n this chapter, I examine how the literature produced in nineteenth-century Egypt played an important role in the nation-building processes at both the Ottoman center and its periphery reflecting the social and political changes taking place and also helping to develop new forms of solidarity and models of community. This discussion will provide a context for Taymur’s study of the relationship between literature, gender and nation-building within which the analysis of ‘A’isha Taymur’s work of fiction titled Nata’ij al-Ahwal fi al-Aqwal wa al-Af’al (The Consequences of Change in Words and Deeds), published in 1887/88¹ will be offered in the next chapter. As part of the analysis of nation-building, I will pay special attention to the way language, translation, and the changes in the old literary forms and themes offered prisms for capturing the homogenizing dynamic in the construction of a modern national community in Egypt and its relations with the Ottoman and European ones. Equally important, I will show that this dynamic privileged the narrative structures, new thresholds of meaning, and prescriptive models of community of a new emerging middle class. The result was the development of horizontal and fraternal bonds of community that gave the emerging middle class an important role to play in the shaping of these communities.

The Role of Print Language and Capitalism in the Construction of a National Community

Nineteenth-century Egypt witnessed a redefinition of the hierarchal ordering among the multiple regional languages identified with the Ottoman community and the development of new relations of power between them and European languages. The Ottoman linguistic system, which reflected the defining political and cultural characteristics of the community, relied on Turkish as the
official language of government, Persian as a literary language, and Arabic as the language of religion. In nineteenth-century Egypt, Arabic, the spoken language of the majority, gave way to a new form of social solidarity as the new language of government and literary production. What is often overlooked in the discussions of the nineteenth-century revival of Arabic as the new national language was the parallel reliance on the knowledge of European languages creating a bilingual intelligentsia that played a central role in the region’s massive translation project and reform as the cornerstones of modernization.

An examination of the books published during this period in different languages provided a quantitative measure of the changing balance between the languages associated with the multilingual Ottoman system and those associated with the national. The earliest official figures available for published books in Egypt deal with the 1820s. There were one hundred books published during that decade: 49 books were published in Arabic, 43 in Turkish, and 8 in Persian. The functional division of labor between Turkish as the language of government, Persian as a literary language, and Arabic as the language of religion and the number of books published in each language provided a baseline for the Ottoman-Egyptian community.

In the 1830s, the opening of modern state schools associated with the modernization project had mixed effects on the fortunes of the Arabic and Turkish languages. It did not immediately challenge the linguistic hierarchy between the two even though the schools heavily recruited Arabic speakers among its student and instructors resulting in a demand for Arabic textbooks—giving the language a new role to play and explaining the jump in the number of published Arabic books to 186. Because these schools also used Turkish to teach administration and military sciences, they also contributed to a parallel jump in the demand for Turkish textbooks (148). The technocratic bent of the modern schools explained both the drop in the number of literary books published in Persian to 5 and the publication of 19 books in what were identified as “other languages,” most probably European ones, which suddenly emerged as new linguistic players during this period.

This early trend, which maintained the relative power of Turkish vis-à-vis Arabic, Persian, and European languages did not continue into the 1840s and the 1850s. In the 1840s, the number of published Arabic books (244) continued its rise in comparison to Turkish (122), Persian (12), and European (26). The educational and fiscal retrenchment that characterized the 1850s did not affect the continued rise in the number of Arabic books (345) but contributed to the decline of the number of all books published in local and European languages: 66 books published in Turkish, 9 in Persian, and 23 in European languages.

In the 1860s, a qualitative change in the fortunes of these languages occurred that was reflected in their publishing record. The reign of Ismail (1863–79),