six chapters reveal little about him: only that his stride is strong and that, unlike other young men who live in al-‘Abbāsiyyah, he ignores Amīnah publicly. However, his ears become «two pieces of liver»<sup>12</sup> every time she passes by him, a blushing reaction that represents a

<sup>11</sup> This is supported by the strong criticisms that ‘Abd al-Quddūs received after the publication of *Anā ḥurrah*. The novel was first published only two years after the revolution and ‘Abd al-Quddūs was accused of not being able to go beyond this kind of plot, which did not serve any cause. It is said that the Egyptian writer ‘Abbās Maḥmūd al-‘Aqqād even described ‘Abd al-Quddūs’s literature as «Adab firāš» (bed literature). ‘Abd al-Quddūs responded after the 1956 war with the publication of his novel *Lā tuṭfi’ al-šams* (Don’t Put Out the Sun, 1960) and with the story *al-Baḥt ‘an zābiṭ* (Searching for an Officer), which was intended as script for a movie but finally ended as a part of his collection *Damī wa dumū’ī wa ‘btisāmatī* (My Blood, My Tears and My Smile, 1973). Political events were the basis of the plots of these two stories, but they never attracted the attention of the audience or became as popular as his other stories. It is interesting to note that the words attributed to al-‘Aqqād are mentioned in many sources (for example see: Zaynab ‘Abd al-Razzāq, *Iḥsān ‘Abd al-Quddūs. Ma‘ārik al-ḥubb wa ‘l-siyāsah*, al-Dār al-Miṣriyyah al-Lubnāniyyah, al-Qāhirah 2020, p. 142), but not the context and occasion which tie them to al-‘Aqqād directly. Egyptian writer and literary critic Dr. Amānī Fu’ād, during a January 2021 program about ‘Abd al-Quddūs on Egyptian channel TeN TV, mentioned that the words had definitely been used to define ‘Abd al-Quddūs’s work, but she herself could not find any evidence that it was al-‘Aqqād who said them. Cf. *Ḍikrā wafāt Iḥsān ‘Abd al-Quddūs*, in *Ra’ī ‘āmm*, TeN TV, 13 January 2021, <https://ar-ar.facebook.com/TeNTVEG/videos/406639757084828/> (accessed 04 February 2022).

sign of victory for Amīnah who knows that, even if ‘Abbās seems to ignore her, he is aware of her presence.

In the novel, Amīnah as a child never talks to ‘Abbās, but she keeps thinking about him obsessively after she sets out from al-‘Abbāsiyyah as a young adult. Only when she becomes an employee in a private company does she decide to surrender to her obsession and contact the man directly. It is then that the reader discovers that ‘Abbās studied law at a university and, at the time Amīnah contacts him, he also writes articles in the press. In the first meeting between Amīnah and ‘Abbās, he portrays himself as a nationalist<sup>13</sup> with leftist tendencies<sup>14</sup>. Later, he reveals<sup>15</sup> that most of his friends share his political thoughts and suffered imprisonment because of them, though he offers only a brief explanation of what his ideas actually are<sup>16</sup>. ‘Abbās’s political stands against colonialism and government corruption are confined to Chapter Eight of the novel and they never affect the events of the plot.

In the film, though, ‘Abbās’s revolutionary ideas have a major role in the story and directly affect the development of the plot. From the very beginning of the movie, he is portrayed as a political activist and underground militant who is directly involved in outlawed activities against colonialism and the corrupt Egyptian regime. In one of the first scenes in which ‘Abbās appears (minute 20), he discusses with other young men the organization of a strike in the country.

The film also embellishes Amīnah’s participation in political activities and their consequences on her life. In the closing chapters of the novel, Amīnah meets ‘Abbās’s friends and reads his articles as a natural consequence of their relationship. She never takes part in any political activity by herself, and never gets punished or rewarded for activism. She explicitly and unmistakably participates in political activities in the movie, and they trigger the final events of the plot, which completely differ from the novel. In the movie, ‘Abbās asks Amīnah to type and print copies of a political pamphlet at her home using her office’s machinery. The woman is arrested by the police at her home in an inspection while printing these pamphlets. At the end of the movie, she asks ‘Abbās to marry her while they are both imprisoned, and the marriage contract is signed on July 20, 1952, which 1959 Egyptian audiences were well aware was three days before the revolution that overthrew King Fārūq.

The last scene of the film, in which the main characters sign their marriage contract, is absent from the novel and presents a clear political state-

<sup>12</sup> All page references refer to the 2009 printing in Cairo by “Aḥbār al-Yawm”. Iḥsān ‘Abd al-Quddūs, *Anā ḥurrah*, Aḥbār al-Yawm, al-Qāhirah 2009, p. 60.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

ment that the protagonists were participants in a grassroots revolution. In another scene toward the end of the movie – once again, a scene that did not occur in the novel –, a police inspector interrogates Amīnah about her political activities in presence of her father in a police station. When Amīnah tries to assume all responsibility and exonerate ‘Abbās from all the charges, the police officer falsely informs her that the man is dead. The young woman breaks down and the police can prove their mutual involvement in a conspiracy against the regime. This scene portrays the police of the old regime as an evil force, which lies and manipulates good people’s loyalties. At the end of the scene, Amīnah and ‘Abbās are shown together on the right side of the screen, in juxtaposition to the police officer and a portrait of King Fārūq on the left, representing a good-evil pair. The scene closes with the camera moving towards the portrait of the king on the wall, zooming into the image of the king, who remains the last – and approving – witness of the interrogator’s vile methods. This is done without any dialogue, accompanied only by a dramatic melody. The king, then, is portrayed as part of the evil side, and the portrait’s high position in the room where the events take place makes him witness and supporter of the police behavior. In the novel, ‘Abd al-Quddūs never mentioned the king at all.

*The Ṭarbūš, from Respected Mark of Status to Symbol of Oppression*

After the July 23, 1952 revolution, the *ṭarbūš* was no longer part of military uniforms and ceased to be worn by government employees in their official capacities<sup>17</sup>. It was considered a symbol of the old regime and a remnant of Ottoman influence in Egypt. The royal family, descendant from Muḥammad ‘Alī, always wore the *ṭarbūš* in official portraits, and it was part of the military uniform and the attire of the most highly educated classes and government employees, the *Effendiyya*. During the monarchy, the *ṭarbūš* was a symbol of prestige and it served to differentiate educated Egyptians wearing Western clothes from actual Westerners<sup>18</sup>.

The treatment of the *ṭarbūš* varies considerably from the novel to the movie. In the novel, the *ṭarbūš* does not have the negative connotations that it has in the movie. The only time in which it is explicitly mentioned in the novel is when Amīnah visits the area of Cairo University, then called Fu’ād I University, and one student approaches her to ask in which faculty she studies<sup>19</sup>: he is described as wearing a «tall *ṭarbūš*»<sup>20</sup>. A few paragraphs before

<sup>17</sup> I. Gershoni; J. Janskovsky, *Confronting Fascism in Egypt: Dictatorship versus Democracy in the 1930s*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2009, p. 54.

<sup>18</sup> N. Reynolds, *A City Consumed: Urban Commerce, the Cairo Fire, and the Politics of Decolonization in Egypt*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2012, p. 97.

<sup>19</sup> Iḥsān ‘Abd al-Quddūs, *Anā ḥurrah*, cit., p. 53.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.



that mention, Amīnah shows great respect for university students, looking at them as if they were «gods of science and gods of nationalism»<sup>21</sup>. In the movie, though, the university students do not wear the *ṭarbūš*. There are no other references to it in the novel, but the single mention clearly contrasts with its portrayal in the movie. As with other symbols, reminders of the old regime, acquire elements of negativity in the movie.

In the movie, the *ṭarbūš* is prominently and consistently worn by Amīnah's uncle, a negative character who is portrayed as tyrannical to the rest of his family. The man always wears it outside the house and sometimes inside it as well and, when he does not wear the *ṭarbūš* at home, we see it hanging by the door. King Fārūq also wears a *ṭarbūš* in his portrait in the police station, as does the police officer who arrests Amīnah. 'Abbās, on the other hand, who is the hero of the story, never wears one in any scene, whether indoors or out. The *ṭarbūš*, then, appears as a silent symbol of pre-revolutionary Egypt, of the old regime, and as a sign of tyranny.

### 3.2. *The Jewish Community: the Distortion of a Group*

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Egypt's demographic mix included a sizeable Jewish minority concentrated mainly in the country's largest cities. Although not numerically comparable to the Muslim and Christian populations, the Jewish minority in Egypt grew significantly as a result of the Egyptian economic boom of the 1860s, when Egyptian cotton replaced American cotton in most European markets<sup>22</sup>. The Jewish population grew from 6,000-7,000 individuals at the beginning of the nineteenth century to approximately 25,000 by 1900, reaching 75,000-80,000 during the twentieth century's interwar period<sup>23</sup>.

The Jewish population that lived in Egypt before the nineteenth century did not occupy high government or commercial positions. However, many families who arrived after 1860, especially those descending from Iberian Jews and others coming from areas around the Mediterranean Basin, were able to reach high levels in the society due to their education and experience in trade, finance, and manufacturing. Most of these post-1860 immigrants were fluent in European languages, especially French, and a number of Jews who took Egyptian citizenship also participated in political activities with other citizens of minority heritage<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> J.M.R. Oppenheim, *Egypt and the Sudan*, in R. Spector Simon; M.M. Laskiers; S. Reger (eds.), *The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa in Modern Times*, Columbia University Press, New York 2003, p. 411.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 412.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 423.

The situation of the Jewish population in Egypt changed radically after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. Despite Zionism being a marginal movement among Egyptian Jews, emigration to Israel increased after the Egyptian defeat in the war of 1948-1949. Israel's establishment and victory over Egyptian forces provoked attacks against Egyptian Jews and their properties. Although intercommunal tension calmed and emigration slowed after the 1952 regime change in Egypt, the Lavon affair of 1954 and the Israeli raid into the Egyptian-held Gaza Strip in 1955 eroded this stability and the Suez War of 1956 marked a point of no return for Egyptian Jewry. In addition to attacks perpetrated by individuals or groups on Jewish people and their properties, the Egyptian Nationality Law of November 1956 formally legislated discriminatory measures against Jews<sup>25</sup>. Mass arrests, expulsions of French and British nationals, and 'Abd al-Nāṣir's nationalization measures destroyed the businesses in private hands. Most Jews were forced to leave Egypt and, at the end of the 1950s, there were no more than 10,000 Jews left in the country<sup>26</sup>.

*Anā Ḥurrah, a Bridge Built over the Suez War*

The situation of the Egyptian Jewish community when Iḥsān 'Abd al-Quddūs wrote the novel had dramatically deteriorated by the time Ṣalāḥ Abū Sayf directed the movie. The presence of the Jewish community was still significant and respected when 'Abd al-Quddūs wrote his work, although the novel acknowledges and portrays attacks against Jews and clashes between Jewish neighborhoods and adjoining non-Jewish ones<sup>27</sup>. Before the 1952 revolution, Israel was not at the top of the Free Officers' agenda. 'Abd al-Nāṣir is said to have declared that Egypt's enemies at the time of the revolution were «our superior officers, other Arabs, the British, and the Israelis, in that order»<sup>28</sup>, and that the Free Officers' priorities were to expel the British and develop the country<sup>29</sup>. The British were the main enemy at the time of the revolution. The situation started to change while 'Abd al-Quddūs was writing his novel but, narrating past events, the Jewish minority was still an important presence in Cairo.

The Jewish neighborhood al-Zāḥir occupies a significant role in the first half of Iḥsān 'Abd al-Quddūs's novel *Anā ḥurrah*. 'Abd al-Quddūs himself was familiar with al-Zāḥir neighborhood because he had lived in an adjoin-

<sup>25</sup> G. Krämer, *The Jews in Modern Egypt, 1914-1952*, University of Washington Press, Seattle 1989, p. 217.

<sup>26</sup> These numbers kept decreasing in the following years and, in 1980s, the number of Jews living in Egypt was believed to be less than 400.

<sup>27</sup> Iḥsān 'Abd al-Quddūs, *Anā ḥurrah*, cit., p. 55.

<sup>28</sup> L.M. James, *Nasser at War: Arab Images of the Enemy*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke (UK)-New York 2006, p. 7.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

ing neighborhood, al-‘Abbāsiyyah, during his childhood. He even worked in a friend’s shop next to the Jewish quarter, and therefore his knowledge of the Jewish population in Cairo was by first-hand observation. This contact with the Jewish population is manifest in some of his stories, especially in *Lā tatrūkūnī hunā waḥdī* (Don’t Leave me Alone Here, 1979), *Ayna ṣadīqatī al-yahūdiyyah?* (Where is my Jewish Friend?, 1975), and *Kānat ṣa‘bat<sup>am</sup> wa maḡrūrat<sup>am</sup>* (She was Difficult and Conceited, 1986), which have Jewish main characters<sup>30</sup>.

In *Anā ḥurrah*, ‘Abd al-Quddūs provides abundant information about the struggles between the Egyptian Jewish and Muslim communities and the attacks against the Jewish communities, which are caused, he notes, «by religious fundamentalism and the hatred toward the Jews deriving from fictitious stories about them»<sup>31</sup>. He also describes in detail some Jewish holidays, such as Yom Kippur, Passover and Purim<sup>32</sup>, and he even attempts to transliterate into Arabic as *Ḥaḡ Simāḡ* the Hebrew holiday greeting *Chag Sameach*<sup>33</sup>. These descriptions show both ‘Abd al-Quddūs’s knowledge of the Jewish community and its traditions and his powers of observation as a working journalist.

‘Abd al-Quddūs particularizes the Cairene Jewish community in the family of dressmaker *Sitt* Mary, a Jewish woman who lives with her children in one of the apartments in al-Zāhir neighborhood<sup>34</sup>. She has two children, a daughter, Fortuny, friend of Amīnah, and a son, Elie, who is a bank employee who also gives private dance lessons. Fortuny, in addition to being a student at high school, tutors French at home. These character sketches correspond to the diverse backgrounds of many Francophone Jewish families who emigrated to Egypt after the economic boom of the 1860s.

This Jewish family, especially Fortuny, plays an important role in Amīnah’s adolescence. Despite feeling socially superior to them<sup>35</sup>, Amīnah seeks their company to rebel against her immediate surroundings. As ‘Abd al-Quddūs mentions in the novel, the young women from al-‘Abbāsiyyah were not supposed to go to the al-Zāhir neighborhood alone, and they could only go on certain occasions<sup>36</sup>. Amīnah, in her constant desire of rebelling against her environment, frequently goes to visit Fortuny, whom she considers to be

<sup>30</sup> For a more detailed description of ‘Abd al-Quddūs’s Jewish characters, see the work by Raṣād ‘Abd Allāh al-Šāmī, *al-Šaḡsiyyah al-yahūdiyyah fī adab Iḥsān ‘Abd al-Quddūs*, Dār al-Hilāl, al-Qāhirah 1992.

<sup>31</sup> Iḥsān ‘Abd al-Quddūs, *Anā ḥurrah*, cit., p. 53.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 83-85.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>34</sup> The mother of the main character in ‘Abd al-Quddūs’s story *Ayna ṣadīqatī al-yahūdiyyah?*, Gladys, is also a dressmaker, and her family is very similar to the Jewish family described in *Anā ḥurrah*.

<sup>35</sup> Iḥsān ‘Abd al-Quddūs, *Anā ḥurrah*, cit., pp. 56-57.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

truly free. She hears from Fortuny about Paris, cinema, clothes, and other topics great and small that are hardly spoken of in al-‘Abbāsiyyah. She also participates in her friend’s religious holidays and becomes a regular visitor of many Jewish households.

The Jewish characters have a prominent role in the novel and interactions with them represent a significant stage in Amīnah’s character development. In the movie, however, the Jewish identity of *Sitt Mary*’s family is blurred and there are no direct mentions of the Jewish neighborhood or any Jewish presence. The 1959 Egyptian viewer may have deduced the Jewish identity of the characters because Fortuny – called Vicky in the film – works at *Cicurel* and dates *Monsieur Murād*. *Cicurel* was the name of a major department store in Cairo owned by the Jewish family of that name<sup>37</sup>, and Murād was a surname associated with Egyptian Jews at the time, prominent among them the singer and actress Laylā Murād.

In 1958, when Ṣalāḥ Abū Sayf directed the movie, the Jewish population in Egypt had decreased significantly. The Suez Crisis marked a final turning point in the relations between Egypt and Israel and their rivalry, which was of secondary importance to the Egyptian state at the time of the revolution, became a priority after 1955. Despite the efforts of some of the Jewish leaders in Egypt to differentiate between Israel, Zionism, and the Jews<sup>38</sup>, ‘Abd al-Nāṣir started mixing the terms in his public statements in 1955, conflating individuals and concepts.

After the Israeli raid on an Egyptian military base in the Gaza Strip in February 1955, ‘Abd al-Nāṣir started suspecting a connection between Israel and the United States, which at the time refused to export weapons to Egypt. ‘Abd al-Nāṣir thought that the US government was «trying to keep Egypt weak and that this resulted from Jewish influence»<sup>39</sup>. In a Radio Cairo broadcast on January 12, 1956, Nasser said that «Peace between us and the Jews is impossible. As far as we are concerned, it is a matter of life and death, not a dispute over frontiers or interest»<sup>40</sup>. These sentiments show that by 1956, ‘Abd al-Nāṣir and official media started to portray the Jewish community living in Egypt as part of a universal Jewish entity instead of as a local Egyptian community.

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<sup>37</sup> J. Beinlin, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry: Culture, Politics, and the Formation of a Modern Diaspora*, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles 1998, p. 48.

<sup>38</sup> G. Krämer, *The Jews in Modern Egypt*, cit., pp. 188-194; and I. Gershoni; J. Jankovskyy, *Confronting Fascism in Egypt*, cit., p. 163.

<sup>39</sup> L.M. James, *Nasser at War*, cit., p. 13.

<sup>40</sup> *Nasser’s Pattern of Aggression: captured documents reveal army and fedayeen roles in Egyptian plot against peace*, Israel Office of Information, New York 1957, p. 28.

It was in this political environment when *Anā ḥurrah*, the movie, was produced<sup>41</sup>. The emigration of Egyptian Jews was fully underway and Jews were perceived as the enemy. Under these circumstances, the Jewish neighborhood as a unit was erased from the film adaptation of *Anā ḥurrah* and the family of Mary the dressmaker – whose Jewish identity was inferred but never directly mentioned – was shown as liberal bordering on morally depraved, with a semi-naked statue in the main room and a picture of a shirtless male body-builder on Vicky's wall.

Two elements in the film are especially significant in debasing the Jewish identity of the novel's characters and in negatively portraying Fortuny-Vicky and her friends. As described in the novel, Amīnah arrives home late one evening after having been to a celebration of the Jewish holiday of Purim with Fortuny's family and friends. The movie maintains Amīnah's late arrival and shows images of a party, in which Vicky's family and friends are portrayed laughing, drinking excessively, and dancing. Vicky's mother associates the festivities with an unspecified religious occasion, but they are in a party in which people drink alcohol and dance. After the party, the debauchery degenerates further, as Amīnah goes to the desert with her friend, and all but her start dancing, hugging, and kissing around "the tree of love". Amīnah looks completely out of place among the group, and her discomfort in the scene distances her from her friends.

A second element that calls into question the Egyptianness of the novel's Jewish characters is the way they are referred to in the film by Amīnah's neighbors. In two scenes, one taking place in a gathering of women and the other when Amīnah arrives home late after the party mentioned above, her neighbors refer to Vicky and her friend as «ḥawāḡāt sakrānīn», drunk "foreigners" (minute 26 and minute 35). *Ḥawāḡah*, translated as "foreigner", is a word used in Egypt to describe or address non-natives, or those who behave as if they were not natives.

The Jewish community, then, is transformed from being an integral and respected part of the plot in *Anā ḥurrah* the novel, to have a blurred identity and treatment as foreigners or degenerates in *Anā ḥurrah* the movie. This is probably one of the most politicized features of the movie, which alters the characters and the events from the novel to make them fit into the political situation of Egypt in the late fifties.

### 3.3. Portrayal of American Symbols

A fair number of Egyptian intellectuals throughout the 1930s and early 1940s admired US policies, comparing them favorably against those of the

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<sup>41</sup> For a description of how the Jews are portrayed in Egyptian cinema of the twentieth century, see V. Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema. Gender, Class, and Nation*, American University in Cairo Press, Cairo-New York 2007, pp. 23-40.

European powers, especially Germany and Italy. The United States under President Franklin D. Roosevelt proved that a country could be a vibrant democracy and, at the same time, make great strides economically and socially and compete on the world stage<sup>42</sup>. The United States represented a model of self-improvement in a country which, after a grave economic depression, was capable of maintaining social values, democracy, and equality.

This Egyptian spirit of admiration for US policies, people, and institutions declined precipitously in the 1950s, however. Despite an initial friendly relationship between post-revolutionary Egypt and the United States, in which both countries perceived an opportunity to ally for mutual benefit, 'Abd al-Nāṣir dropped his moderate position after the events of 1955. Egypt's clashes with Israel in the mid-fifties combined with US restrictions on arms exports to Egypt contributed to Egyptian suspicion that the United States was on the side of Israel, and changed the official Egyptian view of the US<sup>43</sup>. Also, the US condition that Egypt had to normalize its relations with Israel as a pre-requisite for financing construction of the Aswan High Dam provoked Egyptian distrust and changed the relations between the two countries<sup>44</sup>. This foreign policy environment, together with a post-revolutionary, post-colonial zeal to Egyptianize society, made the portrayal of American symbols in the 1959 movie completely different than in the 1954 novel.

In the novel, Amīnah matriculates at the American University in Cairo (AUC) because she admires its reputation: AUC upholds individual freedom, and encourages independent thinking, and will provide a protective environment to shield her from old Oriental traditions and religious fanaticism<sup>45</sup>. She chooses AUC for the positive, liberating, and exciting possibilities it offers of «escaping from the Egyptian mentality as a whole»<sup>46</sup>. Amīnah becomes strongly Americanized while studying at AUC, changing her hair and clothing to American styles, speaking English as much as she can, and even changing her taste in music, preferring American melodies to traditional Egyptian songs<sup>47</sup>. When she graduates, she starts working in a big American company which imports products to Egypt; the company's name is never specified, but its American identity is reinforced to the reader, with the adjective "American" repeated several times<sup>48</sup>.

<sup>42</sup> I. Gershoni; J. Janskovsky, *Confronting Fascism in Egypt*, cit., pp. 121, 128, 136, 169, 182, 192.

<sup>43</sup> L.M. James, *Nasser at War*, cit., p. 13.

<sup>44</sup> The need of financing the Aswan Dam contributed to the decision to nationalize the Suez Canal and, subsequently, the Suez War of 1956. Muhammad Abd el-Wahab Sayed-Ahmed, *Nasser and American Foreign Policy 1952-1956*, Laam, London 1989, pp. 150-151.

<sup>45</sup> Iḥsān 'Abd al-Quddūs, *Anā ḥurrah*, cit., p. 116.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 123-124.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 140, 144, 149, 158.

In the movie, Amīnah still enrolls at AUC, mainly to escape from al-‘Abbāsiyyah and its residents. There is no mention of any desire by Amīnah to escape from Egypt spiritually or geographically. Despite some depictions of American traditions and lifestyles such as a basketball game, the young woman only slightly modifies her physical appearance while studying at the AUC – for example, by wearing trousers instead of a skirt in a scene in which she studies at home – and the images that present the time she spends at the university are focused mainly on her academic achievements. The company she works for is an invented oil company named “ARAPETCO Arab Petrol Company”. The filmmaker’s choice of a company which exports an Egyptian product intentionally Egyptianizes the story, portraying a proud, independent, and rich Egyptian nation rather than one dependent on importing foreign goods. The nationality of the company is also unknown or, at least, not explicitly mentioned. The viewer may believe that ARAPETCO is an international corporation because its signs are in both English and Arabic, but its identity is decisively Arab and the word “American” is never used in relation to the company.

As with other elements in the story, even if the novel’s American symbols are not completely erased in the film, they are transformed to serve the purpose of an Egyptianized Egypt, freed from foreign elements after the revolution of 1952. The main character, despite studying at the distinctly American University in Cairo as opposed to any other, maintains her Egyptian identity above all.

#### 4. Conclusion

Egypt witnessed, and its artistic expression reflected, the dawn and maturation of a new revolutionary era over the course of the 1950s. At the beginning of the decade, the country was still living under the monarchical regime of King Fārūq, with strong British presence and influence. At the end of the decade, the monarchy had been abolished and the republic established; the king was in exile, and Ġamāl ‘Abd al-Nāṣir had become president of Egypt, starting a wave of social reforms that changed the organization and appearance of the country. The fifties also witnessed the Suez Crisis of 1956, which radically changed Egyptian political alliances with other countries. It was in the early years of this decade that Egyptian writer Iḥsān ‘Abd al-Quddūs’s novel *Anā ḥurrah* was published, and in its closing that Egyptian filmmaker Ṣalāḥ Abū Sayf’s cinematic adaptation was first screened. The half decade between print and film bridged crises and conflicts, domestic and international, that transformed Egypt. ‘Abd al-Nāṣir not only became the president of Egypt in 1954 but also the strongest man in the country and the symbol of the revolution for years to come. The Suez Crisis realigned Egypt’s international relations, and, in its aftermath, most Jewish citizens left the country.

Nationalization of foreign assets, especially the Suez Canal, amounted to an economic as well as political overthrow of the ancien régime, and on a cultural level, too, many attempts were made to Egyptianize the society and free it from Western foreign influences.

The reimagination of *Anā ḥurrah*, from novel to film, is testament to this process of Egyptianization of the society, praising the revolution and anticipating a bright future for it. The movie was the product of an era when individual desires were sacrificed for social needs, and when artists often aspired to the ideal that any work of mass media should carry a social message supporting and strengthening the new era that Egypt had just entered. The main character of the novel, Amīnah, who was portrayed in the novel as a self-centered, self-tortured woman who struggled to reaffirm her independence and individuality in a traditional society, was transformed into a woman who fought the old traditions and participated in political activities against the old regime. ‘Abbās, who was a mute obsession for Amīnah in most of the novel, appeared in the movie as a symbol against oppressions and the voice of the revolution. The protagonists, then, were transformed from social individuals to political symbols, and the whole movie became a call to continue the march of the revolution of 1952. Other elements which appear in the film also reflect the transformation of Egyptian societal and governmental attitudes in the few years since the novel’s publication, such as the diminution of the Jewish community and the abatement of American symbols.

Other films produced in Egypt between 1952 and 1967 also contributed to supporting the revolution<sup>49</sup>, taking four different approaches. There were films that, without mentioning the revolution itself, provided a negative view of pre-revolutionary Egypt, mainly by portraying the social injustices present in that society. This was the case of other films directed by Ṣalāḥ Abū Sayf, such as 1960 *Bidāyah wa nihāyah* (Beginning and End) and 1966 *al-Qāhirah 30* (Cairo 30), both adaptations of novels by Naḡīb Maḥfūz. Other films showed the path to the 1952 revolution through groups’ or individuals’ activities against the monarchy and the institutions that supported it. This is the case of *Fī baytinā raḡul* (A Man in our Home), a 1961 film directed by Hinrī Barakāt and adapted from a 1957 story written by ‘Abd al-Quddūs. A third

<sup>49</sup> Between 1952 and 1967 Egyptian filmmakers and writers generally supported the revolution’s ideology and leaders, especially Ḡamāl ‘Abd al-Nāṣir. It seems probable that in the 1950s, at least, filmmakers’ support came from their own convictions, not government-mandated cultural policies, since until the 1960s ‘Abd al-Nāṣir’s government took a relatively hands-off approach to film production. The 1967 defeat of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan in the Six Day War was a turning point for many Arab intellectuals, however. Many filmmakers and writers reflected their disillusionment and distanced themselves from the official discourse of their leaders. See J. Gordon, *Revolutionary Melodrama. Popular Film and Civic Identity in Nasser Egypt*, Middle East Documentation Center, Chicago 2002, p. 11.



group of films showed both the road to the revolution and the revolution itself. The most famous film in this category is *Rudda qalbī* (Return my Heart), released in 1957 and directed by ‘Izz al-Dīn Dū ‘l-Fiḡār from a Yūsuf al-Sibā‘ī’s story, a classic shown in Egypt every year on the anniversary of the revolution<sup>50</sup>. Finally, there were films that positively depicted the changes that Egypt experienced after the revolution. *al-Aydī al-nā‘imah* (Soft Hands), the 1964 film directed by Maḥmūd Dū ‘l-Fiḡār from a Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm’s play, is an example in this group. The film *Anā ḥurrah* can be included in the second category, with the distinction that the story from which was adapted needed to be altered in order to clearly support the revolution.

The main discrepancies between *Anā ḥurrah* the novel and the film arise from the intent of their creators. Whereas the novelist wanted to portray the struggle against tradition that many young Egyptians experienced during the 1930s and 40s, the filmmaker intended to support and strengthen the 1952 revolution. While the novelist – a journalist in a parallel career – tried to present an accurate portrayal of the Egyptian society from 1936 to 1954, the filmmaker intended to strengthen Egypt’s rising political leadership through manipulation and portrayal of past events.

Iḥsān ‘Abd al-Quddūs was criticized for writing stories that did not serve any political cause. He defended himself by saying that such accusations were made due to political disagreements and not because of literary standards; and later he wrote stories with political themes, but they did not sell particularly well. In any case, no one can credibly accuse the writer of lack of political interest or awareness. ‘Abd al-Quddūs was imprisoned because of the opinions that he expressed in his journalistic articles, both before and after the 1952 revolution. Even though he had been a friend of ‘Abd al-Nāṣir since the late 1940s, he confronted him after the revolution in an article entitled *al-Ġam‘iyyah al-sirriyyah allatī taḥkum Misr* (The Secret Organization That Governs Egypt) and he was imprisoned in 1954<sup>51</sup>.

‘Abd al-Quddūs, as a professional journalist, composed factual prose based on direct observations of the society in which he lived. He recorded the contemporary political situation of Egypt in his journalistic articles, and described the country’s social situation in his fictional stories. Even if his fiction writing focused on real social issues lived by imaginary characters, it did not hide political agendas, as the cinematic adaptation of *Anā ḥurrah* did. His role as a journalist was to describe and if conscience required to denounce newsworthy developments, not to praise and uphold the regime. ‘Abd al-Quddūs’s journalistic background is reflected in his fictional stories as well, in which he presented information to the reader about both external events and psychological states. His style was to relate a story by providing

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 115-116.

<sup>51</sup> Nirmīn al-Quwayasnī, *Iḥsān ‘Abd al-Quddūs. Ams. Wa ‘l-yawm. Wa ḡadām*, cit., pp. 136-141, 266.

enough information so that the reader could understand or justify the behavior of the characters. In this sense, ‘Abd al-Quddūs applied journalistic rigor to his fictional stories.

Filmmaker Ṣalāḥ Abū Sayf, on the other hand, took a completely different approach to the depicting *Anā ḥurrah*’s plot points on film. The movie, released in 1959, could not be limited to a disinterested portrayal of pre-revolutionary Egyptian society. The movie recalls the beginning of the tumultuous decade for a 1959 audience, foreshadowing and glorifying the audience’s known future, strengthening the march of the 1952 revolution through an idealized political mobilization of the sympathetic main characters. The reimagination of the novel seems more keen to present Egypt’s past as a negative contrast to justify post-revolutionary developments than on providing an accurate historical portrayal of Cairo during the 1940s. In this way, a novel whose very title declares freedom to live life any way one chooses was mobilized into national patriotic service as a film obligated to fulfill the needs of a new political era.