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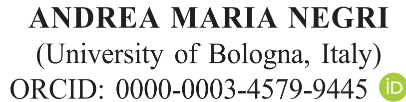

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The Burden of Jealousy: Shame, Self-Love and Betrayal in *Sāra* (1938) by ʿAbbās Maḥmūd al-ʿAqqād

Abstract

This article offers a reading of the theme of jealousy in the novel *Sāra* by ʿAbbās Maḥmūd al-ʿAqqād (1889–1964), a theme depicted with such realism that many of his contemporaries perceived it as drawn from the author own life. Al-ʿAqqād presents a phenomenology of jealousy through Hammām, male protagonist in his forties, and the vicissitudes of his romantic relationship with a foreign woman, Sāra in her twenties. Jealousy emerges as a destabilizing force that triggers the protagonist's psychological turmoil, fuelled by cultural fears of dishonour, wounded pride, a sense of social betrayal, and the erosion of trust. This article argues that jealousy functions as an emotion shaped by the urban environment – thriving in a setting where anonymity and concealment prevail, in contrast to rural areas where social control is more pervasive. The novel of Al-ʿAqqād explores various expressions of the universal emotion of jealousy within the context of the cultural and ideological tension between two worlds in Egypt.

Keywords: Egyptian novel, Al-ʿAqqād, *Sāra*, jealousy, shame, self-love, betrayal

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Introduction

The novel *Sāra* by ʿAbbās Maḥmūd al-ʿAqqād (1889–1964) holds a significant place in the development of modern Arabic fiction. It was initially serialized in the magazine *Ad-Dunyā*, but the publication was discontinued, as the novel was deemed linguistically too elevated for the target audience.[1] The author continued developing the novel, which was later serialized in *Al-Balāġ* and subsequently published in book form in 1938.[2] The work is particularly significant due to its novelty within the literary landscape of the period and its arguably pronounced experimentalism.[3] The novel employs a third-person narrative through which is prominently filtered the perspective of the protagonist in his romantic journey. The narrative begins with a chance encounter on the streets of Cairo between the protagonist, Hammām, and Sāra, a woman with whom he had previously been involved in a romantic relationship that was some unspecified reasons interrupted. The initial encounter is succeeded by a series of meetings in which Sāra appears to elude full emotional or psychological grasp – or is at least perceived as such by the protagonist – leading Hammām to experience the relationship with her as a source of deep emotional unrest and great jealousy. Hammām is portrayed as persistently doubting Sāra's sincerity in her love for him, prompting him to adopt a series of strategies aimed at securing her affection or seeking a proof of it. The narratives presents the protagonist between obsessed on her fidelity suspended between delusion and potentially reasonable suspicion. The roots of Hammām's mistrust appear to lie partly in Sāra's emotional distance and in his own insecurities, which are arguably hinted to be partly due by the significant age gap between them – she in her twenties, and he in his forties. The relationship reaches its conclusion when the private investigator hired by Hammām to follow Sāra claims to have seen her entering another man's car. Irrespective of whether the betrayal actually occurred, the justification for the dissolution of the relationship is experienced by Hammām not as a loss, but as a release from his tormenting emotions and a return to life.

The novel *Sāra* represents a significant innovation, driven by artistic ambition, within a literary landscape largely defined by the dominant currents of Romantic aesthetics.[4] The fact that realism should be the horizon of literature had been underlined as early as 1905, by Muḥammad Luṭfī Ǧumʿa (1886–1953) in the preface to his novel *Fī wādī al-humūm* (*In the Valley of Sorrows*) where he presents this current as the most difficult and ambitious in the literature of the time.

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[1] Matti Moosa, *The Origins of Modern Arabic Fiction*, Boulder 1997, p. 291.

[2] Ibidem, p. 110.

[3] Robin C. Ostle, 'Three Egyptian Poets of "Westernization": 'Abd al-Rahman Shukri, Ibrahim 'Abd al-Qadir al-Mazini, and Mahmud 'Abbas al-'Aqqad', *Comparative Literature Studies* 7/3 (1970), p. 366; Muḥammad Ibn ʿAyād, *Ar-Rihān at-taraǧiḏātī Ibrāhīm al-kātib li-Ibrāhīm ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Māzinī unmūdağan*, Ṣafāqis 2003, p. 33; Maya I. Kesrouany, *Prophetic Translation: The Making of Modern Egyptian Literature*, Edinburgh 2020, p. 11; J. Brugman, *An Introduction to the History of Modern Arabic Literature in Egypt*, Leiden 1984, p. 1; Reuven Snir, *Modern Arabic Literature: A Theoretical Framework*, Edinburgh 2017, p. 198.

[4] ʿAbbās Maḥmūd al-ʿAqqād and Ibrāhīm ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Māzinī, *ad-Dīwān fī al-adab wa-an-naqd*, 1997, pp. 77–114.

وليعلم القارئ الكريم، أن فن الروايات منقسم إلى قسمين؛ القسم الأول يسمونه «رومانتيك»؛ أي روايات خيالية، والقسم الثاني يسمونه «ريالستيك»؛ أي روايات حقيقية، فالأولى هي التي تصور البشر كما يجب أن يكونوا، لا كما هم في الحقيقة، والثانية تمثل البشر كما هم بنقائصهم ومعايبهم ومخازيهم، وأشهر كتاب الخيال السير ولترسكوت القصصي الإنجليزي وإسكندر ديماس وماكس بمبرتون وغيرهم، وطريقة كتاب القصص الخيالية هي أن يجلس الكاتب في غرفته، ويتخيل الحقول الخضراء، والحدائق الغنَّاء، وغدران الماء، والطيور المغردة، والليالي المُقمرة، والأبطال الشجعان، والنساء الجميلات، والغزل والغرام، والشكوى والجفاء واللقاء، ثم يكتب قصته. وأما طريقة كتابة الروايات الحقيقية هي أن يلبس الكاتب ملابسه أو يتزيَّى بغير زيه، ويتجول في الطرق والأزقة، ويدخل المجتمعات والمحطات، ويرقب حركات الناس في ملاعب القمار والحانات والحدائق العمومية، ويبقى طول ليلته هائمًا في الطرق؛ يدرس الأخلاق والطبائع والعادات، وهو فيما بين تلك الأشياء يقيد ما يراه ويسمعه ويدرسه، ثم يجلس ويكتب قصته ويسبك فيها كل ما رآه وسمعه. وكل الكُتَّاب في أوائل القرن التاسع عشر وما قبله، كانوا يميلون للطريقة الخيالية؛ لسهولتها ورواج رواياتها، وينفرون من الطريقة الثانية؛ لصعوبتها ونفور القراء منها.[5]

The esteemed reader has to know that the art of the novel is divided into two categories: the first is called "romantic", meaning fictional novels, and the second is called *"realistic"*, meaning true-to-life novels. The first portrays humans as they should be, not as they truly are, while the second depicts people as they are, with their flaws, shortcomings, and disgraces. Among the most famous writers of fiction are Sir Walter Scott, the English storyteller, Alexandre Dumas, and Max Pemberton, among others. The method of writing fictional stories is for the writer to sit in his room and imagine green fields, lush gardens, flowing streams, singing birds, moonlit nights, brave heroes, beautiful women, romance and love, lamentation, estrangement, and reunion – then, he writes his story. As for the method of writing true-to-life novels, the writer must dress himself or even change his attire, wander through streets and alleys, enter social gatherings and stations, observe people's movements in gambling halls, taverns, and public gardens, and spend the entire night roaming the streets, studying morals, nature, and customs. Amidst these observations, he records what he sees, hears, and examines. Then, he sits and writes his story, weaving into it everything he has witnessed and experienced. All writers in the early nineteenth century and before tended toward the fictional approach, due to its ease and the popularity of its novels, while they avoided the second method because of its difficulty and the readers' aversion to it.

Muḥammad Lūṭfī Ǧumʿa identifies the limits of Ǧurǧī Zaydān (1861–1914), whose narratives often position the hero as a moral exemplar, with psychological complexity subordinated to didactic intent. This tendency is characteristic of a broader literary current in which love stories are structured around the well-known novelizations or free adaptations

[5] Muḥammad Luṭfī Ǧumʿa, *Fī wādī al-humūm*, 2018, pp. 11–12.

of Muṣṭafā Luṭfī al-Manfalūṭī (1876–1924). In these works, romantic themes occupy the narrative centre, and the protagonists exhibit the defining features of romantic heroes: hypersensitivity, social maladaptation, and an inability to navigate a world perceived as morally corrupt. These figures seek refuge in nature – whether in the countryside, as with Istifān in *Māğdūlīn* (a free adaptation of Jules Sandeau's *Madeleine*), or in the wilderness, as in *Al-Faḍīla* (*The Virtue*) – yet ultimately succumb to the corruption of their contemporaries and the materialism of their age. Al-ʿAqqād elaborated on this view in the collection of articles, *Ad-Dīwān*, co-authored with Ibrāhīm ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Māzinī (1889–1949).[6] At the center of *Ad-Dīwān* critique of narrative – penned by Al-Māzinī – is a pointed criticism of Muṣṭafā Luṭfī al-Manfalūṭī (1876–1924), whose work is dismissed as a flawed model due to its lack of realism, defined as an unnatural style.[7]

The narrative of *Sāra* aligns the novel closely with the literary transition championed by the *Dīwān* group, and its most prominent author al-Māzinī. The same conclusion drawn by readers of Al-Māzinī's novels – especially his widely acclaimed *Ibrāhīm al-Kātib* (1931; *Ibrahim the Writer*) – can arguably be applied to *Sāra*. His writing are seen to adopt a mode in which the distinction between reality and fiction becomes increasingly blurred, producing narratives that consistently take the form of autobiography and stream of consciousness. As Muḥammad al-Mandūr highlights, Al-Māzinī's literary style:

يخلط في المقروء بالنتاج نفسه ولا يعود يميز بين ما أخذه عن غير وما نبأ من ذاته.[8]

> He mixes the product itself in what he reads, and no longer distinguishes between what he has taken from others and what has come from himself.

This phenomenon is further reinforced by the accounts of his family members, who were convinced that Al-Māzinī's literary works were drawn exclusively from his own life experiences. As Niʿmāt Aḥmad Fuʾād met the family of the writer for her doctoral research, they affirmed that every place, person, and event described in his novels was directly taken from his personal experience and that they had lived together as a family.[9] This novel is thus part of a stream of narrative that aims represent lived experience through fiction in forms[10] even if it may lack sometimes a clear narrative goal.[11] This is arguably exemplified by many novels of Al-Māzinī in which is evident the lack of a clear narrative design. In the novel *Min an-nāfiḏa* (*From the Window*), Al-Māzinī describes for instance his afternoons spent gazing out of a window, interweaving reflections with narrations of encounters with acquaintances – only for the novel to end abruptly.

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[6] Edmond Saussey, 'Ibrāhīm Al-Māzīnī et Son 'Roman d'Ibrāhīm', *Bulletin d'études Orientales* 2/2 (1932), p. 163.

[7] Muḥammad Musṭafā Badawī, 'Al-Māzinī the Novelist', *Journal of Arabic Literature* 4 (1973), p. 114; Muḥsin Jāsim Mūsawī, *The Postcolonial Arabic Novel: Debating Ambivalence*, Leiden 2003, p. 39; Saussey, 'Ibrāhīm Al-Māzīnī et son 'Roman d'Ibrāhīm', p. 171; Pierre Cachia, *Arabic Literature: An Overview*, London 2002, p. 137.

[8] Muḥammad al-Mandūr, *Muḥāḍarāt ʿan Ibrāhīm al-Māzinī*, Al-Qāhira 1954, p. 6.

[9] Niʿmāt Aḥmad Fuʾād, *Adab al-Māzinī*, Būlāq 1954, p. 146.

[10] Moosa, *The Origins of Modern Arabic Fiction*, p. 121.

[11] Muḥammad al-Mandūr, *Muḥāḍarāt ʿan Ibrāhīm al-Māzinī*, p. 330.

The narration of *Sāra* parallels that of Al-Māzinī, both being read as autobiographical narratives that positioned individual experience as the goal literary creativity. This autobiographical mode informs the novel's structure, in which the love story unfolds through a formally discontinuous, stream-of-consciousness-like narrative that, while not strictly causal, achieves thematic and emotional coherence. The novel presents depth and realism of the emotional content in a progression that appears shaped by autobiographical memory as the narration itself that resists the conventions of fiction, presenting the story not as a carefully constructed novel in the classical sense, but rather as a process of fictionalizing lived events. This resistance is particularly evident in the narrator's explicit reference to the act of fiction-making, when he states that the names assigned to the protagonists are used merely as a matter of convention, names that are, furthermore, introduced only in the middle of the narrative.[12] The sense of narrative of real experience is further arguably reinforced by the presence of an intradiegetic narrator, whose measured and at times reticent tone suggests an implied author personally implicated in the events and thus aiming to preserve his own memory and honor. Essential elements of the story, including Sāra's maternity and the age difference between her and Hammām, and Sāra being a foreign Christian are conspicuously withheld by the narrator until the latter part of the novel.

The novel's highly realistic and personal tone is confirmed by the reception of the text upon its publication. The plausibility and emotional intensity of the narrative led many readers to doubt that Sāra was entirely fictional, prompting widespread speculation about the real-life referent behind the character.[13] Some believed she was a Syrian woman named Alice, with whom the author was rumored to have had a relationship; others speculated that she was Greek, a foreigner, or even a Jewish woman – given the biblical connotations of the name *Sāra*.[14] Still, many believed that *Sāra* was none other than Mayy Ziyāda (1886–1941).[15] In the introduction to the second edition, the author himself attempted to dispel these rumors by firmly asserting that the story was entirely fictional.[16]

The novel *Sāra* is particularly compelling as it offers a window into possible psychological and cultural construct of jealousy in Egypt between the two world wars. Within this framework, this article examines the theme of jealousy as represented in *Sāra* through a psychological lens. The perspective of an intradiegetic narrator presents

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[12] ʿAbbās M. al-ʿAqqād, p. 104.

[13] Matti Moosa mentions an ambiguous pamphlet where one of the friends of Al-ʿAqqād, Muḥammad Ṭāhir al-Ǧabalāwī claimed that Al-ʿAqqād had in the period a romantic relation with a girl named Sāra of Lebanese origins, but that the relationship was complicated because Al-ʿAqqād questioned her character and conduct. Like in the novel, Al-ʿAqqād is claimed to asking him some other friends to spy on Sāra. Al-Ǧabalāwī claims that he was the one who saw her enter a house of ill repute and informed al-ʿAqqād. Al-Ǧabalāwī also recalls Al-ʿAqqād crying while listening to a song by a Syrian singer that made him remember his beloved, prompting him to immediately turn off the phonograph. See: Matti Moosa, *The Origins of Modern Arabic Fiction*, p. 110.

[14] J. Brugman, *An Introduction to the History of Modern Arabic Literature in Egypt*, p. 273.

[15] Matti Moosa, *The Origins of Modern Arabic Fiction*, p. 110; J. Brugman, *An Introduction to the History of Modern Arabic Literature in Egypt*, p. 127.

[16] ʿAbbās M. Al-ʿAqqād, *Sāra*, Al-Qāhira 1943, p. 9.

jealousy not as a phenomenon to be analysed in its entirety but rather as a specifically male phenomenology. While the novel adopts the voice of an omniscient narrator, which allows for the extensive use of the protagonist's stream of consciousness, its representation of *Sāra's* thoughts is arguably lacking in psychological depth. This absence paradoxically reinforces the novel's strong sense of realism, giving the impression that the characters are not entirely fictional but rather a condensation of the author's own experiences. It appears as though the author is projecting his own voice, perspective, and biases through a narrator who, while ostensibly omniscient, ultimately aligns with the protagonist's worldview. This partiality suggests that the narrator fully comprehends only Hammām's perspective, thereby shaping the reader's understanding of events through a single, gendered lens. In this sense, the emotional connection between the narrator and the protagonist suggests that Hammām functions as an alter ego of the author, serving as an expression of his own internal conflicts and perceptions.

1. Jealousy and anxiety

While the expression and behavioural manifestations, jealousy may vary across cultures, but in its core dynamics appear to be constant. Jealousy is a complex emotion and is classified among the fundamental, universal emotions, alongside anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, and surprise.[17] It is considered universal not only because it transcends specific cultural contexts[18] – in its essential structure,[19] at least – but also because it can be observed as early as four months of age in infants. Moreover, components of this emotion have been observed in various mammalian species, suggesting a biological and evolutionary basis.[20] Jealousy typically arises as a response to a perceived or potential threat to a privileged relationship, most notably within affective or intimate bonds. It is also thought to be linked to unconscious processes, as it may be triggered not only by actual threats but also by imagined ones. In infancy, the experience of jealousy is rooted in the symbiotic relationship with the mother and the sense of security and protection associated with maternal attention – particularly her smile.[21] The threat of losing this exclusive bond, whether due to external agents or the presence of other

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[17] David M. Buss, 'Sexual Jealousy', *Psihologijske Teme* 22/2 (2013), p. 157.

[18] Peter N. Stearns, 'Jealousy in Western History: From Past toward Present', in: *Handbook of Jealousy*, eds. Sybil L. Hart and Maria Legerstee, Oxford 2010, p. 9.

[19] Phil Mollon, *Shame and Jealousy: The Hidden Turmoils*, London 2003, p. 101; R. Peter Hobson, 'Is Jealousy a Complex Emotion?', in: *Handbook of Jealousy*, eds. Sybil L. Hart and Maria Legerstee, Oxford 2010, p. 294; Danielle L. Zandbergen and Susan G. Brown, 'Culture and Gender Differences in Romantic Jealousy', *Personality and Individual Differences* 72 (2015), p. 176.

[20] Scott Forbes, 'Sibling Rivalry in the Birds and Bees', in: *Handbook of Jealousy*, eds. Sybil L. Hart and Maria Legerste, Oxford 2010, p. 121; Christine R. Harris and Caroline Prouvost, 'Jealousy in Dogs', ed. Elissa Z. Cameron, *PLoS ONE* 9/7 (2014), p. 157; Ben S. Bradley, 'Jealousy in Infant-Peer Trios: From Narcissism to Culture', in: *Handbook of Jealousy*, eds. Sybil L. Hart and Maria Legerstee, Oxford 2010, p. 193.

[21] Phil Mollon, *Shame and Jealousy: The Hidden Turmoils*, pp. 11–12.

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children, provokes feelings of jealousy, shame, and disorientation.[22] Rivalry with the father, often repressed, tends to emerge more openly in relation to siblings or others perceived as competitors.[23] This rivalry can be interpreted as an early attempt to cope with these affective disturbances. Such early experiences of jealousy may shape the emotional dynamics of later interpersonal relationships and manifest in adulthood as an instinctive fear of losing a privileged emotional connection.

At the core of jealousy lies a profound fear of abandonment, wherein the object of one's affection – typically, in the case of the child, the mother as the source of life and protection – is perceived as withdrawing attention in favor of others. This perceived displacement gives rise to feelings of unworthiness and guilt, as the child experiences a failure to merit such exclusive care.[24] Underlying this conceptualization is the aspiration to be loved exclusively, such that any attention directed toward others is interpreted as a deprivation of affection toward oneself. The fear of abandonment becomes a persistent and intrusive mental presence, experienced as a fundamental threat to one's very existence. This perceived threat is feared, internalized, and repeatedly relived in fantasy, which also accounts for the obsessive dimension often associated with jealousy. The denial of a person's value – through the withdrawal of exclusive relational bonds – triggers a constellation of emotional responses, including sadness, a desire for revenge or vindication, and a resistance to forgiveness.[25] In adulthood, betrayal is not experienced merely as a painful personal event but also as a social one: the failure to be deemed worthy of love becomes amplified by the shame induced through perceived social judgment.[26] The threat of betrayal, which activates the primal fear of abandonment, often gives rise to dysfunctional responses, among which obsessive jealousy is particularly prominent.[27] This condition is defined by intrusive, unpleasant, and irrational ruminations about the partner's potential infidelity, typically accompanied by compulsive monitoring and control of the partner's behavior.[28] Jealousy, emerges as an emotion that encapsulates a complex reflection on identity itself, intertwining the fear of the beloved's absence with a deep sense of shame for not having been deserving of their attention.

Jealousy is a well-known emotion whose cultural perceptions have varied across time and space. While its excessive forms have consistently been viewed in a negative light, its more moderate expressions often occupy a more ambivalent space, bearing neither

[22] Gregory L. White, 'Jealousy and Partner's Perceived Motives for Attraction to a Rival', *Social Psychology Quarterly* 44/1 (1981), p. 24.

[23] Phil Mollon, *Shame and Jealousy: The Hidden Turmoils*, p. 103; Leon Wurmser and Heidrun Jarass, 'Pathological Jealousy: The Perversion of Love', in: *Jealousy and Envy: New Views about Two Powerful Emotions*, ed. Leon Wurmser and Heidrun Jarass, New York 2008, p. 8.

[24] Ledon Wurmser and Heidrun Jarass, 'Pathological Jealousy: The Perversion of Love', pp. 16–17; Phil Mollon, *Shame and Jealousy: The Hidden Turmoils*, pp. 2–3.

[25] Danielle Zandbergen and Susan G. Brown, 'Culture and Gender Differences in Romantic Jealousy', p. 122.

[26] Phil Mollon, *Shame and Jealousy: The Hidden Turmoils*, p. 2.

[27] David M. Buss, 'Sexual Jealousy', p. 161.

[28] R. Almeida Leite et al., 'Obsessive Versus Delusional Jealousy: Destruction in a Form of Creation – A Review', *European Psychiatry* 33/S1 (2016), p. 531.

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exclusively negative nor wholly positive connotations. In cultures across the Mediterranean sea jealousy is frequently considered socially acceptable, provided it does not become excessive or obsessive.[29] Male jealousy has been culturally sanctioned as a protective mechanism against female infidelity and the fear of the "cuckoo in the nest."[30] Jealousy, at its core, is also seen to imply a deep emotional investment in the beloved; in some respects, its total absence may be interpreted as a form of emotional detachment or indifference. This entanglement between jealousy and genuine love is further underscored by the fact that in Islam, jealousy (*ġayra*) is not classified as a sin but is instead counted among the divine attributes. God Himself is described as *Al-Ġayyar* (the Jealous One) whose jealousy is expression of love for his creation which inflects idolatry as a form of betrayal of this divine love.[31] Furthermore, in the Sunna the Prophet Muḥammad himself is portrayed as having experienced jealousy, particularly in relation to his wife ʿĀʾiša, as recounted in several *ḥadīṯ* traditions.[32] Within this religious framework, legal and theological acumen has arrived to what appears to be a broad consensus among Islamic scholars that jealousy is acceptable. Nevertheless, the Sunna establishes a clear limit through the *ḥadīṯ* of the Prophet: *iyyākum wa-aẓ-ẓann fa-inna aẓ-ẓann akḏab al-ḥadīṯ* ("Beware of suspicion, for suspicion is the most deceitful of speech")[33] that indicates that only jealousy grounded in objective evidence is allowed and not the one arising from unfounded suspicion or delusional projection.[34]

The emergence of jealousy as an emotionally salient category in Egypt during the *Nahḍa* period can be attributed, in part, to the profound social transformations underway at the time. The rapid demographic expansion of Cairo and the shift toward urban living drew many individuals from rural environments – contexts traditionally structured around strong communal bonds and rigid mechanisms of social control, particularly in relation to *ʿirḍ*, or female honour – into a new urban reality characterized by greater social fluidity and personal autonomy. A defining feature of urban life, in contrast to rural settings, was the relative anonymity it afforded. The city, populated increasingly by recent arrivals unmoored from extended kinship networks, offered a degree of independence from the familial oversight that had previously regulated personal conduct. Cairo had become a city of individuals, where the spatial vastness and the breakdown of traditional surveillance weakened the reach of collective familial authority.[35] Within this new context, women,

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[29] Peter N. Stearns, 'Jealousy in Western History: From Past toward Present', p. 184; D. P. H. Barelds and P. Barelds-Dijkstra, 'Relations between Different Types of Jealousy and Self and Partner Perceptions of Relationship Quality', *Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy* 14/3 (2007), p. 189.

[30] Candida Yates, *Masculine Jealousy and Contemporary Cinema*, Houndmills, Basingstoke, New York 2008, p. 28.

[31] Ḥamāda Aḥmad Muḥammmad Ismāʿīl, *Faḍāʾil al-ġayra ʿalā an-nisāʾ*, p. 34.

[32] Marion Holmes Katz, 'Beyond *Ḥalāl* and *Ḥarām* : *Ghayra* ("Jealousy") as a Masculine Virtue in the Work of Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya', *Cultural History* 8/2 (2019), p. 203.

[33] Ibidem, p. 114.

[34] Ḥamāda Aḥmad Muḥammmad Ismāʿīl, *Faḍāʾil al-ġayra ʿalā an-nisāʾ*, p. 116.

[35] Peter C. Dodd, 'Family Honor and the Forces of Change in Arab Society', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 4/1 (1973), p. 48.

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too, entered the workforce and navigated public space with a level of autonomy previously unavailable to them in more tightly regulated rural settings. The absence of strong communal mechanisms of accountability and the loosening of gendered restrictions on mobility and visibility rendered jealousy a more socially intelligible emotional response. In the context of the *Nahḍa* and Cairo's rapid urban expansion, jealousy may thus be read as a response to shifting norms and structures of intimacy. With women's increasing participation in the market economy[36] and the formation of direct, individual relationships,[37] their relative independence grew.[38] Combined with the anonymity and invisibility afforded by urban life, this development made interpersonal relations less publicly observable,[39] in contrast to rural communities where such interactions were subject to communal scrutiny.[40] The resulting atmosphere of uncertainty fostered a sense of insecurity, and jealousy emerged as an affective response to this perceived erosion of social and emotional control.

2. Hammām's jealousy

The interplay between modernity and jealousy is vividly illustrated in the novel *Sāra*. The author, Al-ʿAqqād, situates the relationship between Hammām and Sāra within the modern and symbolically charged setting of a cinema. This choice of locale reflects the broader cultural shifts of the time, as cinemas – unlike traditional cafés frequented by older generations – were perceived as spaces associated with youth and modernity. As Al-Māzinī affirms in his *Min an-nāfiḏa* (*From the Window*, 1949), the cinema represented a departure from traditional social spaces.[41] The setting of a cinema also aligns with the foreignness attributed to modern culture, as most films screened in Egypt at the time were imported, owing to the nascent stage of the local film industry.[42] The cinematic space appears not only a marker of modernity but also a site of encounter with the foreign.[43] This notion is reinforced through the character of Sāra, a Christian foreign woman, whose relationship with the protagonist brings cultural differences – particularly in the conception of honour – into sharp relief. The protagonist is deeply invested in safeguarding Sāra's respectability and implicitly expects her to demonstrate an equivalent regard for his own. His actions suggest a reciprocal, though culturally asymmetrical, concern for mutual honour.

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[36] Judith E. Tucker, *Women in Nineteenth-Century Egypt*, Cambridge 1985, p. 8.

[37] Ibidem, p. 64.

[38] Muṣṭafā Luṭfī al-Manfalūṭī in his *An-Naẓarāt* three collection of his articles emphasizes this aspect of individualism as a result of westernized life, see: Muṣṭafā Luṭfī al-Manfalūṭī, *An-Naẓarāt*, Al-Ǧīza 1991, p. 355.

[39] Peter C. Dodd, 'Family Honor and the Forces of Change in Arab Society', pp. 47–48.

[40] Ibidem, p. 3.

[41] Ibrāhīm ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Māzinī, *Min an-nāfiḏa*, Al-Qāhira 1995, p. 47.

[42] Delphine Pages-El Karoui, 'Deciphering the Binary Code "Egyptian versus Foreigner" in Egyptian Cinema', *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 16 (2017), p. 382.

[43] Lucie Ryzova, *The Age of the Efendiyya: Passages to Modernity in National-Colonial Egypt*, Oxford 2014, p. 9.

In the novel *Sāra*, the cinema is portrayed as a symbol of promiscuity and sensuality. This association stems from the physical characteristics of the cinema itself: the darkness of the theatre hall offered one of the few semi-private spaces where unmarried couples could seek intimacy, away from the public gaze. A similar depiction appears in *Min an-nāfiḏa*, where the female protagonist's visit to the cinema with her boyfriend serves not only as a moment of intimacy and relationship-building but also as an encounter with sin and the fleeting nature of romantic entanglements.[44] For Al-ʿAqqād's alter ego in *Sāra*, the cinema is not considered an appropriate or respectable venue for individuals concerned with honour and public reputation. The protagonist, Hammām, carefully navigates this tension. His visits to the cinema with Sāra are conducted with secrecy and discretion, driven by a desire to avoid social censure and preserve his image as a respectable man. To this end, he purchases two separate tickets and enters the cinema alone, only joining Sāra once inside, in the cover of darkness and away from the public eye.[45] This ritual of concealment lends the relationship a tone of moral ambiguity, suggesting both the transgressive potential of such urban spaces and the latent risk of social disapproval. The cinema in *Sāra* thus emerges as a liminal site of 1930s romantic encounters – one situated on the margins of social acceptability and charged with an implicit atmosphere of licentiousness.

The novel opens in the vicinity of the cinema, marking it as a charged spatial and emotional locus. Following a prolonged and unexplained separation from Sāra, Hammām returns to the same street near the cinema, a place still haunted by memories of their past relationship.[46] He claims to have entered the cinema by chance, after five months of absence.[47] The narrative begins *in medias res*, immediately immersing the reader in the protagonist-narrator's emotional turmoil, characterized by anxiety and unease. Hammām describes his journey to the cinema as a passage through "demon-ridden" alleys to express the psychological distress he experiences.[48] He reflects on the tumultuous period that followed the breakup, referring to it evocatively as *ašhar mūḥiša* ("mournful months") conveying the intensity and disorientation of his emotional state.

The author delves into the psychological motivations underlying Hammām's return, framing it as an internal conflict between two opposing dimensions of his personality as he defines them one rational and one irrational. Although initially reluctant to reopen an emotional wound,[49] Hammām is ultimately compelled by an inner impulse to embark on this journey. The narrative presents this decision as the result of an internal dialogue between two contrasting voices within his psyche. The first is the rational and apprehensive self, characterized by a concern for self-preservation and a desire to avoid emotional risk. The second voice, by contrast, is marked by irrationality and hopefulness, driven by

[44] Ibrāhīm al-Māzinī, *Min an-nāfiḏa*, p. 33.
[45] ʿAbbās M. al-ʿAqqād, *Sāra*, p. 9.
[46] Ibidem, p. 9.
[47] Ibidem, p. 11.
[48] Ibidem, pp. 13–14.
[49] Ibidem, p. 10.

a longing to re-experience the past, regardless of its possible consequences. This internal dialectic culminates in the triumph of the irrational self, as Hammām admits his inability to offer a logical explanation for his return to the street near the cinema, describing his action as the result of an irresistible, irrational compulsion.

The extended period of separation between Hammām and Sāra appears to stem from Hammām's desire to punish her by withholding his presence – a form of emotional retribution. The novel's opening scene immediately underscores the lingering effects of his inner turmoil. Although the eventual encounter with Sāra is, in narrative terms, foreseeable, it is framed as unexpectedly charged. Hammām does not actively seek her out; rather, he merely passes through the street where she might be encountered.[50] It is Sāra who first notices him and initiates contact, asking, *ʾa huwwa anta?* ("Isn't it you?"). Hammām is depicted as emotionally paralyzed, unable to offer a response. The trauma elicited by these words is rendered in strikingly catastrophic terms. The moment is render through the metaphor of a ship overwhelmed by a violent storm[51] to express the protagonist's psychic disarray. What initially appears to be a tranquil sea is suddenly revealed as treacherous, its calmness concealing a series of inner upheavals that, as the narrator claims, defy articulation through ordinary language.[52] The scene thus dramatizes the collision between surface composure and submerged emotional chaos, a theme that recurs throughout the narrative.

In the initial encounter with Sāra, she is portrayed as attuned to Hammām's emotional distress and chooses to accompany him, though she too is rendered silent by the awkwardness of the situation. Both characters appear to navigate a shared discomfort – primarily precipitated by Hammām's behavior – yet ultimately depart together. Hammām expresses a clear desire to avoid the gaze of onlookers on the crowded cinema street, underscoring his persistent preoccupation with public perception and social judgment. Once inside the taxi, it is Sāra who assumes control of the situation, instructing the driver to proceed wherever he wishes,[53] while Hammām remains speechless. Though his reaction may appear exaggerated, it effectively conveys a state of unresolved trauma tied to the emotional rupture in their relationship.[54] At the same time, the protagonist's near-pathological withdrawal can be read as an implicit plea for recognition and care. It may represent a nonverbal attempt to elicit Sāra's empathy and to communicate the intensity of his emotional attachment – perhaps even as a means of inducing her to acquiesce to the very demands that led to their initial estrangement.

Upon arriving at their destination and exiting the taxi, Hammām's first words immediately reveal his jealousy, which functions as an expression of his desire to reassert control over Sāra. Instead of inquiring about her well-being during their five-month

[50] Ibidem, p. 11.
[51] Ibidem, p. 12.
[52] Ibidem, pp. 14–15.
[53] Ibidem, p. 15.
[54] Ibidem, p. 16.

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separation, his opening question focuses on her recent whereabouts. Sāra does not recount the intervening months, but instead refers only to the moments preceding their unexpected encounter – an exchange that appears habitual, as if she anticipated his interest and responded accordingly. She informs him that she had gone to the cinema, a revelation that deeply unsettles Hammām. Interpreting this as a potential betrayal, he experiences a renewed sense of disappointment and recognizes that any attempt to restore their relationship will be fraught with emotional difficulty. Yet, despite the emotional charge of this moment, the confrontation between the two regarding the underlying causes of Hammām's jealousy – particularly his controlling behaviour – is postponed.

Once again, an internal, hidden will within Hammām emerges – one that operates in opposition to his declared intention to end his relationship with Sāra. This latent impulse does not manifest through reasoned deliberation but rather asserts itself through spontaneous and unpremeditated action, effectively undermining Hammām's conscious agency. It intervenes in the narrative with the force of a *deus ex machina*, reanimating the relationship through a sudden, impulsive kiss that he bestows upon Sāra in the public space of Cairo's streets. Overwhelmed by this uncontrollable desire, Hammām subsequently attempts to rationalize the kiss, downplaying its sensual dimension.[55] From his perspective, the act was not erotic but rather frightening, nervous, and suffused with regret. He likens the experience to an electric shock – abrupt, disorienting, and disturbing. The brevity of their renewed intimacy leaves Hammām emotionally unmoored, as though he were a shipwrecked figure engulfed by a storm. In the aftermath, he claims to have retreated to a distant mental space, overwhelmed by the intensity of the encounter. Yet despite this vulnerability, Hammām soon adopts a posture of dominance, assuming the authoritative role of Sāra's partner. He attempts to reimpose control over the relationship by issuing unilateral demands, instructing Sāra to meet him the following day without consideration for her own schedule or autonomy.[56]

Hammām is persistently haunted by the fear of losing Sāra, a fear that arguablt manifests through his continual doubts regarding her sincerity. Although the couple has reconciled after a period of estrangement, Hammām remains unable to dispel his anxieties about the authenticity of Sāra's affection. He recalls subtle signs – her expressions, gestures, and tone of voice – that he interprets as inauthentic, leading him to question even the genuineness of her kiss. Driven by suspicion, Hammām visits the cinema after parting from Sāra, motivated by a desire to investigate her activities during their separation.[57] Once inside, he approaches a cinema attendant to inquire about Sāra's companions in his absence. The attendant informs him that Sāra had not acted inappropriately and was, in fact, accompanied by another woman. Nevertheless, Hammām persists in questioning whether any men had been present, prompting irritation from the attendant. Instead of reflecting on the inappropriateness and invasiveness of his behavior, Hammām becomes

[55] Ibidem, p. 18.

[56] Ibidem, p. 19.

[57] Ibidem, p. 23.

increasingly paranoid, suspecting that the attendant is deliberately concealing information. His persistence is so intense that the attendant himself grows anxious, fearing that Hammām might jeopardize his employment.

In the narrative, the "irrational dimension" of Hammām's self as he calls it[58] appears curiously immune to the emotional turbulence typically associated with jealousy, which is instead framed as a rational and calculated response. Within this framework, jealousy is not portrayed as a spontaneous outburst of passion but rather as a product of deliberate reasoning – originating, paradoxically, from the protagonist's rational self. This characterization complicates conventional understandings of jealousy and reinforces broader thematic concerns in the novel, particularly those related to individualism and the internal conflict between emotion and reason. In the context of modernity, as portrayed in the text, Hammām's experience of jealousy becomes emblematic of the broader psychological struggle to reconcile competing dimensions of the self in an increasingly fragmented and introspective social world.

3. Desire and denial: Hammām's inner conflict in relation to Sāra

The nature of Hammām and Sāra's relationship gradually settles into a routine characterized by emotional superficiality and a lack of depth. The protagonist himself acknowledges that the relationship has become a mere *ʿāda* (habit),[59] one he finds difficult to abandon despite a tacit sense of indolence and diminished desire. This sense of stagnation is also reflected in the banality of their interactions. The novel exemplifies this through a comical argument Hammām presents to justify their compatibility for marriage: he prefers the legs and wings of a chicken, while she prefers the breast – therefore, he reasons, they would have no cause for conflict.[60] While this observation may appear humorous on the surface, it is strikingly unaccompanied by any deeper reflection on emotional or intellectual compatibility. This absence of meaningful introspection suggests that Hammām is either unwilling or unable to engage with more substantive questions about the foundation of their relationship. Such superficiality may, in turn, be the root of his persistent anxiety and insecurity – feelings that manifest in his recurring suspicions that Sāra is seeking alternative partners. The underlying fear appears linked to a perceived lack of novelty or emotional richness within the relationship itself. The novel thus presents their bond as marked by alternating cycles of pleasure and dissatisfaction, underscoring its emotional instability and the unfulfilled needs of both characters.[61]

Hammām is caught in a persistent psychological dilemma: on one hand, his rational self urges him to end the relationship with Sāra in order to escape the emotional turmoil it

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58 Ibidem, p. 33.
59 Ibidem, p. 43.
60 Ibidem, p. 47.
61 Ibidem, p. 48.

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generates; on the other, his irrational self compels him to remain bound to it. This internal division – between rational detachment and irrational attachment – is never resolved over the course of the novel. Instead, the narrative continually stages this opposition as a dynamic of oscillation and paralysis, in which neither impulse decisively prevails. Hammām's indecision creates a state of existential stalemate, wherein he is immobilized by the tension between his conflicting drives. His struggle to justify or subdue the intrusive and overpowering force of his irrational self becomes a central feature of his emotional and psychological landscape. The conflict is narrated through the metaphor of two fictional characters inhabiting Hammām's mind – personifications of reason and emotion. While the rational self recognizes the pain caused by his inability to exert control over Sāra and thus seeks to avoid further encounters, the irrational self persuades him to maintain the relationship, cloaking its emotional compulsion in a sense of duty or inevitability. The irrational self exploits the rational ego's aversion to suffering and its desire for stability, further complicating the internal struggle. Ultimately, the irrational self prevails, persuading Hammām to pursue another meeting with Sāra despite the emotional risks involved.[62] This internal debate, framed as an ongoing contest between opposing selves, illuminates the protagonist's deeper crisis of agency. Hammām's actions are not portrayed as the result of deliberate choice, but rather as responses to an instinctual force that operates beneath the threshold of consciousness. His preparation to meet Sāra is presented not as a rational decision, but as something that happens to him – as though his body moves toward her under the compulsion of an unconscious drive, revealing the extent to which his autonomy is undermined by internal fragmentation.

Hammām's fear of losing his beloved Sāra manifests in a recurring internal interrogation concerning the authenticity of his own loyalty and the potential for his own betrayal. This repetitive cognitive process may be understood within the broader framework of human psychology, where repetition functions as a common mechanism for processing unresolved emotional conflicts.[63] It is not unusual for individuals to revisit earlier experiences or anxieties that remain unresolved; such repetition serves as both a symptom and a strategy of the psyche attempting to work through latent tensions. In this context, Hammām's obsessive preoccupation with the possibility of Sāra's departure – and the continual reevaluation of their emotional bond – can be interpreted as an effort to impose coherence upon his emotional turmoil. His repetitive thoughts reflect a desire to achieve closure or control, yet they simultaneously underscore the compulsive nature of repetition when it is tethered to unresolved psychic wounds. The narrative thus positions Hammām's fear not merely as a reaction to present insecurity but as a deeper entanglement with past affective failures, resurfacing through the inescapable pull of repetition that marks the human condition.

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[62] Ibidem, pp. 27–28.

[63] Stephen Owen, 'Repetition: Of Small Pleasures in Idleness', in: *Remembrances: The Experience of the Past in Classical Chinese Literature*, Cambridge 1986, p. 100.

4. Sāra between the virtuous mother and the fallen woman

The narrator constructs the character of Hammām primarily through his gaze upon Sāra, thereby offering insight into his psychological projection and perception of her. The depiction of Sāra functions as a mirror of Hammām's internal conflict – his oscillation between rational restraint and irrational desire. Rather than presenting Sāra as an autonomous subject, Hammām projects his own fragmented self-image onto her, attributing to her a multiplicity of identities that he claims to understand fully.[64] Yet, upon closer examination, his characterization of her is reductively dualistic. On one hand, he imagines Sāra as a virtuous mother figure – modest, chaste, and protective of her honour. On the other, he perceives her as a pleasure-seeking, bohemian woman, immersed in sensuality and modern freedoms. Within this framework, Hammām assumes the role of moral guide, urging her to embrace modesty and maternal virtue.[65] However, this portrayal is neither stable nor entirely convincing. Hammām's narrative is marked by inconsistency and rhetorical overcompensation. If Sāra were genuinely inclined toward moral corruption, as he intermittently suggests, such a characterization would suffice as a justification for ending the relationship – without the need for constant surveillance or proof of betrayal. The fact that he does not act on this presumed moral judgment suggests a deeper ambivalence. It implies that Hammām himself does not fully believe in the negative portrayal he constructs, but rather uses it to rationalize his own insecurities, exert control, or manage the cognitive dissonance produced by his conflicting desires.

Hammām's accusation that Sāra is inclined toward a bohemian lifestyle appears to be driven less by objective observation and more by a projection of his own envy and insecurity. The depth of Sāra's capacity for romantic engagement and emotional vitality is portrayed as a source of unease, even jealousy, for Hammām.[66] He critiques her apparent pursuit of pleasure, warning that such a lifestyle will inevitably result in the erosion of youth and physical beauty. This critique reflects a broader thematic tension in the novel between the pursuit of pleasure and the societal pressures associated with aging, propriety, and the preservation of beauty – especially for women. However, this concern may be interpreted less as a reflection of Sāra's priorities and more as an externalization of Hammām's own internal anxieties. As he approaches middle age, Hammām exhibits a growing sense of vulnerability regarding his own desirability and emotional viability. His critique of Sāra's lifestyle, then, can be read as a projection of his fears about his diminishing capacity to engage in fulfilling romantic relationships. This interpretation suggests that Hammām's preoccupation with the loss of beauty and youth does not derive from any intrinsic deficiency in Sāra's character or behavior, but rather from his own struggle with self-worth and aging. In this light, his moralizing stance serves as a defense mechanism, masking deeper emotional insecurities under the guise of ethical concern.

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[64] ʿAbbās M. al-ʿAqqād, *Sāra*, p. 121.

[65] Ibidem, pp. 54–55.

[66] Ibidem, p. 52.

It can be argued that Hammām instrumentalizes the question of Sāra's morality as a means of attracting and exerting influence over her. Within the narrative, jealousy is portrayed not merely as a personal emotion, but as a socially sanctioned virtue – particularly when it serves to uphold a woman's honour and social standing. In the Arab cultural context, non-excessive jealousy is often legitimized as a moral sentiment, especially in situations where it is seen to protect *ʿirḍ* – a concept of honour intrinsically tied to female chastity and virtue. In such a framework, jealousy becomes both a gendered and moralizing force, motivating women to embrace and display modesty.[67] The absence of jealousy, conversely, is frequently interpreted as a sign of moral decline.[68] This view is echoed in historical sources, such as Taqī ad-Dīn al-Maqrīzī (1364–1442), who associated the absence of jealousy with vice and societal degeneration.[69] Hammām's desire to assert control over Sāra's moral comportment becomes especially evident in his composition of an unsent letter, in which he articulates his intention to end their relationship.[70] Although the letter remains unread by Sāra and exerts no direct impact on the narrative, it provides critical insight into Hammām's psychology. Within it, he expresses feelings of vulnerability and danger, as he imagines and seeks to dispel rival figures in Sāra's social orbit. He asserts his privileged position as the only person capable of truly recognizing and preserving Sāra's dignity, implicitly casting other potential suitors as morally inferior. Framing his bond with Sāra as one rooted in honour and purity, Hammām contrasts their relationship with others he deems base or dishonourable. He also reproaches Sāra for speaking openly about her past lovers, suggesting that such disclosures compromise the ideal of modesty he seeks to impose. Ultimately, Hammām's desire is to construct a relationship that not only aligns with his own moral expectations but also symbolically elevates Sāra's social standing – provided that she conforms to the role he envisions for her. This idealization, however, is less a recognition of Sāra's autonomy than a projection of Hammām's own need for control, couched in the language of virtue and honour.

5. Sāra beyond possession

Jealousy can arise from underlying dynamics of power in the roles within romantic relationships.[71] It often reflects the tension between the desire to possess one's partner and the competing need to assert individual autonomy. Within this framework, factors such as physical attractiveness, intelligence, social status, and age often influence the distribution of power within a romantic relationship, and jealousy may be seen as an emotion that

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[67] Peter C. Dodd, 'Family Honor and the Forces of Change in Arab Society', p. 49.

[68] Marion Holmes Katz, 'Beyond *Ḥalāl* and *Ḥarām*', p. 208.

[69] Ibidem, p. 209.

[70] ʿAbbās M. al-ʿAqqād, *Sāra*, p. 48.

[71] Marcianne Blévis, *Jealousy: True Stories of Love's Favorite Decoy*, (trans.) Olivia Heal, New York 2009, p. 3; Nancy Consuelo Martínez-León et al., 'A Systematic Review of Romantic Jealousy in Relationships', *Terapia Psicológica* 35/2 (2017), p. 204.

aims to prompt action in who experience it to compensate for the potential risk of loss of the beloved due to these perceived deficiencies in these areas.[72] Jealousy, understood in this context, acts as a psychological mechanism for prompting action towards the perceived relational disequilibrium, compelling the affected individual to seek a solution of perceived disparities. This coping with fear may nevertheless produce reaction that contribute to relational instability and cause its failure.[73] The drive to possess, which lies at the core of jealousy and its associated fear of loss, may at times incite betrayal, functioning as a countermeasure to reassert one's autonomy in the one object of jealousy.[74] This dynamic is arguably exemplified in *Sāra*, where Hammām's insecurity brings him to make actions to provoke jealousy in Sāra as a mean to bring her attached to him. Yet these efforts ultimately, rather than securing the relationship, possibly gradually push Sāra away, which in this fear of possession render her less involved in the relation ultimately leading her to betray him. Within this psychological framework, jealousy propels Hammām into a pattern of possessive behavior born of fear, while Sāra's attempts to evade such control set into motion a spiral of conflict and resistance that fractures their bond.

Here, jealousy is not merely an emotional reaction but part of an ongoing relational game, one that Sāra is claimed to master more effectively than Hammām. Whereas Hammām is portrayed as consumed by inner conflict and psychological unrest, Sāra emerges as a figure of emotional equilibrium, largely impervious to the anxieties that torment her partner. Hammām seeks hence to make Sāra aware of the pain associated with jealousy and suspicion he is leaving. In an exchange coming out of the cinema[75] she asked whether he would accept a kiss from an actress in a film, Hammām replies, "Is it polite to refuse a kiss?" and follows with, "If the profession required it, it would be a business matter." Through these statements Hammām seeks to ignite her jealousy. Similarly, in another episode, Hammām make Sāra find an image of a beautiful woman among his papers. The image, as Hammām later explains, is of a dancer whom he explicitly describes as being more beautiful than Sāra. He attempts to justify his possession of the photograph by likening it to an aesthetic object comparable to a statue intended to be appreciated as art rather than as an object of desire. Sāra's outburst which culminates in the destroy of this image[76] gratifies Hammām's need for emotional affirmation as a sign of her love. Despite this charged moment, there are no other instances where Hammām succeeds in arousing Sāra's jealousy. Even this episode proves largely ineffective, as it fails to prompt any meaningful dialogue or emotional reckoning between the characters.

Her apparent ease in navigating jealousy is hinted to function as a defensive strategy, rooted in the emotional lessons derived from two previous relations. In the first relationship, Sāra is said to have ended the partnership after witnessing her partner engage in a prolonged conversation with another woman at a party, despite the absence of any definitive evidence

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[72] Phil Mollon, *Shame and Jealousy: The Hidden Turmoils*, p. 108.

[73] Ibidem, p. 222.

[74] Gregory L. White, 'Jealousy and Partner's Perceived Motives for Attraction to a Rival', p. 222.

[75] ʿAbbās M. al-ʿAqqād, *Sāra*, pp. 30–31.

[76] Ibidem, p. 156.

of infidelity,[77] in which she had a public confrontation with the partner and immediate termination of the relation. According to the narrative, Sāra's second relationship operated as an act of reparation; following the emotional trauma of betrayal and the implicit negation of her value, she pursued a relationship with a younger, physically appealing neighbour as a means of reaffirming her self-worth.[78] Yet this interpretation seems deeply inflected by Hammām's own present insecurities embedded into the narrating voice. By affirming her sensitiveness to the theme of jealousy and fear of loss the narration implicitly accuse her of not coping with these fears in Hammām. In this framework the narrator gives ways to interpret her perceived coldness in the relation as generated by her own fear of losing the partner by keeping a certain distance and thus her way of dealing with jealousy.

The novel suggests furthermore that Sāra's desire for independence plays a central role in the fraught dynamics of her relationship with Hammām. She appears to interpret Hammām's jealousy not as a sign of affection but as an attempt to assert control over her, which she firmly resists.[79] This resistance is consistent with the portrayal of Sāra as possessing a strong and assertive personality, which manifests in her frequent efforts to dominate arguments and assert autonomy within the relationship. One site where this dynamic is symbolically enacted is in their differing attitudes toward punctuality.[80] Hammām places great importance on timeliness, viewing it as a sign of respect and emotional investment, while Sāra often arrives late and leaving him waiting. Moreover, Sāra does not shy away from provoking jealousy, occasionally referencing her friendships with other men. A notable instance occurs when she tells Hammām that a male friend has invited her to accompany him to a car dealership a remark that foreshadows the later betrayal by entering in the car of another man. In response to these perceived transgressions, Hammām repeatedly threatens to end the relationship, positioning his demands as efforts to restore moral and emotional order. Yet Sāra remains largely unmoved by such ultimatums.

The root of Hammām's jealousy is portrayed as arising from a deep-seated desire to be the central focus of Sāra's emotional world.[81] The novel intimates that Hammām's greatest fear is not simply the loss of Sāra but the existential condition of being alone.[82] Without her, he appears to lack meaningful social ties, and his solitude becomes increasingly pronounced. While he interacts with others in passing, his emotional gaze is singularly fixed on Sāra; when she is absent, he is depicted as passively observing the street from his window, as emphasizing hi his social and emotional isolation.[83] This pervasive loneliness compels Hammām to construct a romantic narrative in which he positions himself as the only figure capable of offering Sāra a life of genuine emotional fulfilment. With a certain degree of naivety, he seems to hope that Sāra will come to believe that her best possible

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[77] Ibidem, p. 34.
[78] Ibidem, pp. 34–35.
[79] Ibidem, pp. 45–46.
[80] Ibidem, p. 142.
[81] Ibidem, p. 53.
[82] Ibidem, p. 45.
[83] Ibidem, p. 54.

life lies with him. He dismisses her past relationships as superficial and purely physical – experiences any woman might have – while presenting his own bond with her as uniquely meaningful and emotionally substantial. Ultimately, Hammām's possessiveness and jealousy seems less the result of mistrust in Sāra but arguably his underlying fear of loneliness.

The deterioration of Hammām and Sāra's relationship is attributed, within the narrative, to Hammām's perception of Sāra's increasing emotional distance. Sāra is described as concealing herself behind metaphorical veils, resisting complete exposure to Hammām's scrutiny.[84] In response to the growing instability of the relationship, he becomes increasingly preoccupied with understanding Sāra and unable to do it he seeks help by a friend physician to uncover hidden motivations and interpret Sāra's words and gestures.[85] This perceived opacity generates in him a sense of estrangement, as if she is gradually withdrawing from the intimacy they once shared. However, this interpretation is not unambiguous. One could argue that it is, in fact, Hammām who withdraws emotionally, unable or unwilling to fully engage with the complexity of Sāra's life. A key aspect of this complexity – one that remains untold until almost the end of the story – is Sāra's motherhood. Although the text makes it clear that Hammām is aware of her having a son from a previous relationship, this fact is neither addressed directly in his discourse nor explored as a meaningful component of their relationship. The child does not figure prominently in the narrative and is not presented as a source of conflict between the two. Nonetheless, the latent presence of the son takes on a pivotal role in the story's climax, as this hidden character was the source of the separation, it is ultimately he who provides evidence of Sāra's alleged betrayal. The postponed revelation of Sāra's status as a mother may be read as a narrative strategy that reflects a subtle disavowal of her maternity, an aspect arguably rendered invisible, as unwanted, or inconvenient for the characterization of Hammām.[86]

6. The relief of betrayal

Hammām's existence is portrayed as orbiting almost entirely around his relationship with Sāra, with his thoughts and actions consistently preoccupied by her presence – and more notably, her absence. His intense emotional dependency is revealed through repeated depictions of him observing the street from her window during her absences, as if hoping for a fleeting glimpse of her. This behaviour shows his anxious attachment and contrasts sharply with Sāra's more detached and nonchalant attitude, which arguably suggests a markedly asymmetrical emotional investment within the relationship.

Hammām's eagerness to be in Sāra's company is further emphasized by his habit of arriving early to their planned meetings that accentuates the intensity of his desire for her company, as well possibly as the underlying fragility of his emotional state. In contrast,

[84] Ibidem, p. 157.
[85] Ibidem, p. 39.
[86] Ibidem, p. 32.

Sāra's habitual disregard for punctuality and her apparent indifference toward timeliness arguably function as an assertions of emotional detachment and personal autonomy. This imbalance contributes to Hammām's growing sense of insecurity and inadequacy within the relation. In response, Hammām seeks to incite jealousy and provoke Sāra into demonstrating emotional involvement, but his efforts fall short of producing the desired effect.[87] One of Hammām's primary strategies involves deliberately withdrawing his presence in an attempt to provoke a sense of loss and elicit fear of abandonment in Sāra. This tactic is further exemplified by his recurrent use of professional or social obligations as convenient pretexts for postponing their meetings, to manipulate the emotional dynamics of the relationship through "strategic absence." This appears in the final analysis the reason of the five-month separation between them before their meeting at the beginning of the novel. Sāra's apparent immunity to emotional manipulation is reflected in her indifference toward Hammām's attempts to provoke a reaction. These strategies of withholding presence as a form of punishment ultimately intensify Hammām's own emotional distress, as he comes to desire the very meetings he had chosen to defer.

The destabilizing effect of jealousy on Hammām's self-esteem is a central psychological thread in the narrative. His emotional state is marked by a persistent internal conflict, wherein jealousy becomes an overwhelming and disproportionate response that ultimately undermines, rather than protects, his well-being. This emotional excess gives rise to feelings of shame and self-reproach, as Hammām becomes increasingly aware of the irrationality of his behaviour. His sense of inadequacy is laid bare in comic moments that underscore the dissonance between his self-perception and behaviour, inviting the reader to view his plight with a mix of irony and empathy. Particularly illustrative in this context are the scenes depicting the interactions between Hammām and the private investigator he employs. The elderly private detective appointed to follow Sāra is indexically chosen as an older man out of fear that a younger one might be seduced by her. The comedic tone is heightened by the many discussions with the clumsy investigator Amīn which reveal his furthermore poor eyesight as when he mistakenly reports having seen another man with Sāra, unaware that the man in question is in fact Hammām himself.

Towards the conclusion of the narrative, signs of Sāra's possible infidelity begin to surface paradoxically bringing a sense of relief to Hammām. Tension escalates at the moment when Sāra's child repeats romantic expressions, and Hammām, struck by their unfamiliarity, recognizes them as evidence of another's presence. When questioned, Sāra attributes the child's expressions to a servant in the household. However, Hammām dismisses this explanation, contending that the refined diction and literary register of the repeated phrases are incongruent with the speech of a domestic worker. Hammām's suspicions are given credence – at least from his perspective – through the intervention of the detective, Amīn which exclaims with elation, "I've found it, I've found it!"[88] claiming having witnessed her entering another man's car.

[87] Ibidem, p. 143.
[88] Ibidem, p. 193.

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Regardless of the truth of the betrayal of Sāra, the narrative presents this resolution not as a tragic collapse, but as a moment of psychological liberation for the protagonist. Significantly, the betrayal arguably emerges not as a source of dread for Hammām anymore but also something he appears to seek, even hope for, as demonstrated by his precipitous acceptance of Amīn's account, notwithstanding the latter's previously demonstrated unreliability. Ironically, the resolution of Hammām's emotional turmoil is brought about by the realization of his greatest fear, Sāra's unfaithfulness, which paradoxically emerges as a liberating force.[89] After a prolonged period of emotional anguish marked by obsessive jealousy and insecurity, the confirmation of Sāra's disloyalty functions as a form of catharsis for the protagonist. This emotional release is symbolized by Hammām's ability to smile again and a return to psychological equilibrium.[90] The betrayal can arguably be seen wished as it offers him a morally and emotionally justifiable rationale for ending the relationship. Crucially, this discovery serves to rehabilitate Hammām's self-image and recast his prior emotional volatility in a more sympathetic light. Hammām's jealousy, previously verging on pathological, is retrospectively legitimized, while Sāra is positioned as the villain of the story.

The act of reclaiming personal freedom is furthermore dramatized through Hammām's withdrawal from the cinema district, a space that appears in the novel as emblematic of modern, arguably emotionally volatile forms of life. This departure serves as a symbolic severing from the affective milieu in which his dysfunctional relation with Sāra had been cultivated.[91]

Conclusions

Al-ʿAqqād's *Sāra* offers an exploration of the complex interplay between jealousy and shame, presenting these emotions as simultaneously personal and socially conditioned. Jealousy emerges as a profoundly destabilizing force – traumatic in its intensity and characterized by an unstable constellation of affective states, including wounded pride, internalized shame, and an acute anxiety over potential betrayal.[92] In confronting these anxieties – anxieties for which Sāra appears arguably not to understand or unable to offer the assurances demanded – Hammām enacts a masculine model that seeks to secure his partner's fidelity through various control-oriented strategies. These attempts, however, ultimately prove ineffective and counterproductive, as they fail to eliminate doubt regarding Sara's loyalty. Moreover, such strategies rebound upon Hammām himself, exposing his emotional vulnerability and culminating in a form of self-humiliation. The sense of self-humiliation is underscored through the novel's deployment of humour in scenes that highlight the protagonist's trepidation and anxiety. The novel suggests that the protagonist's

[89] Ibidem, pp. 179–180.
[90] Ibidem, p. 193.
[91] Ibidem, p. 182.
[92] Phil Mollon, *Shame and Jealousy: The Hidden Turmoils*, p. 12.

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jealousy arises not only from personal insecurity or a sense of inadequacy, but also from his inability to accept Sāra's emotional autonomy and her assertion of agency. Sāra's resistance to his desire for possession – and the independence this resistance enables – disrupts Hammām's model of relational control, thereby arguably fueling a cycle of suspicion and emotional instability. The pain of jealousy is such the narrative presents the dissolution of the relationship not as a tragic failure, but rather as a form of resolution, a 'happy ending' that liberates Hammām from this psychological burden.

The relationship between Hammām and Sāra, then, could arguably be interpreted as a symbolic confrontation between competing value systems: one rooted in conventional notions of honour, control, and emotional transparency, and the other aligned with modern ideals of personal freedom, privacy, and self-determination. Hammām's jealousy may be interpreted as a mechanism shaped by a traditional value system that places significant emphasis on the notion of *ʿirḍ* where jealousy functions as a drive to preserve this moral ideal. This desire is underpinned by a deep-seated fear of public humiliation and social censure for the self and the family. The anxiety he experiences can thus be situated within the shifting social dynamics of early 20th-century Cairo, a city whose expanding population fostered a heightened sense of anonymity and thereby eroded traditional forms of life within communal and familial oversight. The absence of social control is made starkly evident through Hammām's resort to hiring a private investigator that is unable to fully follow Sāra. Hammām's experience arguably points to a deeper unease with the social norms and relational dynamics of the city, highlighting his limited capacity to inhabit its space on his own terms.

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