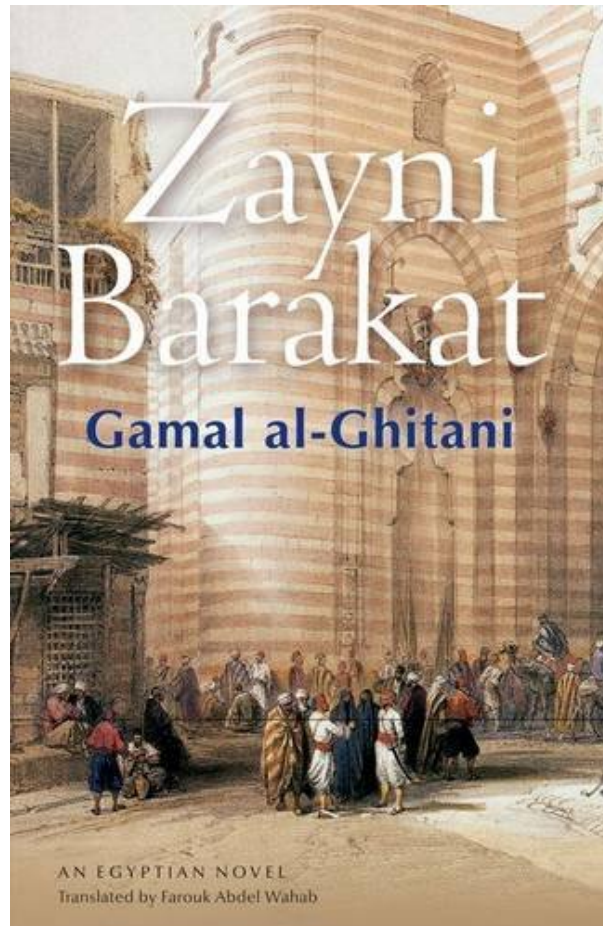
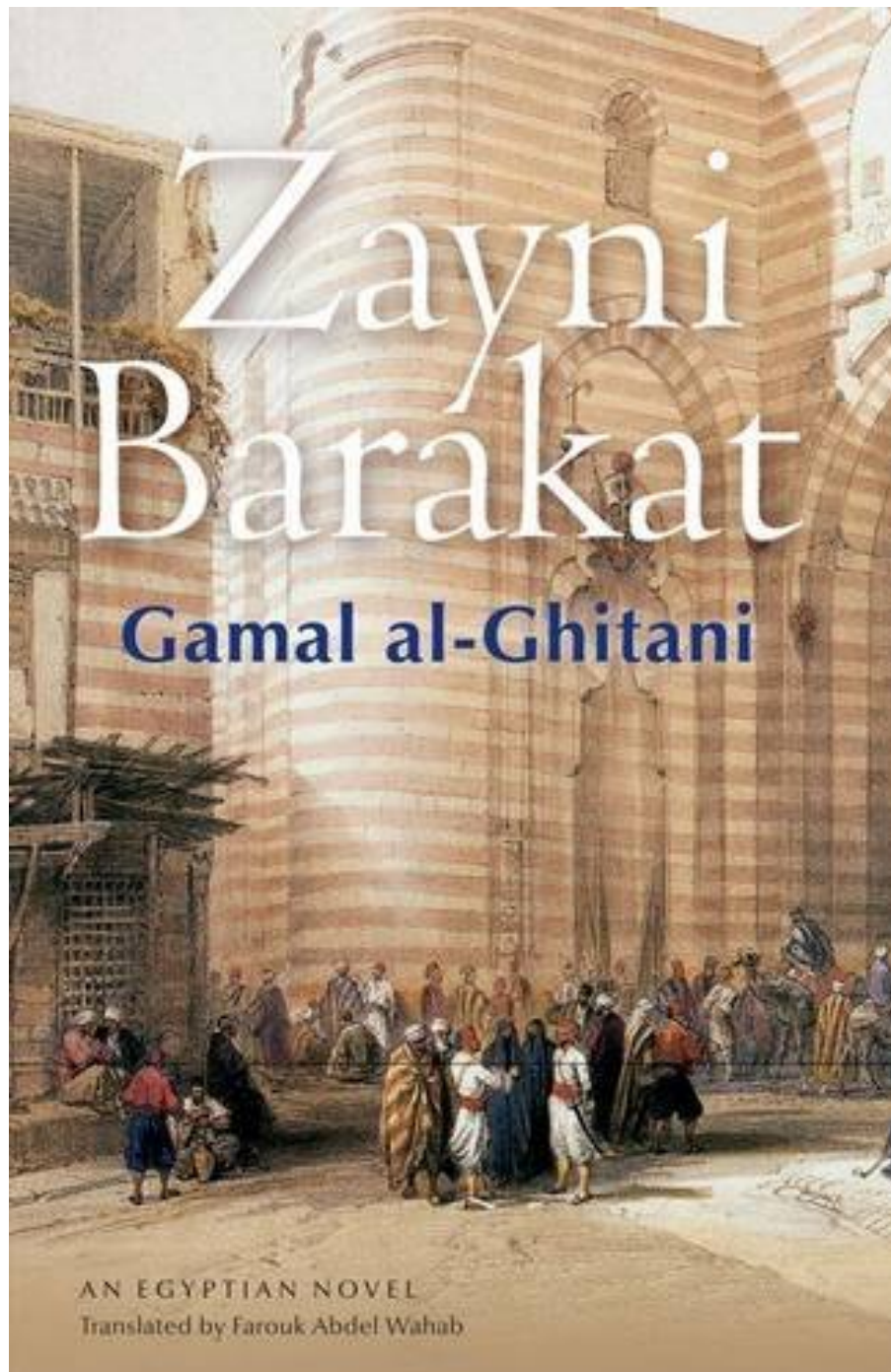


# ZAYNI BARAKAT BY GAMAL AL-GHITANI



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## Review

"A gripping, unforgettable work of prose fiction. It displays its author's originality of conception and execution at every step." - Edward Said, in his Foreword to the book; "Whether read as a colorful evocation of past times or as a bleak political parable, *Zayni Barakat* succeeds brilliantly." - Robert Irwin, *Times Literary Supplement*"

## Language Notes

Text: English (translation)

Original Language: Arabic

## About the Author

Gamal Al-ghitani was born in 1945 and educated in Cairo. He has written 13 novels and 6 collections of short stories. He is currently editor-in-chief of the literary review *Akhbar al-adab*

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"In the course of my long travels I have never seen a city so devastated. After a long time I ventured out into the streets. Death, cold and heavy, hung in the air. Walls have no value here, doors have been eliminated. No one is certain that they will see another day."

The Egypt of the Mamluk dynasty witnessed a period of artistic ostentation and social and political upheaval, at the heart of which lay the unsolved question of the ruler's legitimacy. Now, in 1516, the Mamluk reign is coming to an end with the advance of the invading Ottomans. The numerous narrators, among them a Venetian traveler and several native Muslims, tell the story of the rise to power of the ruthless, enigmatic, and puritanical governor of Cairo, Zayni Barakat ibn Musa, whose control of the corrupt city is effected only through a complicated network of spies and informers.

- Sales Rank: #518249 in Books
- Published on: 2010-02-01
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 4.90" h x .70" w x 7.80" l,
- Binding: Paperback
- 254 pages

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11 of 11 people found the following review helpful.

A Brilliant Historical Fiction

By M. Sable

Zayni Barakat is a historical novel set in Mamluk Egypt. Having lived in Egypt (where I read the novel 11 years ago) and studied Egyptian history, I can say that the work more than accomplishes the primary job of historical fiction--it transports the reader to another time and place, making that time and that place come

alive.

However, Zayni Barakat is, like much of Naguib Mahfouz's later work, a pointed commentary on modern Egyptian politics. In particular, it is the story of police surveillance and what it means to live -- and work for -- a police state. Al-Ghitani captures the dis-ease and perversity of the Nasserist police state admirably. The novel thus deserves to be read both as a diversion and as an education in contemporary Arab politics.

6 of 7 people found the following review helpful.

pertinent to our time

By Nazir A. Husain

This book is written in the context of the Mamluk dynasty in Egypt. However many of the attitudes, methods and ideas presented in the book can be found in today's Middle East. The author has an excellent command on the history of the region and also on the attitudes, feelings and emotions of the period he is describing through a narrative account. The book is fiction but it feels too real to be that

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

Brilliant spy thriller

By James R. Maclean

This is a brilliant book that deserves far more attention than it has received. Gamal al-Ghitani died in October 2015 after decades as a member of a very distinguished cadre of Egyptian novelists (Naguib Mahfouz, Nawal El Saadawi, Khairy Shalaby); his specialty was the historical novel, but like the other Egyptian novels I've had the good fortune to read\*, espionage plays a surprisingly important role.

The novel is set in the last years of the Mamluk state, an unusual state ruled by slave soldiers that controlled Egypt, the Levant, and the Red Sea (1). For over a century, the sultanate became a permanent junta, with the sultan himself merely the top-ranked oligarch. In 1516, the sultanate entered its last war with the Ottoman Empire--a war that would prove to be a crushing walk-over by Selim I the Grim. But this shattering blow to Cairo is still in the future. The ruthless and oh-so-professional spymaster Zakariyya is challenged by the rise of a mysterious, naïve-seeming inspector of markets--Zayni Barakat, notionally, his new boss (and a direct appointee of the sultan). Soon Zakariyya discovers that Zayni is even better at spying than he is, and potentially a deadly adversary for control of Cairo's immense network of informers and investigators. All his career, the effects have been felt through the rise and fall of entire factions of Mamluks and emirs. Zayni adds to the stakes by introducing pietistic populism in his public appearances.

The narrative structure is unusual and complex. There are many characters, and the point of view shifts constantly. Mainly there are four characters: Zakariyya, the perennial head of the secret police; Zayni (2), the market inspector; Visconti Gianti, the Venetian merchant; Said al-Juhayni, the idealistic student; and Shaykh Rihan, Said's mentor. All are the objects of intense scrutiny by one of the others. An obsession of the characters is the grievous injustice of Cairene society: cruelty is meted out to the innocent, while the powerful enjoy impunity--except when they fall in factional struggles.

The obvious comparisons to this book are George Orwell's 1984 and Naguib Mahfouz's *Arabian Nights and Days*. Orwell and Mahfouz wrote purely fictional accounts of life under murderous hypothetical regimes--Orwell's, in a familiar near-future (3), and Mahfouz's, in a faintly comical update of an ancient fairytale (4). In Orwell, the power of the super-states are terrifying and infallible; the thought police easily gull the protagonist, Winston Smith, into betraying himself. If there are splinters in the security apparatus, we never see them. In Mahfouz, the main protagonist is a "reformed" Shahrar, who imagines that he can avoid the consequences of his obsession with control. Both of these books have their place, but after reading them, a connoisseur of deep politics may want to look at the endless convoluted dilemmas and delusions of secret power.

\* Translations from Arabic to English

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#### ADDITIONAL READING

Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 3rd ed., Cambridge University Press (2014)

Naguib Mahfouz, *Arabian Nights and Days*, Anchor Books (1995/1982\*)

\*First date refers to date of translation into English; second, original publication in Arabic.

Naguib Mahfouz, *Palace Walk*, Anchor Books (1990/1956\*)

George Orwell, 1984, Secker & Warburg (1949)

(complete text available online at Project Gutenberg)

R. Stephen Humphreys, "The Politics of the Mamluk Sultanate: a Review Essay," *Mamluk Studies Review*, IX.1 (2005), p.221

(Many of the articles in the *Mamluk Studies Review* are available online for free)

Carl F Petry, "Crime in Mamluk Historiography: A Fraud Case Depicted by Ibn Taghribirdi", *Mamluk Studies Review*, X.2 (2006) p.141

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#### NOTES

(1) FYI: many states used slave soldiers (Arabic: sing., "ghulam," pl. "ghilman"), and many states fell under the control of slave soldiers. Not all of these were Muslim. Historian Ira Lapidus (2014, p.197) uses the terms "ghulam" and "mamluk" interchangeably; "ghulam" is a more specific term ("Mamluk" just means "owned slave").

(2) Zayni Barakat is an historical figure from the *Bada'i al-Zuhur fi Waqa'i* of Muhammad ibn Iyas. So is Sultan al-Ghawri (r.1501-1516). A few other characters in the novel are real, but they are not prominent. The other main characters are fictional.

(3) This may be controversial, but in Orwell's personal experience the world of Winston Smith was rather familiar. The lapse from realism is, I think, surprising to most readers: it is the political cohesion and ideological sincerity of Ingsoc, not the panopticon cities, or the global scope of the three superpowers.

(4) Mahfouz's book is yet another retelling of *One Thousand and One Nights*; in Mahfouz's version, the Empire of Shahriar seems to be a modern police state that merely lacks modern technology. Shahriar is the emperor who resolves to marry a virgin every night, and behead her the next morning--until Scheherazade (Shahrazad) changes his mind. Realistically, Mahfouz's Shahrazad does not forgive her sociopathic husband

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