NARRATING DICTATORSHIP, RECONSTRUCTING NATIONS: THE REPRESENTATION OF DICTATORS IN THE ARABIC DICTATOR NOVEL

By

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Abstract

The dictators who emerged after independence in the Arab World had a profound effect on their nations and the literary scene. Early on after independence, Arab dictators exploited many strategies such as the media, the historical narratives of their nations, and prose narrative to construct a public persona of themselves that would eventually grow to become mythological. This dissertation examines novels that address the issue of dictatorship, its various configurations, and the politics of history—the exclusive history told by dictators— by offering a textual and contextual discussion of four recent Arabic novels from Algeria, Morocco, Yemen and Egypt. It calls attention to the parallel/s between narrative and the rhetorical processes and structures that once played a role in empowering dictators and helping them to create a god-like image of themselves. It also traces how novels can be read as tools of dissent against Arab dictators' ongoing rhetorical self-empowering over their own people and nations.

The four novels I analyze in this dissertation are: *al-Aʿẓam* (2010) by Ibrāhīm al-Saʿdī, *al-Khawf* (2009) by Rashīd Jallūlī, *Ṭā'ir al-Kharāb* (2005) by ʿAbd al-Rabb Sarūrī, and *Lā Yā Shaykh* (2011) by Saʿīd Ḥabīb. The focus on the representation of dictatorial, ruptured urban, and exilic space and thus time cannot be detached from the social and political experiences of these writers, but can —and should— be read as a reflection of such experiences. The representation of dictators in these novels is thus both a reflection of the changing socio-economic and political climate of post-colonial nation-state, as well as a means to trace the critiques launched against the dictatorial regimes.

The significance of this dissertation is its contribution to determining the extent to which the Arab novelists and the Arab literary scene have managed to produce a body of texts that can

be categorized together under the banner of dictator novels like that of dictator novels in the case of Latin America.

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Translation and Transliteration

None of the primary texts I worked on were translated into English; therefore any translation is mine. As far as transliteration is concerned, I followed the style used by the Library of Congress. For Arab authors whose works have been translated into English, I used the most common spelling in English

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my loving mother and the soul of my deceased father whose words of encouragement and push for tenacity ring in my ears.

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I begin by thanking my advisor Professor Aliko Songolo for his help and support throughout my entire graduate career at UW-Madison and the completion of this dissertation. Professor Songolo's intellectual mentorship, encouragement, and patience made this project possible. I am sincerely grateful for his guidance, constant feedback, and his resolve in seeing me through to the end.

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Introduction

The modern imagining of nations on a geographical site is necessarily twi(n)-ned with an impulse to rewrite history in a way that gives the modern nation roots in the immemorial past (Ouyang, v)

As recent as it is, the Arabic novel and its political implications are heavily debated. The famous concept of "art for art's sake" has become the target of pointed critique and debate. These debates took place in a period that came with extreme instability and uncertainty in the Arab countries after independence. The short lived optimism and hope that followed independence in most of the Arab countries during the 1940's and the 1950's of the twentieth century and the end of European colonial rule had all but disappeared by the following decade. The disappearance of the once dreamt of and fought for independence is clear in the events and practices that followed it such as: the reality of life under Arab leaders' police states which exposed the fallacy of the promise of a democratic, independent, post-colonial nation-state; the repression of all political activities; the absence of political and social freedom which was also inaugurated by the catastrophic defeat by Israel in 1967.

The disillusionment after independence is not something unique to the Arab world alone; rather, it is something that most of the third world countries have in common. Scholars of African, Arabic and Latin American literatures have been consciously occupied with the depiction of this disillusionment and trauma. Addressing the experience of African writers and nations specifically and that of the third world in general, Aliko Songolo, for instance, summarizes the centrality of disillusionment in the works of postcolonial writers, when he writes that the new regimes in most of the third world countries, are "[s]hrewdly orchestrated and largely perpetrated by the … dominated regime that took power … in the aftermath of [colonization], the slaughter of [the people] has been concealed behind a curtain of silence on the part of the international community"

(108). This means that the practice of the unjust power which was implemented by the colonial project continues to find consumers in the newly independent nations. Although he was referring to African nations in describing this unjust system, Songolo's statement describes the sense of disillusionment where the people of the new nations sadly came to understand how they are being exploited, oppressed, and excluded from the new state and the privilege/s promised by independence.

The growing sense that the dream of postcolonial nations is gradually in question, Salih Moukhlis remarks, forms the focal point of postcolonial literature which was predominantly concerned with "the colonizer/colonized dichotomy" (350). The literature produced after independence, he further writes, "confronts not only the need to cure the scars of the colonial, but also to define and expose the flaws and problematic areas within the ex-colony itself such as neo-colonial practices, localized social problems and more importantly political disenfranchisement" (350). Writers turned away from realism and embraced new literary aesthetics which not only fracture the time and space of realism but also merge both the world of contradictions where dream and reality are now twi(n)ned to depict the sense of alienation experienced by the people. There is a sense of loss in which "the task of mourning" nations becomes the center focus of writing (Idelber 1). The master of the new narrative, the dictatorial regime, prevents the people from "the permission to narrate" (Said 1)[1] therefore determining a narrative which feeds into the dictatorial machine illustrating that any dictatorship must exploit the narrative process in order to authorize its legitimacy.

[1] This term was used in Edward Said. "Permission to Narrate." *Journal of Palestine Studies* 13.3 (1984).

Being part of these nations which suffered from this disillusionment, many Arab reformists, writers and scholars have used several strategies to address and reevaluate their sociopolitical predicaments in order to create their own definition of independence and self- ruling. Novelists, for instance, have used the medium of fictional texts to exploit any chance of a "room for maneuver" (Ross 1) to both resist and challenge the rule of dictators. In the Arab world, a whole generation of writers, *jīl al-sittīnāt,* (the sixties generation), for instance, emerged from the dilemma of this disillusionment.

It is not surprising then that from the time of its early emergence, the Arabic novel has been a battleground between authority and the people of the newly mapped nations. Its themes have varied from topics related to colonization, corruption, societal problems and the subjugated dignity of the people. Serigne Ndiaye, in the article "Dictatorship and the emptiness of the Rhetoric of Totalitarian Discourse in Sony Labou Tansi's La Vie et demie," argues that this intertwined relationship between literature and society "has been labeled [as] *littérature engagée* [committed literature]*"* (112) and emerged as a result of French existentialism's beliefs in the artist's responsibility to their society. In other words, the novelists' dissatisfaction with their society becomes the "composite catalyst" (Olaniyan 71) of their writing through which they engage the problems in their society. Emmanuel Yewah summarizes this engagement when he says that writing provides "an introspective critical examination of the…cultural and political structures themselves" (94). Yewah underscores the clear involvement of literature in societal problems. And in the case of Arabic literature, politics and societal problems intersect so much so that critics reading third world literature often pose the question: "Why do your people talk so much politics in your work?" in regards to these bodies of literature (Olaniyan 70). Olanyian's statement is also echoed by Ojaide who argues that it is the writers' recognition of their role in the society as the

"conscience of the society" and "priests, social reformers, and prophets who speak to their people out of their indigenous tradition to meet the demands of a modern society" (767-776) which demonstrates their attempts to articulate the oppressed experience. These writers then find their own strategies to question all the means used to manipulate the truth. Their depiction of the exilic, the rural and the urban space becomes a way, or a move away from realism, to understand their alienation in the new world and to re/evaluate the past through the prism of the present and the present through the eye of the past.

In a seminal study of how the state in developing countries exercises power over narrative, Samia Mehrez writes that "the position of the writer as 'underground historian' is indeed what characterizes much of the literary input in contemporary Arab world" (7). This quotation portrays the commitment that many Arabic novels have devoted to power and history since the colonizers left the Arab world. In the midst of the current changes in the Arab world, it is not surprising, that the phenomenon of social commitment remains conspicuously present in the Arabic novel. Like post-independence Arabic novels, which lament the disillusionment experienced by Arab citizens, contemporary Arabic texts, at their core, call attention to the juxtaposition of both narrative and the rhetorical practices and structures that contributed to the empowerment of the Arab leaders, who later on became dictators. By rhetorical practices, I mean the manipulated paradigms that allow dictators to control even when it is against the will of the people. This manipulation, arguably, helped to provide continuous support for the authoritarian rule—support that eventually allowed them to be "the strongest and most absolute dictatorship[s] ever established" (Wiarda 2).

Unlike Arab critics who did not historicize the Arabic novel sufficiently, Latin American critics have treated travel, existential and cosmopolitan themes in literature as responses to dictatorship. The second half of the nineteenth century in Latin America witnessed the emergence

of a new literary genre that caused quite a commotion on the cultural scene. With the publication of *Facundo*: *Civilización y barbarie* in 1845, the Argentine writer Domingo Faustino Sarmiento did not only pave the road for many other Latin American writers to take apart their military leaders and their dictatorships but was able also to introduce a genre that later came to be known as Latin America's semi exclusive literary achievement, "*la novela del dictador*" which exhibited new literary aesthetics in their work, breaking with the realist tradition of their predecessors. Employing a historical figure, Juan Facundo Quiroga, to address Argentina's contemporary situation, Sarmiento, for instance, was able to link both the past and the present of his nation to tell the story of how the dictator came to power. In his introduction to the English translated version, Ilan Stavans writes that Sarmiento "set out not only to debunk Rosas, but also, perhaps more urgently, to explain what had brought him to power—to illustrate the natural and social conditions in Argentina that allowed such a tyrant to emerge"(viii-ix). A review of the scholarly literature on the topic of dictator novels, shows that the emergence of modern Latin American dictator novels, as we know them today, was reflected in a group of texts that echoed the political circumstances of certain Latin American countries while simultaneously laying the foundations of the "*Dictator Novel*."

In the middle of the twentieth century, with the publication of novels such as, *El Señor Presidente* (Mister President, 1946) by Guatemalan novelist Miguel Ángel Asturias, *El gran Burundún Burundá ha muerto* (The Great Burundún Burundá Is Dead 1952) by Colombian writer Jorge Zalamea, the emerging genre became more developed and distinct from even European novels in the sense that its main search is not for social or economic justice and identity but rather for a historical national identity that was lost at the hands of the dictators. One of the main

characteristics of the dictator novel during this period was that it became very critical of history and its formation.

A new thematic development in the Latin American dictator novel became noticeable in the works of writers who seem to constitute the peak of achievement in the dictator novel and which are also an integral part of the era known as the Latin American Boom: *El otoño del patriarca* (Autumn of the Patriarch, 1975) by Colombian writer Gabriel García Marquez, *Yo el supremo* (I, the Supreme, 1974) by Paraguayan writer Augusto Roa Bastos, and *El recurso del método* (Reasons of State, 1974) by Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier. Although history is still at the center of their writings, the close ties between the Latin dictators and imperialist powers are highlighted.

The experience of Arab writers parallels that of their Latin American counterparts as they, too, are a product of oppressive regimes. Many writers employed new literary aesthetics in their works which captured the issue of disillusionment. Fictional writing, therefore, has a stake in re/writing and shaping the state's history— its past, present and even future, one might say. Just like their Latin American counterparts, Arabic literary texts, contemporary novels to be precise, call attention to the parallels between narrative and the rhetorical processes and structures which, both, empowered and sustained the authoritarian rules.

Some of the texts, which can be categorized as dictator novels, exhibit various characteristics that Arabic dictator novels share and distinguish them from other types of novels. First, in the Arabic dictator novel the character of the dictator occupies a conventional ruling position, as opposed to other Arabic novels where an authoritarian figure may be symbolically function as a dictator. One example of the latter type of novel is Naguib Mahfouz's *Awlād Hāritnā* (*Children of the Alley*, 1995) in which Mahfouz uses the character of Gabalawi to draw an image

of dictatorship and dictators. Another example is the character of the Imam in Nawal El Saadawisadawi's *Suqūtt al-Imām* (*The Fall of the Imam* 1987). Although the Imam in Saadawi's novel is not the ruler of the state, he is used and blamed for the corruption in his society.

Second, these novels use historical leaders, who were themselves dictators, to address contemporary dictators. Gamal al-Ghitani's *al-Zayni Barakat* (1974) is a classic example of such novels. He takes the character of Barakāt ibn Mūsā, a historical ruler who governed Egypt in the 16th century to problematize the emergence of Nasser as a dictator in Egypt. The novel gives a vivid account of how hopes when placed in a charismatic leader get suffocated by a net of state surveillance and torture. In *Majnūn al-ḥukum* (*The Tyrant*, 1998), for instance, the Moroccan writer Bensālem Himmich fictionalizes an iconic historical figure, the Fatimid Caliph Al-Ḥākim bi-Amrillāh who was the ruler of Egypt in the 11th century to mediate the role of Arab intellectuals in contemplating questions of power and authority. The novel mixes history and fiction about a tyrannical medieval ruler to who is deployed as an allegory of modern repressive Arab dictators.

Third, some writers of Arabic dictator novels created create fictitious rulers and nations to talk about Arab dictators and their repressive regimes. Here we can think of Abdelrahman Munif's seminal novel, *Sharq al-Mutawassit* (*East of the Mediterranean*, 1974). The protagonist is physically ill as a result of the oppression and thus he is sent to France to be cured from his disease. The protagonist's political activities, however, are anchored in a desire to challenge the practice of dictatorship and the establishment of, although nameless, a state founded upon liberty. In this novel, both the dictator and the nation are fictitious. The use of fictitious characters has become a bench mark in the work of many Arab writers who write about dictators in their recent works such as *Al-Aʿẓam* (*The Greatest!*, 2010) *b*y Ibrāhīm al-Saʿdī, *Al-Khawf* (*Fear*, 2009) by Rashīd Jallūlī,

Ṭā'ir al-Kharāb (*The Bird of Destruction*, 2005) by ᶜAbd al-Rabb Sarūrī, *Lā Yā Shaykh (Stop It Man*,2011).[2]

If we accept that dictators, by definition, are figures who very much manage their societies by their imposed ideology "to underpin and justify [their] total mastery of the…nation[s]" (Patterson 225), then we can all agree that the Arab nations form a fertile soil for dictators and dictatorships. The question, then, becomes why there is not one single study in which Arab critics have attempted to examine how have Arab novelists chosen to represent this dictatorial power. In other words, why did Arab critics depoliticize literature that is inherently political? Why is there a void in a field that might have determined how far the Arab novelists and the Arab literary scene have managed to produce a body of texts that can be categorized together under the banner of dictator novels like that of dictator novels in the case of Latin America. I seek to answer these relevant questions by contextualizing my arguments in the socio-political, religious, and historical contexts in which the novels under scrutiny were written to argue that by using narratives, Arab writers challenge the dictatorial power and deconstruct its myth. Bearing in mind this connection between narratives and society, the former then, reiterate, satirize, and to some degree even, rewrite the historical account of certain people or certain nations. This process calls into question the ability of writing to fictionally re-present historical events and problematize the social conventions which once granted history and its manipulators the exclusive privilege of using it as a tool to gain and maintain power. In this study I argue that these texts attempt to destabilize the power of dictators through fictional imagination.

[2] These novels will be treated later in detail as they are the focus of this dissertation.

The representation of dictators in Arabic novels is not a new phenomenon; rather, this genre stems from the reality that surrounds Arab writers. Dan Izevbaye writes that "there is a sense in which literary genres are symbolic representations of their age" (38). This statement alludes to the fact that novels sometimes are read for "extra literary reasons" and are also seen as "interesting documents from diverse points of view: anthropological, socio-political, feminist, historical and so on" (Caiani 2-3). To a certain degree, this is a legitimate statement to make; however, one should not also ignore the artistic and aesthetic nature of these novels because if we do so, as Caiani argues, we would be marginalizing a crucial point which is "the form the author has decided to give them [novels]… and how a specific form gives life to a specific content" (3). In other words, although the content of some novels might be social, political, and cultural or even historical s, they often have their own unique innovations which differ from those used by historians, journalists or political scientists.

By employing various strategies such as the monopoly of the media, for example, Arab leaders were able to position themselves at the center of everything including the way of living, thinking and even in the intellectual discourse. This positioning made its way through in two major strategies. First, they notoriously exploited the media, prose, and poetry to construct of themselves public and national figures; in other words, a figure that is, sometimes, treated as a godly figure and one would be blasphemous if he/she stands against him[3]. This strategy of dictatorship enables dictators to self- aggrandize themselves through the narrative which they exploit "in an attempt to rewrite history, to control and to create [a sense of] intolerance for [their opponents]" (Ashcraft et al 83). The second way, then, imposes itself through the sense of fidelity which the first creates.

[3] The use of the pronoun "him" here is exclusive because I cannot think of an Arab dictator who is not a man.

Hence, dictators silence writers and intellectuals who seem to question this abuse of power "literally and dramatically [by the control that these tyrants] reveal in the censorship exercised" (Ashcroft et al 83) under the name of their scribal tradition that they abuse the understanding of national security.

Starting with the premise that authoritarians appropriated the narrative process to legitimize their rule, one can imagine Arabic novels written after the fall of these powers to impose an "authorized readings" (Wolff 54) of the once painted narratives of the authoritative powers. The sacred and untouchable image that Arab leaders constructed of themselves served as a mythology and ideology that they skillfully exploited to maintain their power. In relation to the Latin American context, Richard Patterson argues that "[a]n obvious strategic choice [is a] conceptual space made available through a displacement of narration" (224). Many courageous novelists such as Naguib Mahfouz, Alaa Al Aswany, Rashīd Jallūlī, Yūsuf al-Ṣāyigh, Nawal El Saadawi, Ahlam Mostaghanmi, Assia Djebar among others were able to expose part of this tyranny and oppression through the telling of fictional stories which in turn tell the story of dictators.

Answering the call of scholars such as Husām Abū al-ᶜIlā in his article "Imagining more Autumns for North Africa's Patriarchs: The Dictator Novel in Egypt", where he calls for "[a] discussion of the relationship between Arabic novels and Arab dictators" (Abū al-ᶜIlā), I seek to trace how contemporary Arabic novelists repeatedly call attention to the parallels between narrative and history. I argue that by exploiting the novel as an imagined space, writers are able to challenge and take control of narratives to expose the lies of the dominant dictators by engaging with them in a stultifying "rhetoric of blame" (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 8). In so doing, writing becomes a tool to express the peoples' disappointment while at the same time avoiding the chains

of censorship imposed on Arab writers by the oppressive ruling systems, which, as Moukhlis advocates, are "characterized by arbitrary exercise of power and by rampant corruption and social unrest" (351). In such contexts where people have been stripped of numerous rights and dignities, writing becomes a powerful weapon to fight the injustice.

This dissertation offers a textual and contextual discussion of four recent Arabic novels from Algeria, Morocco, Yemen and Egypt respectively: *al-Aʿẓam* (2010) by Ibrāhīm al-Saʿdī, *al-Khawf* (2009) by Rashīd Jallūlī, *Ṭā'ir al-Kharāb* (2005) by ʿAbd al-Rabb Sarūrī, *Lā Yā Shaykh* (2011) by Saʿīd Ḥabīb. It seeks to find explicit or implicit links between these novels and the history of recent Arab dictatorship. The following chapters trace the rhetorical processes and structures utilized by dictators to both empower and maintain support of their dictatorships and to explore the ways in which Arab writers have responded to the tyrants and their regimes. I chose these novels to see if there are any changes at the aesthetic level of how the issue of dictatorship is tackled in the Arabic novel. Further, since one of the goals of this study is to investigate the role that the Arabic novel plays, as a medium of resistance, within the Arab nationalist movement, these novels offer a space to explore that theme.[4]

In this dissertation, I propose: (1) to trace how novelists use writing to examine the hegemonic process that led to the empowerment of dictators. In other words, how writers in these situations use various strategies to manage the complex and sometimes dangerous political content of their works; (2) to examine the connections between dictatorial regimes and literary expression to reach at the rhetorical structures used by these writers to contest the dictators' power; (3) to

[4] I am fully aware that the choice of these works by these particular writers presupposes some kind of critical stance. However, I would like to note that other notable writers are not discussed for lack of space.

show how these novels skillfully play with the parallels drawn between history and fiction in such a way that problematizes the recovery of the former, and thus prevaricates against any possible future re-appearance of a dictatorial power and; (4) to argue that the genre of dictator novels emerged long before the current Arab Spring[5]and to show that there is a parallel evolution between the thematic preoccupations of the Arabic novel and the beginning of the fall of dictatorships.

To settle on an understanding of the topic at hand, I approached these novels with the arguments that : (1) Studying Arabic novels provides an insight into the complexity of the history and sociopolitical situation in the Arab world; (2) Arabic novels constitute a medium to reconstruct the history of neo-colonialism and the Arabs' experience during their struggle against the dictatorial power; (3) Arabic novels serves as a weapon against the dictatorial authority in such a way that ridicules the brutality of this authority. In other words, it not only problematizes the abuse of power but also creates a visible manifestation of the people's refusal and resistance to this abuse "through irony and parody to uncover its contradictions and explode its myth of national commitment and anti-imperialist posture" (Musawi 13).

The texts under scrutiny in this study are analyzed through the lens of postcolonial theorists who invested in tracing the interrelationships between power, language and truth. As Michel Foucault argues in his book, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, "We cannot exercise power except through the production of truth" (12).Therefore, in their self-empowerment process, Arab writers have to engage their readers in a discourse that is "grounded in a struggle for power" because, as the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* argue, "[p]ower is invested in the language because it

[5] This term, Arab Spring, is sometimes also substituted by "the revolution of expectations". For more about this see Sears, Jennifer. "Hisham Matar and Ali Al-Muqri on Writing during a Revolution." (2011).

provides the terms in which truth itself is constituted" (167). Because my theoretical argument presupposes a historical framework, my focus will not only be on the texts but also on the period of disillusionment preceding them.

The reading of these texts also adheres to Fredrick Jameson's characterization of narrative as an activity that "must be read as a symbolic mediation on the destiny of community" (20). As these texts are read, the division between historical facts and fiction becomes indistinct to the extent that the two seem so intertwined in our minds as readers and therefore, the story's elements are irrecoverably lost. This chaotic space which is created by the meeting of those two worlds is the space that writers exploit to allegorically maneuver against the hegemonic powers.

My dissertation includes an introduction, four substantial chapters, and a conclusion. Chapter one, "Nearly Excluded in Its Early Emergence: Postcolonial Arabic Novel, Oppositional Politics and Its Legacy" surveys the literature of the historical development of the Arabic novel through two main stages: the "embryo" phase, in which the Arabic novel was perceived as a subset of Western writing; and the "contemporary" phase, in which the apprehension of aesthetics unexpectedly expanded to include, with domination sometimes, the political, cultural as well as social appreciations and concerns. This dichotomy is based on Roger Allen's *Literary History and the Arabic Novel* which traces the historical development of Arabic novel. Allen argues that "a history of the Arabic novel, viewed from the perspective of today (2001)[6] looks very different from that of, say, the pre-1967 period, in terms of the nature and direction of the novel itself, and of the volume and variety of examples of it written in Arabic" (Allen 205). This statement is quoted in

[6] The deictic word *today* refers to the time in which the paper was published which was 2001, which is also the last ten years for us as the readers of Arabic literature of today.

length here because it suggests that there is a change in the state of aesthetics of the Arabic novel. Although most critics dismiss the existence of the novel in Arabic literature before *Zaynab,* and they attribute the belated emergence of the Arabic novel to the contact with the West, this specific study by Allen argues that the Arabic novel has its distinct aesthetics. In this chapter, I trace the development of aesthetics in the Arabic novel from the time of its emergence to the current era to argue that the Arabic novel has actually established its canon through the creative talents of current writers and critics and the new aesthetic values. I conclude the chapter by showing that a discussion about an emerging sub-genre, dictator novel, in Arabic is imperative and must take place to see how it alters the dynamic of the field.

Chapter two, "Dismantling Dictatorship: Novel as Artifact, Narrative as Archeology in Sa'dī's and Jallūlī's Novels" examines Ibrāhīm Saᶜdī's novel *al-Aᶜẓam* in light of the concept of novelists as legitimate agents who re/write history of nations. I read the novel from a socio-political perspective to show how Saᶜdī combines realistic, fantastic, historical and mythological elements to create a story which educates the current people about the history of their country and challenges to the dictators' hegemony. In reading this text I make use of Said's understanding of how 'human history is made up by human beings' which he also admits that he adopted from the Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico's (Said 42).

As for *al-Khawf*, I analyzed the ways[7] in which the novel represents the dictator's power. I engaged this question by tracing how the novel challenges the authoritarian political power

[7] By ways here I mean form. I intend to examine how the novel challenges the dictator's hegemony through its form.

through the inventive use of narrative techniques. I also show how the novel responds to the social/political system which has grown increasingly marked with corruption.

Chapter three, "Majnūn Performing Autopsy: Exposing the Ugliness of Dictatorship in *Ṭā'ir al-Kharāb",* offers a close reading of how *Ṭā'ir al- Kharāb* by ᶜAbd al-Rabb Sarūrī had to struggle with new socio-political practices which create new aesthetics and thus require different interpretative modes to unveil the ugliness of dictatorship in Yemen. The novel employs fear, terror as well as love of a tortured female body to describe what happens to Yemen as a whole nation at the hand of the dictator. The aim of this chapter, therefore, is to show how *Ṭā'ir al-Kharāb* uses narrative to deconstruct and dismantle the political oppressive regime in Yemen. The novel problematizes the traumatic impact of the dictatorship on the female body, and by a means of allegory on the body of the nation, as exemplified by the female character, the protagonist, Ilhām. The juxtaposition of both the story of the raped female body and the rape of the nation by the dictator, who is referred to throughout the novel as Ṭā'ir al-Kharāb (the bird of destruction) as well as *shaykh al-qabīlah* (the tribal sheikh), is read as an anguished cry for normalcy sought by not only women in Yemen but all the nation. Exploring the female body in sexual encounters interspersed throughout the novel echo, for the sake of unveiling and violently exposing, the discourse of Arab dictatorships in relation to the body which has been transformed from a source of lust and desire into a marker of a nation.

Through the author's use of the obvious gendered reproduction of the nation, I analyze the ways in which the novel represents the dictator's power. In so doing, I argue, that the novel provides a space to shift the paradigms of the politically charged Arabic novel "from questions of representations and cultural exchange to an engagement with genealogy of symptoms and affects [… represented by] disorientation, anxiety attacks, and physical collapse" (El-Ariss 2).

The fourth and final chapter, shows how one specific novel, *Lā Yā Shaykh,* by Saʿīd Ḥabīb lucidly problematizes the use of Islam as an ideological process that empowers the dictatorial regime in such a way that turns the rhetoric against itself. In other words, the chapter argues that the monolithic representation of Islamists is oversimplified and misleading at the same time because it conceals an extremely complex reality behind it and that it is among the strategies of the regime to maintain its control over the political landscape. The argument of this chapter is twofold: historical and literary. The first part of the chapter gives a brief summary of the rise of Islamism and the social practices related to it in Egypt. The literary section of the chapter aims at problematizing the issue of how Islam and Islamists are depicted in Arabic literature and how writers use fiction to draw parallels between fiction and reality in order to explore the idea of the fantastic as a resort to portray collective memory of reality in the texts.

CHAPTER ONE

Nearly Excluded in Its Early Emergence: Postcolonial Arabic Novel, Oppositional Politics and Its Legacy

"[The field of cultural production is] a field of forces…a field of struggles tending to transform and conserve this field of forces" (Bourdieu, 30; 46)

In an essay entitled, *"*Imagining more Autumns for North Africa's Patriarchs: The Dictator Novel in Egypt," Ḥusām Abu al-ᶜIlā writes about the history of the genre of dictator novels in Latin America and how it emerged at the skillful hands of writers such as Miguel Angél Asturias in his novel *El Señor Presidente (1946)*, Cuban Alejo Carpentier in *El Recurso del Método (*1974), Gabriel García Márquez's *El Otoño del Patriarca* (1975), and Augusto Roa Bastos's *Yo el Supremo* (1975). What is most interesting in this essay is not the historical fact that the genre of dictator novels emerged first in Latin American literature, but that Abu al-ᶜIlā underscores the absence of this kind of writing in Arabic literature despite the many repressive regimes in the Arab world: "[a] discussion of the relationship between Arabic novel and the Arab dictator must inevitably begin" (Abu al-ᶜIlā 1). This statement suggests that the theme of the imaginary and, at times, real character of dictators has never been tackled or elaborated on in Arabic fiction. But what does it mean to have a critic write something like this? Is it that he is living outside history? Or, is the problem a symptom of something more significant?

In an interview with the Algerian writer, Ibrāhīm Saᶜdī, the interviewer says to him "although political dictatorship is a purely Arabic phenomenon, the Arabic novel has not portrayed this phenomenon and did not represent the character of dictators" and then she continues to ask "How do you explain this?" And his response was affirmative that the Arabic novel has not addressed the question of political dictatorship, and he then continues to say:

> "lā adrī in kāna al-amr yadkhul fī iṭār mā yumkin iᶜtibāruhu raqābah dhātīyah am sū' qirā'ah lil-wāqiᶜ al-siyāsīy. min al-mu'akkad anna al-riwāyah al-ᶜarabīyah lam tataṣadda liẓāhirat al-istibdād al-siyāsīy biṣūrah mubāshirah wa ṣarīḥah, wa yaᶜūd dhālika rubbamā, ilá ᶜāmil al-khawf min qibal al-mubdiᶜīn al-riwā'iyīn aw al-hadhar min al-ᶜawāqib allatī sawfa tanjum ᶜan tajāwuz al-khuṭūṭ al-ḥamrā' lil-'anẓimah al-siyāsīyah al-sā'idah fī al-ᶜālam al-ᶜarabī" (I don't know if this can be considered within the framework of self-censorship or a misreading of the reality of Arabic politics. It is certain that the Arabic novel did not, directly and candidly; challenge the phenomenon of political dictatorship, and this might go back to, perhaps, the factor of fear by those intellectuals and novelists of the consequences that might come to them from crossing the red lines drawn by the political systems prevailing in the Arab world (Muḥammad-ᶜUmar)[8].

Both Abu al-ᶜIlā and al-Saᶜdī argue the Arabic novel has not engaged in deconstructing and rewriting their relevant collective history of which dictatorship and dictators have always been a major part in a systematic manner. They both seem to agree that Arab novelists have been unable to address the authoritarian regime as a result of the efforts to suppress their expression; yet, if provided with the space, these Arab writers (like their South American counterparts) would in the words of Gonzales Echeverria undoubtedly blow "the dictator to bits" (5).

My argument in this chapter is driven by such discourse among the critics of Arabic novel; a discourse which claims the absence of the representation of dictators in the Arabic novel without considering the complication(s) of this absence, if there is indeed one which then has serious implications for aesthetic criticism. Drawing from what Pierre Bourdieu has called "the field of

[8] Translation of the text from Arabic to English is mine.

cultural production" and building on the position of "writers between history and fiction," as Samia Mehrez puts it, I will argue that there exists in contemporary Arabic fictional texts a great quantity of works that depict the character of the dictator, in what might be called 'dictator novels' (Bourdieu 40; Mehrez 1). The emergence of a new genre, however, poses a threat to the established powers which always insist on maintaining the "heteronymous principle," a principle that is always "favourable [sic] to those who dominate the field economically and politically" (Bourdieu 40).

This chapter attempts to trace the development of aesthetics in the new Arabic novel from the time of the emergence of *jīl al-sittīnāt* (the 1960s generation of writers) to highlight two important issues: how a literary genre evolves for a subgenre to emerge and the aesthetics of the emergence. The aim of this chapter then is to demonstrate how the development of aesthetics has unexpectedly expanded to include the political, cultural as well as social appreciations and concerns of the writer's context. I trace the debate about the aesthetic innovations of this generation of writers by contextualizing them in the spectrum of the socio-economic and political changes in which they emerged. My argument will present a glimpse of a debate that took place in regards to the emergence of a generation of writers and the anxiety of breaking through the canny. The term "generation" will be used here in its literary meaning "as a tool often used by literary historians to order the past [and as a construct that is] used by the primary literary field of writers and critics to get a grip on their contemporary literary world" (Wijan van den Akker and Gillis J. Dorleijin 10, 18).

From the time of its early emergence, the Arabic novel has been a battleground for the struggle between authority and the people of the newly and arbitrarily mapped Arab nations. This path which Arab writers forged did not develop haphazardly; rather, it resulted from the situation of Arab writers in these new nations and their response to the postcolonial project. Arab writers

struggled to represent the new social and political reality which confronted them. This is the melancholic scenario which the Arabic novel describes revealing a "fascination of the human mind with 'the spectacle of the world'" (Mehrez 3). The nature of such a path seems to be further enriched by the necessity of the experience which is born out of specific socio-political contexts. And this very point is clear in Samia Mehrez' seminal work, *Egyptian Writers between History and Fiction: Essays on Naguib Mahfouz, Sunallah Ibrāhīm , and Gamal Al-Ghitani*, in which she reflects upon certain recurring connections between history and fiction. Arab contemporary novelists, she argues, "[come] to occupy a larger and more crucial space, despite […] all the restrictions, limitations, and censorship he or she may encounter" (7). It is because of the potent role that the Arab writer came to serve as "an underground historian," in the words of Mehrez, and the boom of their writing led most Arab leaders and regimes to set up a "system of institutions through which it intended to control and mobilize the intellectuals, a system which in its essentials still exists today" (Jacquemond 15). This is why, and to take Egypt under Nasser's regime as an example, many organizations such as The Higher Council for Arts and Letters (1956), State Television (1960) were established. The aim of establishing such organizations, as Anouar Abdel-Malek, puts it, is to create "a virtual state monopoly of culture" (199). Monopolies of cultural production arise when the dominant, and in this case it is the state, maintains its political power through the control of cultural production, especially literary production the "space of literary or artistic position-takings" (Bourdieu 30) that has emerged for all of the same historical and socio-political reasons that make the appearance of dictatorship possible. Implicitly or explicitly the concept of controlling cultural production has actually served as an ideology which in and by itself gives meaning to resistance in writing. When the state flexes its muscles over literary production and controls the institutions, such as the media, university professions, and many other sectors, as

well as cultural productions it, the state, succeeds in turning the consecrated literary figures of the field into players who pay lip service to the regime.

In her book, *The Limits of Freedom of Speech: Prose Literature and Prose Writers In Egypt Under Nasser and Sadat*, Marina Stagh articulates this point when she writes that "prominent figures of the old left were restored to favour [sic] and given high offices in the State cultural sectors" (76). This trend, she further argues, did not come without consequences of a counter opposition where "a new generation of radical intellectuals became the victims of secret police harassment" (76). The heavy-handed actions of the state transformed the field of literary production from a "field of force," to use the words of Bourdieu, into a "field of struggle" (30). What this means is that there is a larger struggle over legitimacy about whether or not this group constituted a generation, and more generally what defines a generation. Fabio Caiani further articulates this when he writes: "[T]he political elite controlled and at times cracked down on writers and intellectuals but also gave them a certain autonomy and power (basically employing them) in exchange for their support in articulating the regime's policies" (Caiani 6). In this context, Arab novelists were not simply passive but experimented with new narrative techniques and writing styles.

The struggle here stems from the incentives and needs that writers feel to "go beyond the ranting rabble, beyond traditions and simplicity" (Kendall 190). The problem, briefly stated, is that a rigid aesthetic criteria is applied to an evolving Arabic novel, without attempting to trace the reason/s why Arabic writing and writers tend to frequently move away from the consecrated form. Oftentimes, by challenging this criteria, new writers and their works are dismissed by critics, rather than recognizing their works as an effort to present themselves as the heralds and spokesmen of a new generation.

Not surprisingly, then, the role of writers in the Arab world, and more specifically in the field of cultural production, becomes a sort of dissent against dictatorship that is being practiced over them by the older literary tradition. The role of 'new writers with new innovations,' then, becomes a way of forming a firm basis of self-determination in which they, the new writers, erode the rhetorical underpinnings of the obvious and the implied dictatorships through allegorization of the dictator. Waïl Hassan underscores this point when he argues that they, the new writers, "challenge canonical interpretations embraced unquestioningly by traditional clerics [... of] political institutions who have set themselves up as the censors and guardians" (56). This is why these writers at times face retribution for their commitment by either imprisonment or exclusion from the circle of the elites in the field of cultural production who are now in line with the state. The first consequence, imprisonment, is clear and will be discussed more thoroughly later in this chapter in regards to the genre of the prison narrative in the Arabic novel. The second type, 'exclusion,' manifests itself in a form of marginalization where the work does not receive recognition by critics and the apparatus of cultural production. In reference to Yusuf al-Sibāʿī, "general of the army of letters," Jacquemond writes that "[he] quickly gained Nasser's favor, and was given the job of organizing and controlling the literary milieu" (18). His example illustrates that Gamal Abdel Nasser was aware of the importance of cultural production and thus established a controlled framework for literary production where the interests of the state are at the forefront. Hence, taking this as a point of departure, the regime allowed its patrons to form literary associations "whose political and aesthetic positions" were in line with those of the state. This practice, of course, did not stop after Nasser, rather it continued in a more damaging fashion which Bahaa Taher writes about when he says:

> [This strategy of controlling the literary field] set about turning the authorities against these writers, treating them in the same way whether they were existentialists, communists, anarchists or reactionaries. The accusation varied by period according to what seemed most effective […]. All these accusations were made in order to ensure that we do not enter the establishment and gain an audience (qtd in Jacquemond 22-23)

The argument which Bahaa Taher is making here is that the reasons for censorship against Arab writers have varied, but the result was the same; in other words, they were denied from occupying any leading positions because of the exclusionary practices directed at them from "the trustworthy men" to use Jacquemond's own terms (35). These "trustworthy elites," created by the regime itself, function as the guardians of the regime's political ideology. It is due to this monopoly that literary writing in the Arab world became "either substitutes for political action or natural extensions of it" (Jacquemond 36). What this means, in practice, is that the Arabic novel is pervasively occupied with the theme of dominant-dominated relationship at both the "micro and macro levels" of political engagements which Tejumola Olaniyan refers to in his chapter, "Political Critique and Resistance in African Fiction*"* (71). At its early emergence, the Arabic novel was exploited by the rulers to depict the artistic facets of their ideology as well as prevent those who appear to be critical of the system from access to the field of cultural production to articulate their struggles and those of their people. This is not to suggest that Arab writers were all traitors neither does it attribute a submissive role to all of them. Rather, the point is that the elites actually safeguarded the system by imposing censorship on the ones who tried to break away from this long-standing reciprocation between the elites and the regime.

The examples for this kind of censorship are many, but the instance of the teaching of *al-Khubz al-Ḥafī* (English translation, *For Bread Alone*), which is cited in Jacquemond's book, is worthy of mention. Samia Mehrez, Professor of Modern Arabic Literature at the American University in Cairo was attacked for including this novel by the Moroccan writer Mohamed Choukri in her syllabus. After several students presumably complained to their parents about the 'pornographic' content of the novel, the matter was brought to the attention of the President of AUC who then followed up by inviting Mehrez to his office for an impromptu meeting with the President, the Provost, and the Dean. In this meeting she was informed of the nature of the charge against her and of the desire of the University to silence the matter by having her remove the book and apologize to the class for assigning it. Mehrez, of course, refused to do either but she expressed willingness to exclude the novel from the exam. The consequences of this exchange were the removal of works that were deemed outside the scope of the etiquette of the status quo from the shelves of the AUC Bookstore. As a result, others works were also removed like that of Sunallāh Ibrāhīm 's *The Smell of It* and Alifa Rifaat's *Distant View of a Minaret*. Although this incident illustrates the infringement on the academic freedom of professors, this issue is beyond the concern of this chapter. What is significant for the task at hand is that it demonstrates the wholesale attack on the literary imagination of the writers who utilize their writing as a means to challenge any rigid frameworks.

Aḥmad Hāshim al-Sharīf summarizes this role when he writes: "I blame the old generation and invite the new generation to refuse to reconcile and to begin the dialogue with the word "No!" (197)". The word "No" in this quote is directed towards both old and new generations. It can be read as a challenge to exclusionary traditions and practices by the giants of Arabic literary aesthetics. It also strengthens the view of new writers as a "self-contained generation striving to

sever all ties with their predecessors" by highlighting the fact that the earlier Arabic novel failed to adjust to the novelistic conventions of a changing society. In addition, while his statement above states that the future of the Arabic novel is unclear, it offers an implicit prediction by describing what he perceives as a trend toward new aesthetics in the Arabic novel in which writers start to say 'No" against any kind of dictatorship practiced over them (Ramadan 22).

Another critic, Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Sinna provides an examination of the dynamic relationship between old and new writers when he writes:

> I see that very few of them [the old generation] are able to appreciate the new meaning of life and art for our generation. We are a generation under siege. But the generation that preceded us was a generation that had the ability to break out. Our generation needs no value as much as it needs freedom. This freedom is that which the previous generation fought for, and the battle for which it seems to have lost…I respect the previous generation but I admit that it gave me little (qtd in Ramadan 46)

In this statement, Abū Sinna emphasizes the idea of a new generation emerging in the genre of Arabic novel; a generation with an experience that differs from the one before it. The problem which Abū Sinna refers to here is the issue of new aesthetics. In addition, while he is unsure of the future of Arabic novel, he offers an implicit prediction by describing what he perceives as a trend toward a generation of writers who seek freedom in writing.

It is for this reason that according to Hafez: "the sixties was indeed a decade of confusion, a decade of numerous huge projects and the abolition of almost all political activities" (qtd in Mehrez 13). The themes of the Arabic novel in the sixties generation vary and include colonization, corruption, societal problems, and the subjugation of the people. Writers established themselves

as significant figures who used the text of the novel to depict these issues and question the nature and the authenticity of the regime and therefore reconstruct a history of their nations with the hope that it will ultimately contribute to the emerging socio-political revolution. Literature can be a significant source of sociopolitical understanding, not because it simply mirrors society but because it is a social and intellectual activity in itself. The outcry of Al-Sharīf mentioned above and many other critics such as Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī, Muḥammad al- Bisāṭī, ᶜAbd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim, Muḥammad Ḥāfiẓ Rajab, Bahaa Taher, Yaḥyā Ṭāhir ᶜAbdallah, Ibrāhīm Aṣlān, Majīd Ṭūbyā, Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Sinna, Raḍwā ᶜĀshūr and Sunallah Ibrāhīm grounded the emergence of a new literary generation that caused turmoil in the Arabic cultural panorama.

In her doctoral dissertation in which she traces spatial representations in the literature of the sixties generation in Egypt, *jīl al-sittīnāt*, Yasmine Ramadanwrites that: "This group of young writers, that would come to be known as *jīl al-sittīnāt* (the sixties generation), exhibited new literary aesthetics in their work, breaking with the realist tradition of their predecessors" (Ramadan 18). In their literary works these writers exerted effort to trace the social, political, and economic changes of the post-colonial period.

In other words, while the central question that seems to pose itself at the beginning of any discussion about the Arabic novel is a question of origin, whether or not Arabs knew of the genre of the novel before encountering the West[9], these critics of *jīl al-sittīnāt* ignored this debate and

[9] Although this is beyond the scope of this study, I want to mention here that the fixation with the question of origin and whether or not Arabs knew drama before encountering the West assumes the incompleteness and inferiority of Arabic literature, as if a given literature cannot claim to have reached maturity without including all established European genres. This fixation also ignores the heterogeneity and the cultural specificity of the non-Western world. Hasan Muhsin notes that instead of interrogating why the Arabs did not know drama, for instance, as defined by the West until the colonial encounter, one should interrogate why the Greeks knew it. In other words, it is more critically productive to research the existence of a given phenomenon rather than its non-existence. And it is a fallacy to assume a simplistic causal relationship between rational superiority

broke away to form what came also to be known as the movement of "al-udabāʾ al-shabāb" [10](the young writers). Critics have spilled much ink trying to understand the motivating drive of these writers, and what inspired them to engage in their project of writing. At its core, therefore, any discussion about the postcolonial Arabic novel[11], like its African counterpart, will involve themes such as the trauma that the people from previously colonized nations have undergone after independence to find that only the color of power and colonization has changed but the practice of oppression continued to be the same (Olaniyan 140).

In their efforts to rationalize the motives and aspirations of the new generation, critics related this revolutionary movement to the political and socio-economic disappointment of the disastrous defeat of the Arab nations led by Egypt in 1967. For this reason, critics such as Jacquemond, argue that although many members of this group were already producing works as early as the late fifties, it was only after the defeat that they came to be known as "the generation of the 1960s" (Jacquemond 8). This of course prompts some critics to even question the legitimacy of calling them a generation on their own because, as Jacquemond also points out, "writers such as Taha Hussein, Tawfiq al-Hakim, Naguib Mahfouz and Yusuf Idris are presented as being the 'pioneers' of the modernist intelligentsia, while at the same time continuing to have the status of 'major intellectuals'…and being at once the moral conscience of their society". What is important here is that because of this "sort of simultaneous existence" (8), to use Jacquemond's words, there

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and the production of a specific literary genre. Greek drama emerged as a result of a number of historical, social and cultural circumstances. It undoubtedly represents and manifests an area of excellence in the Western civilization, but it cannot be made a criterion for measuring the superiority or inferiority of non-Western literatures.

[10] This term is from *Al-Ṭalīʿa* (*The Vanguard*, 1965-77), cited in Ramadan 2012.

[11] My understanding of the postcolonial discourse stems from that of Ashcroft and Ahluwalia as the field which "investigates, and develops propositions about, the cultural and political impact of European conquest upon colonized societies, and the nature of those societies' responses" cited in Ashcroft, Bill; Ahluwalia, Pal. *Edward Said*. London & New York: Routledge, (2001):15.

was an ongoing debate about the emerging literary generation and, in fact, some critics cast some doubts on the existence of this group.

The fixation with the question of originality and whether or not a new generation actually exists is problematic when a literature does not conform to the standards of the established aesthetics of the genre. In her discussion of the idea of a canon, Assia Moutahhir writes: "The Canon: two words that, with their self−conscious capitals, imply the existence of a fixed literature" (1). This fixation with a rigid standard also ignores the heterogeneity and the cultural, political and socio-economic specificity of different generations. Therefore, instead of interrogating the existence and the emergence of a new generation, one should consider the reasons for the emergence of this generation. In other words, it is more critically productive to problematize a canonic framework that projects a singular aesthetic and recognize alternative forms of expression.

And this was the project that a significant number of Arabic journals in the 1960s addressed. Ramadan argues that the inauguration of *Al-Ṭalīʿa*'s[12] feature [, for instance,] was a desire to understand, analyze, and ultimately categorize the emerging literary generation; by specifying a particular age group; highlighting socio-economic and political markers; identifying the aesthetic innovations in their work; and distinguishing literary influences" (19). In other words, critics started to accept the idea of a new generation that emerged as a result of a number of historical, social and cultural circumstances. That is to say, that writing before this generation undoubtedly represents and manifests a genre in the arena of Arabic novel, but it cannot be made a criterion for measuring the superiority or inferiority of a new generation. This understanding of literary genres evolving, is in accordance with what Assia Moutahhir argues in regards to

[12] Al-Ṭalīʿa is an Egyptian Journal that was established in 1965 and stopped publishing in 1977. It was under the control of the Ministry of Culture but in 1972 it turned to be a leftist periodical which began to publish its own literary supplement.

canonization: "canonization tends to produce readers who cannot read independently and that canonical works sometimes maintain their status because of this phenomenon"(1). This statement is very relevant to the question that was raised by critics such as Ḥusām Abu al-ʿIlā in regards to whether Arabic novel has engaged in a discursive challenge to the authority of the ruler. Canonization can be a deceiving factor in our reading and the way we approach texts because, more often than not, we tend to read texts through the lenses of the critics who contextualize them for us. For this reason, one can argue that in dealing with the Arabic novel there is a large concern with the nation-state; thus, critics need to be aware lest they undermine or suppress certain genres by imposing a specific reading on texts which in return might lead to problematic generalizations.

If writing is the cultural apparatus of the people's overall experience and aesthetic values, then Arabic novel is related, and should be related, to the Arab experience, which has strong cultural and historical underpinnings. This idea of an Arabic literary canon is one that has often been raised in controversies between scholars and critics such as Muhsin Musawi in his book, *The Postcolonial Arabic Novel: Debating Ambivalence*, and Richard Jacuemond's *Conscience of the Nation*. From the early 1960s to the present, Musawi argues that the ongoing debate as to whether contemporary Arabic writers, especially among those living in North America and Europe, are writing more to please their Western audiences and publishers rather than their own people about whom they write, are examples of discussions that touch on the issue of canonization in modern Arabic novel.

To go back to the discussion about *jīl al-sittīnāt,* one can see that the intellectual development of this generation of writers emerged both from a re-assessment of the cultural heritage and their relationship to the thoughts of the western schools which most of these intellectuals attended. Writers such as the above mentioned group, started to appear in the arena

of Arabic novel which Ramadan writes that "[they] dedicated a number of issues to the discussion of the emerging literary generation" (Ramadan 18). They not only acquired fame, but their thoughts were geared towards a new aesthetics of Arabic literature. This shift resulted in a genre that began to utilize the form of the western novel to tackle issues such as class structure and social concerns. In his book, *al-riwāyah al-jadīdah: qirā'ah fī al-mashad al-ᶜarabī al-muᶜāṣir*, Mahmūd al-Ḍabᶜ argues that Arab critics connect the beginning of a new understanding of what he refers to as "the new novel" to the 1967 war, the *Naksah*, as it is considered to be the event that draws the line between two different schools of thoughts in the writing of the Arabic novel. The first deals with the novel as a means of expression that depicts the life of an individual in a world where both the real and the imagined interact to tell the story of this individual through his/her relationships with the world that surrounds him/her. The second, however, looks at the novel as an "imagined autobiography in which the narrator moves back and forth between different situations and scenes that do not seem to represent an autobiography of a specific individual, rather it portrays a point of view… that tackles [what is considered as the] marginalized and the forbidden, particularly the issues of religion, sex and politics"[13] (al-Ḍabᶜ 35-36).

This move in the aesthetics of the Arabic novel took place during a period of acute instability and ambivalence in the Arab world, which began with optimism and hope following the end of colonial rule in the Arab countries and then disappeared by the following decade. The reality of life under the new leaders' police state uncovered the misleading promise of a socialist, democratic, independent, post-colonial nation-state that the people of the new nations have once dreamt of. In the middle of the repression of approximately all political activities, the absence of

[13] The translation provided here is mine.

political and social freedom, and the ongoing crackdown on writers and intellectuals, prompted writers to increasingly cast doubts on the new leaderships.

Writers of the new novel[14], according to critics such as al-Ḍabᶜ, turned away from the realist paradigms that had proscribed literary production in the decades of the establishment of the post-colonial nation-state. These writers used new literary techniques that include fracturing the time and space of the realist narrative which Ramadan argues "[…] displayed a focus upon the subjective, the merging of the worlds of dreams and reality, the use of stream of consciousness, depicting a world in which the individual was ever more alienated". Other writers Ramadan writes "drew upon the mythic, historical or folkloric tradition, as sources of inspiration" (3).

So the space in the new Arabic novel traces the memory of the people, their identity and their existence. And if we start to think of the space in writing as the one above, then, and only then, we will understand how it serves as a sense of shared sorrows, experiences, in the social, political and economic struggle of the people. Then writing becomes the apparatus, in fact the tragic apparatus, and to use ᶜAbbās Makkī's own term "al-fadā' al-kāmin" which comes to existence in response to the crisis in which the discourse occurs (qtd in Ramadan 3).

Many Arabic novels written by members of this innovative group dealt with themes, that for producers of the traditional canonical cultural framework, will be referred to as, and to use Tanure Ojaide's own words, "extra-literary, suggesting that they should not be legitimate concerns of writers" (5). The problem with such judgment is that it does not account for the dynamic nature of literature, most specifically, the postcolonial literature, which is "inclusive of politics,

[14] And here I am still using the term "new novel" in its relation to previous generations of writers to mean the Sixties Generation, *jīl al-sittīnāt* which includes writers such as ᶜAbd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim, Majīd Tūbyā, Aḥmad Hāshim al-Sharīf, Amal Dunqul, Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Mabrūk, Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī, and Māhir Shafīq Mabrūk.

philosophy, divination, mysticism, and so on. For this reason, many literary works in all the genres criticize political corruption, tyranny of leaders, excessive materialism of the elite" (5).

In a literary discourse where there is a clear intersection between space and time, we find ourselves facing what Adonis refers to as "*al-jadal al-faji'ī*" (qtd in Ramadan 17). This *al-jadal al-faji'ī* creates an imagined space in which history can be interrogated to then present a more nuanced account. In the process of this transformation, the imagined space both philosophical and ontological questions emerge; these questions are central and they form the framework through which a reader would approach the text.

In this sense, we find ourselves dealing with a textual space that creates its literary values and is created by the interaction of these values in a very specific time and history. The focus of the text, however, extends beyond semantics to offer a space to trace the intersection of different ideologies and strategies. In their efforts to query meanings that words carry in specific realistic contexts, these texts embody two experiences: the experience of the socio-political context and the narrative experience. Sabry Hafez describes the relationship between this departure from reality and the sense of fractured and alienated literature when he writes:

> [Writers of the new Arabic novel] depend on the point of fantasy, the separation from reality and the rejection of this reality in a relentless attempt to unite with it and originate from it. The numerous unfamiliar events, and the strange images immersed in the imagination and the historical cells cleverly dispersed throughout this world are all variations on one main tune, that of the individual's loss of security and balance, and the feeling of alienation from a reality full of deception in which any true connection is impossible (Hafez 68).

Hafez's understanding of the change in aesthetics in Arabic novel is relevant here for two reasons: first, it rationalizes and acknowledges the practice of new aesthetics to express the sense of alienation that flexes and bends the traditional Arabic novel in order to capture a macro , and at times, micro scenery of the context. Second, and more importantly, it accounts for the socio-political circumstances that might have led to these aesthetics. In other words, it looks at the writers of the new novel as oppressed subjects who expose the tension and contradiction latent in the experience of their society. Richard Gray in his book, *The Literature of the Memory: Modern Writers of the American South,* makes a crucial point when he writes about writers who engage in this type of project and says: "The things they say, and the ways in which they say them, seem to have been defined with extraordinary completeness— we could even say circumscribed— by the paradoxes implicit in what their history has taught them" (1). Gray's argument here portrays a sense of a narrative which tries to canvass various ways to escape from the narrow scope of a physical place (reality), into a more open one of imagination.

In another article entitled, "The Transformation of Reality and the Arabic Novel's Aesthetic Response", Sabry Hafez also attempts to trace the prevailing trends in the Arabic novel, of which he relates the change in aesthetics and style to socio-political and cultural changes in Arab countries. He argues that the Arabic novel before independence was heavily occupied with the dominant realist trend and he justifies this preoccupation by the very fact of cohesion and certainty of the struggle for independence. After the sixties, however, he argues that the Arabic novel was influenced by the modernist trend in writing. This shift, he adds was not arbitrary nor was it a form of "*al-ᶜabath wa-al-lā maᶜqūl*" (the futile and the absurd), [15]as Shukri refers to it; rather, it has strong ties with the experience of disillusionment by the Arab people towards

[15] Quoted in Ramadan 2012, p 28.

authoritarian regimes after independence. This is not to suggest that the new novel does not deal with socio-political issues: rather, the argument here is that writers' responses to the previously dominant concerns of socio-political matters are now articulated in a concrete critique of ideologies. In other words, the texts and the protagonists who were once "eager to change the world, [become] entangled in [their] own critical vision, besieged and unable to comprehend external reality" (Hafez 106). This is why the harmony that existed between man and nature, space and geography where he, the former, has always felt that he is the master of space has vanished in the new novel and was 'replaced by the dispersal of place and disruption of its protective unity. Hafez even adds that space now is "pregnant with fear and danger, defying the characters and constantly challenge them" (Hafez 106).

It is important to underscore that Hafez's *article* is a polemic, and he does not claim to be practicing criticism at a deep level. The significance of the article is that produces a space to advocate for an approach to the new Arabic novel independent of traditional literary norms. The relationship between old and new novel forms has been a central area of focus in Arabic novel literary studies, providing a core problematization of what may be called the aesthetic criticism of the new novel, and yielding substantive critical works such as Muhsin Musawi *The Postcolonial Arabic Novel: Debating Ambivalence* (2003), Maḥmūd al-Ḍabᶜ a*l-riwāyah al-jadīdah: qirā'ah fī al-mashad al-ᶜarabī al-muᶜāṣir (2010)* among others. Yet even the theoretical propositions of these texts, which catalogue elements of traditional aesthetics and show how they are changing in newer works, have not been taken up by other critics with the energy required to produce a vigorous aesthetic criticism.

Outside of that body of works which focus specifically on the old-new relationship, the criticism of contemporary Arabic novel has tended to operate in a mode which is difficult to term

"aesthetic." Such an approach, I would argue, certainly involves the exercise of judgment, but it is judgment of the themes and ideas expressed in a power imposed by the canonized works, rather than the aesthetic of the text. In other words, there is often a brief gesture towards these concerns, but with little real engagement. Fabio Caiani, *Contemporary Arab Fiction: Innovation from Rama to Yalu (2007)*, for instance, documents and tease out the fact that the number of "studies in English focusing on writers of the preceding generations, dominated by Naguib Mahfouz (1911-2006), outnumber those on the generation of writers" after him (Caiani, 12). Perhaps the most important point here, however, is that critics, who happen to be guardians of authoritarian regimes, also play a major role in how certain writers and their works will be perceived and therefore they become essential in the field of cultural production.

The arguments so far demonstrate that there is little doubt that the Arabic novel has evolved and, in fact, is still evolving. However, the debate about the legitimacy of the new genre to evolve seems to be a contentious issue. There were writers who emerged onto the scene whose literary production revealed new aesthetics; writers who used their novels as a means to engage in dismantling the dictatorship of the regimes in one way or another. But, they did not receive the same recognition by the elites, a matter which in itself reveals an anxiety about the very issue of innovation.

The establishment of a distinctive genre of prison novel in Arabic is another point of departure in the argument about the positions of power and authority and the emancipation of the Arabic novel and its literary criticism from rigid thematic and aesthetic frameworks. In an article entitled "Torture, Imprisonment, and Political Assassination in the Novel", Sabry Hafez notes:

> Arabic literature is perhaps one of very few literary traditions that have a distinct literary genre known as the "prison novel." This is not only because a great majority of writers

> have themselves lived the experience of arrest, imprisonment, and even torture, but also because the history of the contemporary Arab intellectual is one of constant struggle with the authorities (2)

In this quotation, Hafez raises two points: First, he alludes to the role that Arab postcolonial novelists have intuitively resorted to in challenging the authoritarian regimes and reflecting their social and political circumstances. Second and, most importantly, is the counter action by the authority in order to control and prevent these intellectuals from recognition in the field of cultural production. It is true that these writers were threatened with imprisonment and corporeal punishment, but it never hindered their struggle against the holders of power. Their disappointment with the postcolonial leaders as well as the institutions of religion and tradition is reminiscent of what Kafka referred to in his definition of the Absurd when he writes: "Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose….Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental root, man is lost; all of his actions become senseless, absurd, useless" (qtd. in Esslin 24). This lack of hope and frustration is reflected in the form of the absurd, which, in the case of these writers, is to write literature about their experience of imprisonment. Their writing critiques the governing establishment through the description of their bitter experiences, with the goal of inspiring their audience to change the status quo. By employing the aesthetics of absurd literature these writers engage their audience in their quest for freedom and justice. This new mode of writing defies the traditional perception of power by creating an in-between space where the fictional and the historical records collapse, and therefore reflect both collective experience and political critique. The significance of such writing is in the role it assumes for its writers who, in national liberation struggles or resistance movements, voice the concerns of their country's citizen who have been silenced by hegemonic power structures.

Serigne Ndiaye, in his article "Dictatorship and the Emptiness of the Rhetoric of Totalitarian Discourse in Sony Labou Tansi's *La Vie et Demie*," describes the relationship between literature and society as "*littérature engagée [engaged literature]" (112)* which emerged as a result of French existentialism's argument in regards to the artist's responsibility to his/her society. The novelist's dissatisfaction with his/her society transforms him/ her into the "composite catalyst" (Olaniyan 71).Their writings contest the power dynamic at play between the regime and the people, thus voicing the struggles of their compatriots.

Political imprisonment is a prevalent means of control in most Arab countries. This has produced a dynamic in the Arab world, which has served as an apparatus to maintain the hegemonic structure. On the other hand, it has also influenced how the contemporary Arabic novel has been utilized as means to oppose this dynamic. The Arabic prison narrative, one can argue, is one of the means Arabic writers use to engage in protest against the torture and deprivation of people from their basic rights. Through the narration of the experience and dire circumstances of imprisonment, the reader becomes aware of the fate of political prisoners and the complex set of factors involved in the corruption of the regime.

A prevalent theme in the tradition of the Arabic prison narrative is that of the dynamics between the dominant and the dominated and can be traced back to Classical Arabic Literature.[16]But, this kind of genre, prison narratives, began to increase during the Abbasid era. Perhaps the most well-known example in poetry is that of Rūmīyāt, which documents the experience of poets such as al-Mutanabbī and Abū Firās al-Ḥamadānī who were imprisoned by

[16] For more about this, read Franz Rosenthal, *The Muslim Concept of Freedom Prior to the Nineteenth Century*, Leiden, Brill, 1960; Irene Schneider, "Imprisonment in pre-classical and classical Islamic law", *Islamic Law and Society*, 1995, 2, pp. 157-173.

rulers of that time for criticizing them in their poetry. The focus of this kind of poetry, and prose at a time, was more on "historical, social, personal, subjects and rarely touched on current political issues" (Benigni 2). However, from the late nineteenth century and onward, the themes of prison narrative have expanded to include the experience of intellectuals, writers and political activists who stand against the totalitarians who, as Samar Rawhī al-Faysal argues, "hold strongly onto power and silence any objection or any criticism whose aim is to fix the corruption and push for a reform" (75-76). As the dictators become more repressive, the literary response became more forceful. Dictators, al-Faisal argues, "send to prison any person who does not acknowledge their power and their above-ness beyond any criticism" (76)[17]. Under such pressure, writers also fall victim to the repressive measures of the dictator. It is for this reason that in many Arab countries there have widespread arrests of intellectual and political activists and opponents.[18]

Many prison narratives draw from the writers' experience of detention, which involves constraints on expression. This restriction is sometimes covert; by excluding them from access to the field of cultural production, sometimes however, it is overt and it leads to the imprisonment of these writers. And as Roger Allen suggests, their writing then becomes a quest for freedom "'from', 'of', or 'to': freedom from oppression […]; freedom of thought and expression […]; freedom to write, to read, to criticize" (38). The list of such writers is lengthy, but for the sake of exemplifying, however the following writers have been addressed by Arabic literary scholars. These include Edwār al-Kharrāt, Nabīl Sulaymān, Abdelrahman Munif, Sunallah Ibrāhīm, Nawal El Saadawi, Yusuf Idris, ᶜAbd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim and Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī[19]. Through these testimonies,

[17] The text is in Arabic, translation here is mine.
[18] For more about this refer to Andrei Plesu. *Intellectual Life under dictatorship in Representations*, 49, 1995.
[19] For more about this, refer to Jean Fontaine, *Romans Arabes Moderns,* Tunis: IBLA, 1992.

writers describe the climate of threat or life in prison, in itself, and the cultural and ideological strategies that dictators have used to destroy the efforts and the spirits of these writers. The way these writers envisage the space of detention is filtered through their own memories and enhanced by their imagination. In this sense their true experience disconnects itself from reality to become metaphoric in painting a picture of their society which is in conflict with the authoritatively constructed image.

One might say that this approach of looking at the engagement between literature and politics devalues the work as a piece of art. However, Allen disputes this argument and argues that the two are connected: "The lifeblood of all artists, whether acknowledged or not, is the reception of their works by a public; in the case of fiction, a readership" (40). The essential purpose of prison narrative writing then is to combat the ideological and the mental oppression prevailing in their society, to expose the anguish inflicted on the life of prisoners by depicting and denouncing oppression of every kind.

Another literary critic, Geula Elimelekh who has written prolifically on this topic, argues that the tyrannical regimes generate what she refers to as "absurd reality" in which any individual who challenges the tyranny of the regime in an effort to gain some freedom of expression, is punished by imprisonment. In prison, she argues, his/her experience of writing back and subverting the dominant power becomes "a yearning for both personal and collective freedom" (Elimelekh 167). This search for freedom, she further notes, "does not restrict the notion of freedom to its physical or political aspects, but exposes the psychological, social, and cultural consequences of political imprisonment" (Elimelekh 170). What this means is that the act of imprisonment becomes

a blatant demonstration of tyranny because it embodies both the physical pain of the individual as well as the brutal effort by the dictatorial regime to destroy the spirit of this individual.[20]

This notion of challenging any absolute power which manifests itself in prison narratives is what Jean-Paul Sartre refers to, in his seminal work *Existentialism and Humanism*, when he states that "existence precedes essence." For Arab intellectuals and writers, the search is not really for personal freedom, which might also be what they seek, but it is rather a search for the embodiment of the concept of freedom itself. It is in such chaotic existence that Arab writers come to terms with the fear of their existence. On the one hand, they know that they face imprisonment, but on the other hand, they hold strongly into Sartre's belief that "there is no determinism, man is free, man is freedom" (34). When intellectuals and writers feel that freedom is being threatened and denied, determinism, no longer means anything for them and thus they always put it into jeopardy for the sake of challenging repressive regimes.

Arabic prison narratives, especially those based on the personal experience of the writers themselves, serve as means of depicting the torture and abuse which individuals go through at the hand of dictators for opposing the regime. For political activists such as Arab writers, writing becomes a space to express their experiences and thus undergo a personal, and to a degree a collective, catharsis. Thus, "the task of mourning" nation becomes the center of writing (Idelber 1). The master of the new narrative, the dictatorial regime, prevents the people from "the permission to narrate" (Said 1) and dictates a narration which feeds into the dictatorial machine.

[20] And here, I am reminded of Michel Foucault who argues that "Prison is the only place where power is manifested in its naked state, in its most excessive form, and where it is justified as moral force". "Intellectuals & Power: A Conversation between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze", *http://libcom.org/library/intellectuals-power-a-conversation-between-michel-foucault-and-gilles-deleuze*, last accessed 26 April 2013.

In challenging dictatorships, even after they try to destroy the very spirit of writers, these writers respond by constructing a counter account that destabilizes that of the regime.

Like the citizens of many nations which suffered from and lived through disillusionment after independence, Arab citizens experienced similar sentiments. Arab reformists have used several strategies to address and reevaluate their sociopolitical predicaments in order to create their own definition of independence and self- rule. When the governments of the new states became conscious of the danger of such reformists, they began to censor them in order to prevent them from changing the omnipotent figure of authority. Facing their realities, some of these reformists have opted for the novel to be their voice in their national struggle, a point that Musawi underlines: "While authoritarian discourse uses its ideological language to control and to contain these groups, there are also counteracting and subversive languages that undermine this discourse" (8). And this is the path which Arab novelists have undergone to express their disappointment which Said refers to as "the voyage in" (Quoted in Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 8). Since the novel is an imagined space writers are then able to challenge and take control of narratives to destabilize the hegemonic version by engaging with them in a stultifying "rhetoric of blame" (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 8). It becomes a tool to express the peoples' disappointment while at the same time avoiding the chains of censorship imposed on them by the oppressive ruling systems, which, as Moukhlis advocates, are "characterized by arbitrary exercise of power and by rampant corruption and social unrest" (351) that they, reformists, became incapable of explicitly criticizing.

In her seminal critical study about the relationship between history and fiction[21] and of how the state in the developing countries exercises power over narrative, Mehrez writes that "the position of the writer as 'underground historian' is indeed what characterizes much of the literary input in contemporary Arab world" (7).This quotation portrays a sense of the focus of many Arabic novels after colonization. In the midst of the current changes in the Arab world, it is not surprising, that the phenomenon remains conspicuously present in the Arabic novel. Like post-independence Arabic novels, which lamented the disillusionment lived by most of the Arab nations, more recent Arabic texts call attention to the juxtaposition of both narrative and the rhetorical practices and structures that contributed to the empowerment of the Arab leaders, who later on became dictators. By manipulating paradigms, dictators are able to maintain control even when it is against the will of their own people. By juxtaposing the memory of the oppressed with repressive rhetorical practices of the dictators, the postcolonial Arabic novel becomes "ahistorical" (Di-Capua 81) because it unveils the rhetoric of dictatorship and dissects "the pitfalls of the liberation struggle when it sets liberation as its ultimate and only goal" (Musawi 285). Literary works approved by the regime, however, arguably, help to provide continuous support for the authoritarian rule—support that eventually allowed them to be "the strongest and most absolute dictatorship[s] ever established" (Wiarda 2). In these novels, the dictator character is juxtaposed with the experience of a protagonist who tries to contemplate on the state of his/her nation. The subversion of this "political rhetoric, its division of the people into segments and sectors, and its compartmentalization of ideological positions," blow apart the meaning of a nation and human beings become as if "made to suffer at the altar" of one another (Musawi 287).

[21] This work has been mentioned in text earlier in the chapter this is why I am not writing its title again here.

One example of this suffering is exemplified in the novel*al-Sijin* (*The Prison*), [22] by Nabīl Sulaymān, which tells the story of Wahb Mukhtār who is taken to prison after he was reported to the regime by his friend, ᶜĀbid. He is accused of belonging to an organization whose main goal, from the description given by the narrator, is to liberate the people and to put an end to the slavery mission practiced by the regime[23]. And to use the words of the critic al-Faysal, it is the goal of "building a reformed society free from the huge gabs between the social classes, ending injustice and corruption" (77). The novel juxtaposes both authority and its opposition, the organization to which ᶜĀbid belongs and whose name the reader never gets to know, in such a way to subvert the strategy used by Syrian authorities to imprison those who dare to challenge the rule of 'enforced silence'. In her book, *Dissident Syria, Making Oppositional Arts Official*, Miriam Cooke traces how the cultural production in Syria is firmly controlled by the government. She argues that it is a taboo to discuss any of the massacres that occurred in Syria. In a reference to the enforced silence about the 1982 Massacre in Ḥama, she writes "no writer in his right mind touches Ḥama" (114).

In the remainder of the novel, the narrator unveils the stages that this prisoner has undergone, and the different types of punishments which he received. The story of the survivor of trauma becomes central in the novel. Because, as Kali Tal argues, this story portrays a sense of "a need to tell and retell the traumatic experience, to make it real both to the victim and to the community" (17).

Al-Sijin is heavily charged with social and political commentary by means of sophisticated textual forms that encourage a variety of ideological perspectives and a fluidity of power relations. It is, one can argue, a form of meaningful plurality, encompassing social multiplicity and

[22] Nabīl, Sulaymān. *al-Sijin*. Dār al-farābī, Beirut 1972.
[23] See the novel pages: 13, 337, 38, 64, 86, 87 and 106.

competing voices arranged in a dialogical setting. Due mainly to political censorship, that has historically limited freedom of expression in literature, Arab writers have adapted a variety of experimental forms to convey criticism of corrupt governments and systemized political oppression.

Being a form of resistance which resulted from the myriad social, political and corruption, *al-Sijn* and similar novels depict authority—in all its apparatus—as the subject of their invariable disdain and opposition. The protagonists of many prison narratives are almost always "criminals" who are brought to the center of the narrative from the marginalized, oppressed group in the society. This strategy of bringing to the center the story of a prisoner, who is 'officially' considered to be a criminal, reverses the focus from being on the dictator to being on his victims. The narrative is constructed in such a way that makes the reader, develops sympathy towards the supposed criminal prisoner who is usually a political dissident, while authority is represented by the police, the state and the regime. It privileges the criminal by exposing the ugliness of the regime that arrests him/her and uses tactics like torture. This idea of the novel being concomitant with political and social change is eloquently expressed by Olaniyan who argues that: "Through carefully wrought language and alluring imagery, fiction makes us readers form opinions, ideas, and attitudes. To the extent that we are influenced one way or the other about something, the novel is being political in the only way it can be" (71).

Different in title and style, but no less subversive and challenging to the dominant power of authority, is the novel *Tilka al-rāʾiḥah (1966)* which was later translated into English as (*The Smell of It* in 1971) by the Egyptian writer, Sunallāh Ibrāhīm. Like many intellectuals and political activists, Ibrāhīm was imprisoned for his political activities from 1959-1964. The protagonist, criminal-hero, of this novel is the narrator who is a writer "emerges from prison to pick up the

pieces of his life within his society" (Allen 46). He expresses his alienation and sense of imprisonment from the very beginning of the novel when he tells the police officer upon his release from the prison that "he [the prisoner] lives alone and has no one to take care of him; that is why no one has come to collect him" (Allen 46). It is interesting that Allen uses the word 'collect' rather than receive, pick up or accompany. The use of this word is indicative of the sense of estrangement and lack of agency which the protagonist experiences.

The question that emerges here is, what does it mean to live as stranger in your own nation? Is this an isolated problem or is it a sign of a deeper problem? This is what the narrator tries to answer in the remainder of his story. Through the use of flashbacks, the narrator traces his fragmented consciousness of the past, his life in prison and the stories of his friends in their cells. *Tilka al-rāʾiḥah* conceptualizes a new form of agency, where there is a movement from the personal agency to that of the collective. The narrator tries to explain the past in a set of flashbacks which prioritize withdrawal from the world to prevail over a sense of displacement. This displacement is the tool which the narrator/writer uses to express the sense of loss for the nation or to use Marilyn Booth's words, "the experience of a generation" (quoted in Allen 47). This sense of loss comes as a result of the traumatic experiences which the narrator undergoes: witnessing some of his friends being punished to death in the prison, the sense of loneliness upon leaving the prison and the death of his mother while he was imprisoned. Thus, the novel becomes a story of a traumatized survivor. A survivor who is now "rowing on the Nile, losing an oar, and being swept along with no control" (*Tilka al-rāʾiḥah* 86).

An important aspect of the novel is its focus on traumatization. It does this through its depiction of a story of a prisoner who tries to unveil the lies and ugliness of a repressive regime and authoritarian state. The intersection of the individual experience with that of the collective is

achieved by the way the protagonist's story is connected to the history of the notion. In so doing, the narrator/writer's desire extends beyond a quest to simply recover a vanished past. Rather, the desire here is for "[c]onnecting collective amnesia to traumatic instances, and radically expanding its meaning to encompass everyday life and seemingly normal situations (i.e. beyond cataclysm event such as war), the field of trauma studies is now touching upon a host of hitherto unacknowledged associations and subject matters, ranging from individual victims of sexual violence to collective genocide" (Di-Capua 82). *Tilka al-rāʾiḥah* then is a story about a quest for freedom in all arenas: freedom from the struggle of poverty and from political coercion and living under a rigid dictatorial regime.

Knowing that the work of Sunallāh Ibrāhīm and many other Arab writers was banned and prevented from being acknowledged by a popular "readership" would then explain why his work does not receive the critical attention it deserves like those of his generation. The fate of Sunallāh Ibrāhīm is not different from so many other writers and intellectuals who, as Jabrā Ibrāhīm Jabrā argues, "are living through one of the hardest periods in Arab history, one in which opposing pressures whether political or social, are the cause of such psychological trauma" (44).

One major pressure that writers of prison narratives experience is that their works are dismissed and many times these writers are accused of seeking their own desires. Therefore, Tarek El-Ariss, argues that reading their works with this belief in mind would enormously result in considering their efforts as "a far cry from the concerns of Nahḍawī udabā'" (511). One of the writers who has experienced this practice is Abdelrahman Munif. In his novel *Sharq al-Mutawassiṭ* (*East of the Mediterranean,* 1979), the protagonist embodies the figure of the Arab intellectual who struggles with authority. Rajab Ismāʿīl, the protagonist in this novel, begs the prison

authorities to listen to the advice given to them by the doctor who tells them that Rajab's body is now collapsing and he needs to be sent to Europe to be treated.

Rajab's yearning for a travel to Europe is metaphorical. It is a metaphor for the longing for freedom: immediate and perpetual one. Ironically, his journey to Europe to treat his illness and injuries leads to his death in the end. For, although he has promised that while in Europe he will refrain from political activity, he cannot help but to engage in expressing his astonishment of the freedom of speech and expression that Europeans have in comparison to what the people east of the Mediterranean have. To the people in Paris, Rajab says:

> You people of Paris, if you brought your books to the Eastern shores of the Mediterranean, you'd spend your entire life in prisons. You'd rue the day you ever wrote, you'd disavow everything. Above all, make sure you never even think about political parties; the slightest allusion to them would be assumed to be a conspiracy, subversion. Your words would cost you your entire life, to be spent in desert jails, where you'd catch tuberculosis or typhoid; and then you'd die (Munif 43)

Allen argues that the "imprisoned hero [becomes] a writer, one who discusses his attitudes to writing and his role as a writer in the light of his prison experience" (43). There are two things that are relevant to the argument about authority and writing in this chapter: first, the amazement that the protagonist expresses at the amount of freedom that writers in Europe have. Second, stressing that freedom of writing in the Arab world is paid with the highest price--the blood and life of its seekers. The situation of Rajab alludes to the frightening fate of any politically active Arab intellectual or writer. This is why Rajab was not seeking what Tal refers to as "medicalization" (6) where the focus is actually on the individual victim who is suffering from an illness; rather, it was more on documenting the collective suffering of intellectuals and writers. It is a rejection of the

strategy that authorities in the Arab world have adopted of enforcing silence. The aim of Arab novelists then becomes to rupture this enforced silence with the aspiration of opposing the political, religious and cultural censorship that has historically limited freedom of expression.

The position of Arab writers as fighters for freedom is an overarching theme in Arabic novel as a genre and in prison narrative, as a sub-genre, even if it leads to the death of its seekers. There will always be someone who picks up from where others have ended or were they were actually forced to an end. In Munif's novel this motive is clear when Anīsah, Rajab's sister, says:

> If Rajab were still alive, he'd have written a novel for you or something else that you'd all enjoy reading. But he's dead, long dead. All I can do now to honor his memory is to smuggle the papers he brought back with him over the border and have them published as they are (Munif 144).

Anisah, occupying the role of a Shahrazād, comes to the scene to give voice to two silenced stories: that of her brother, who was imprisoned, tortured and eventually killed and that of her own life as a woman in that society.[24] The protagonist in the novel represents writers. They are relentlessly inquiring minds, and they remain certain, to the end of their journey in struggle insisting that the work of the intellectuals never ceases. It, as Allen argues, "involves the creation and manipulation of public perception through carefully crafted images and scenarios" (48). In many ways, this novel is a literary expression of dictatorship. The dictatorship practiced by the state and its surveillance is

[24] Although this is beyond the scope of the argument that I am trying to make here but one can, in fact, argue that it is one of the narrative strategies that Munif is employing to build his narrative i.e. having woman be the one who *narrates* the story which could have otherwise been officially *written* by her brother. This idea is well explained in Muhsin Al-Musawi's *The Postcolonial Arabic Novel: Debating Ambivalence.* Leiden: Brill, 2003. And in this work, I am referring to chapter five under the subsection "Discoursing women". Also for more about the imprisonment of Zaynab al-Ghazālī you can refer to *Prison Writing*. Ed. Farquharson, Danine. 2003. I am referring here to the conference preceding by Nawwār al-Ḥasan Qulay in this book (13-16).

presented in terms of the aesthetics of excremental literature in which the writer becomes: "Indeed, the intellectual, […] the supreme oppositional figure, writing against the grain, thinking contrapuntally, disturbing the established verities, and comforting the indisputably afflicted" (Lal 39) . The struggle to fulfill the roles of both the writer and the intellectual emerges as a major concern of the narrative of such writers.

In regards to the history of emergence of the subgenre of prison narrative, it has been produced by both men and women who span a wide range of ideologies: liberals, communists and Islamists. They differ from each other in terms of their views on many issues but what unites them is the struggle in their quest for freedom from a dictatorial regime. If we take the autobiography of Zaynab al-Ghazālī, *Ayyām min Ḥayātī*[25], who was an Islamist militant accused of her involvement in the failed attempt against President Nasser in October 1954, and therefore detained from 1965 to 1971; and the memoir of the feminist and activist Nawal El Saadawi's *Mudhakkarātī fī sijn al-Nisā'*[26] who was arrested in September 1981, during President Sadat's attack on the opposition we can understand this issue better.

In these two works, although the drive for resistance stems from different ideological approaches, both writers write about the space of prison and describe it as a parallel universe and give voice to the suffering of the prisoners. By doing this, they destabilize the claim of the regime that they control the space of the prison and what voices are heard. This juxtaposition combines the public and private spaces to convey a sense of collective consciousness and identification. Barbara Harlow refers to this phenomenon of experiences of struggle and defiance under repressive and authoritarian regimes when she argues that the political development that they

[25] Zaynab al-Ghazālī, *Ayyām min Ḥayātī.* Beirut: Dār al-Qurān al-Karīm, 1980.
[26] Nawal El Saadawi, *Mudhakkarātī fī sijn al-Nisā'*.al-Qāhirah: Dār al-mustaqbal, 1983.

portray emerges out of their position within a set of social relations which is not based on bonds of gender, race or ethnicity (506). Musawi further maintains that this represents "[the] fight for narrative space." This fight for narrative space, he argues "is not an ordinary one, for both empire and neopatriachs are keen in securing this terrain, not merely to displace competitors, but to include it within a historical property that bespeaks for their achievement and grandeur" (60)[27]. In their fictionally created space where they dispute the transmitted narrative, writers then offer a new reading of the status quo to not only "fight back erosion," to use Musawi's own words, but also to declare "narrative [as] an inclusive term" (60) and use it to fight back.

To return back to the early discussed idea of the narrator as a writer, in *Mudhakkarātī fī sijn al-nisā'* (*Memoirs from the Women's Prison*) by Nawal El Saadawi, we encounter a trembling narrator who is sitting in her flat trying to write her novel but is interrupted by a knock at the door. This scene portrays a sense of the kind of fear which Arab writers and intellectuals have from authorities. The novel relays this fear. The narrator does not open the door instantly; rather it takes her seven pages to think of what could happen if she answers the door and at the same time express her nervousness about a novel that is going to be interrupted. In a form of flashbacks, she keeps thinking of things she has done in her life. One of the most striking flashbacks was between the first and the second knock: her memory of life in Addis Ababa and her return to Egypt. She loses her job in Egypt because she was critical of the regime. And every time she hears the knock at the door she would retrieve something from her memory. At the end, this narration of her tales is interrupted by the law enforcement authorities who break down the door.

[27] This very same notion was actually the thesis of Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994, where he argues that the "power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them" (xiii).

Undoubtedly, the interruption of her narration by authority occurs but she insists on continuing to critique the regime. Even after she was arrested without a warrant as we learn from the story, the narrator continues her outspokenness of the decadence of the Egyptian regime. She utilizes every chance she gets to do so. In a humorous tone, she tells us how outdated the regime is in Egypt. This is clear from her sarcasm about the police car which was taking her to the station when it breaks down. She writes "Lucky for me that I was born in an underdeveloped country where police cars are ancient and liable to break down" (20). Alongside this sarcasm, there is a real fear of the regime and its symbols. The anxiety of imprisonment that inhabits Arab writers and intellectuals is best described by Michel Foucault who argues that the customs of prison life is separate from any kind of everyday life. Thus, entering prison is considered as a break away from ones former life. The life of prisoners then becomes a parallel life with its own rules which dictates a new relationship between prisoners and their space and time, on the one hand, and their own bodies and thoughts on the other. And this is why the description of prison space echoes a sense of it being a concentric spiral of the socio-political reality; in other words, a reality which stiffens the individuals until they are strangled.[28]

As we have seen from the argument thus far, there is no doubt that Arab novelists play a vital role in the way in which power is organized and the ongoing quest for social, political and, more importantly, economic impartiality. Unlike most discussions on this topic where the idea of a new literary generation was almost always associated with a young generation of writers, the argument so far has been on the necessity for change that writers felt a need for rather than forming a new generation. In other words, they pressed the need for a new artistic innovations and

[28] It is in this sense then that the space of prison becomes a reflection of the repressive system which exists outside the bars of the prison

experimentations whose main goal was to create a transformation in the literary sphere. Although they might belong to a younger generation, they all seem to meet in highlighting the tension between preserving a memory and imagining a future state whose beginning comes with the end of political oppression and the subsequent empowerment of the Arab people.

All the texts which I have chosen for my dissertation are written in the last decade. While dictators have been prevalent in the Arab nations, the decades after independence witnessed dramatic changes in the sense that some Arab rulers demolished the lifelong dream of their citizens to choose their leaders. Roger Owen describes this situation as "presidents for life" because these dictators not only secure their presidency for life but also govern "more or less as kings with every intention of creating dynasties for themselves" (Owen ix).

This feeling of disillusionment with their regimes has been triggered by the nepotism that became prevalent in several Arab countries. For example, this transition of power from father to son was clear in Syria in (1999) after the death of Hafez al-Asad. Although this is probably the only successful case of a president in the Arab world passing power on to his son, other leaders like that Hosni Mubarak, of Egypt, Muammar al-Qaddafi of Libya were grooming their sons to become the next leaders (Owen 21-23). For this reason, one can argue that the fear of nepotism produced a fertile ground for Arab writers to engage in what has been seen as a predominantly Latin American tradition of dictator novels. These grounds, in addition to the collective fight for socio-economic and political freedom, have united Arab writers and artist beyond the borders of their nations.

The role of Arab writer here becomes more of a "social agent," in Bourdieu's own words, rather than being exclusively an artist. He states that:

> Constructing an object such as the literary field requires and enables us to make a radical break with the substantial mode of thought […] which tends to foreground the individual, or the visible interaction between individuals, at the expense of structural relations—invisible or visible only through their effects—between social positions that are both occupied and manipulated by social agents (29).

As social agents, artists then are not isolated. They operate in a larger context in which words and images become the most powerful apparatus used against the authoritarian regimes. Being part of these nations where the citizens suffered from this disillusionment, Arab novelists have used several strategies to address and reevaluate their sociopolitical predicaments. In other words, the main goal of writing here becomes that of contesting the dictators' claims to the truth and therefore of power. This idea is best described by Musawi who writes: "While authoritarian discourse uses its ideological language to control and to contain these groups, there are also counteracting and subversive languages that undermine this discourse" (8).

The novel is an imagined space where writers are then able to challenge and take control of narratives to expose the lies of the dictatorial regime by engaging with them in a stultifying "rhetoric of blame" (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 8). It becomes a tool to express the peoples' disappointment even if it faces a system of censorship imposed on them by the oppressive ruling systems, which, as Moukhlis maintains, are "characterized by arbitrary exercise of power and by rampant corruption and social unrest" (351) so that they, reformists, became incapable of explicitly criticizing. In such contexts where people have been stripped of numerous rights and dignities, writing becomes a powerful weapon to fight the injustice.

In his book, *The Voice of the Masters: Writing and Authority in Modern Latin American Literature*,[29] Roberto González Echevarría argues that an ideology is unspoken in modern Latin American literature. He sets a model through which he defines Latin American literature and how it should be approached. The book is an attempt to trace the workings of modern Latin American literature by creating a dialogue between texts and focusing on the themes of these texts rather on the form. The main goal of the seven essays is to examine how novelists create a text whose form "mimic or occupy the authority of the dictator and, by deconstructing that authority, which means to advertise its unreliability, eccentricity, and susceptibility to the interruptions and rejoinders of other voices, to debunk it and deprive it of its power to compel us" (Spencer 146).

To this end, then, the dictator novel is quite different from that of a novel about dictatorship. The former, in addition to its critique of dictatorship, reveals "the intrinsic fallibility of power," the power that has been once possessed by dictators (Spencer 146). This act of disempowering the dictator to transform his power to a text that empowers its readers is central aim of dictator novels. And by drawing from postcolonial theorists who invested in deconstructing the interrelationships between power, language and claims to truth we can say that in their self-empowerment process, Arab writers have engaged their readers in a discourse that is "grounded on a struggle for power" because, as the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* further argue, "[p]ower is invested in the language because it provides the terms in which truth itself is constituted" (Ashcraft et al 167). In order to exercise power, writers have to create a text that is a riposte to the lies of dictators, because

[29] For more about this, please refer to Roberto González Echevarría, *The Voice of the Masters: Writing and Authority in Modern Latin American Literature(Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980)*

Foucault, in *Archeology of Knowledge*, argues that: "We cannot exercise power except through the production of truth" (12).

The representation of dictators in Arabic novels, therefore, is not new phenomenon, one can argue, rather, it indicates a change at the aesthetic level in response to socio-political context which then affects the form of narratives. Dan Izevbaye writes that "there is a sense in which literary genres are symbolic representations of their age" (38). This statement alludes to the fact that novels sometimes are read for "extra literary reasons" and are also seen as "interesting documents from diverse points of view: anthropological, socio-political, feminist, historical and so on" (Caiani 2-3). Dictator novels thus become not only an examination of the nature of contemporary political power, but it also illustrates the effect that this reality has on a literary text and the function of its form where writing can be seen as allegories of the novelist's vocation representing the struggles of the intellectual to realize his function in resisting dictators and their regimes. To a certain degree, this is a legitimate statement to make; however, one should not also ignore the artistic and aesthetic nature of these novels because by doing so, as Caiani argues, we would be marginalizing a crucial point which is "the form the author has decided to give them [novels]… and how a specific form gives life to a specific content" (3). In other words, although the content of some novels might focus on social, political, and cultural or even historical aspects, they often have their own unique innovations which differ from those used by historians, journalists or political scientists.

As such, the dictator novel then is not only a novel about dictatorship because as Spencer argues, "it performs dictatorial power and does so, moreover, in such a way as to allow readers both to interpret the origins of the crime of dictatorship in a durable system of colonial power and

to appreciate dictatorship's vulnerability to democratic forms of government" (146). Although Spencer's focus was more on the African dictator novel, his argument is still relevant to this discussion about the Arabic dictator novel. His focus was on reading a novel like *Wizard of the Crow* in such a way which challenges Lukacs' statement when he declares that the novel is an unheroic genre. Spencer's main argument was that *Wizard of the Crow* is actually a dictator novel which unlike his predecessors such as Nuruddin Farah, Chinua Achebe and many others, probes the inner workings of an entire regime to lay them bare in a form of a novel. The novel then, within the restrictions of a text, dismantles the power of the dictator himself to empower the voice of writing. The beginning of the disintegration of the dictator within the form that the Arabic novel emerges forms the transformation in the figure of the novelist from a writer into a rival of sorts to the dictator because they "present[s] a discursive challenge to the authority of the Ruler. This discursive challenge to authority is significant because the dictator's power is exercised through the power to speak and shape the world to his own ends" (Colson 133).

Whatever one might conclude about the origin, history and development of the relationship between writing and authority in the Arab world, a sense of disillusionment has had a profound impact on the views of and, in a sense, on the literary development of the Arabic novel. The hope of transforming the Arab countries into modern nation-states with self-determination during the peak of Arab nationalism has turned into a struggle. Literature has served as a record of the battle between the political authority and society. The best articulation of this aesthetics in the Arabic novel is in the work of Idwār al-Kharrāṭ, *Al-Ḥassāsīyah al-Jadīdah: maqālāt fī al-ẓāhirah al-Qaṣaṣīyah* (*The New Sensibility: Articles on the Narrative Phenomenon*), which was published in 1993. The use of the word "*Ḥassāsīyah"* (sensibility) as opposed to "aesthetics" indicates a sense of ambivalence. Although the book can be read as an effort to account for the new aesthetics in

contemporary Arabic prose writing, al-Kharrāṭ draws our attention to the interplay of multiple forces: socio-economic, political and artistic values to contextualize these aesthetics. This is clear when he writes "we witnessed great hopes and tragic failures, national successes and frustrations, glories and pains, and deep-seated changes in social relationships, unprecedented in the modern history of the Arab world". He goes further by mentioning some of these changes such as "the supremacy of growing consumerist 'values', the disappearance of socialist ideologies and practices, the brain drain, the explosion of sectarian violence from time to time,[and] the assertion of Islamic fundamentalism" (10). If we are to understand the prevalence of dictatorship in the Arab world through the reading of fictional works, then the pervasiveness and the durability of, as well as the interplay of such factors which al-Kharrāṭ alludes to in the above statement must be where we start. As I have demonstrated in this chapter, in the last three decades the Arabic novel had witnessed the emergence of writers whose literary production exhibited new aesthetic innovations worthy of critical attention. Like this debate which had raged in the late sixties and early seventies to give birth to the emergence of a new literary aesthetics, the analysis of the novels under scrutiny, I hope, will be a beginning of a debate to destabilize the establishment and consecration of the writers in the years that follow—both in terms of their positions within the literary field and their literary innovations. Such critical debates are then I would argue a way to understand how innovation, authority, and legitimacy were, and continue to be, negotiated within the cultural sphere in the Arab world in which we start to see studies about the Arabic dictator novel.

CHAPTER TWO

Dismantling Dictatorship: Novels as Artifacts, Narrative as Archeology in Saʿdī's novel, *al-Aʿẓam* and *al-Khawf* by Jallūlī

What archeology wishes to uncover is primarily—in the specificity and distance maintained in various discursive formations—the play of analogies and differences as they appear at the level of rules of formation (Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 160)

The dilemma of the postcolonial nation-state has long captured the literary imagination of North African writers because of the dramatic changes that the region had to deal with after independence (considering, of course, how bloody their fight for independence was). These changes have produced violence and instability in the region. North African writers have situated themselves at the heart of their nations' crises. As such, they have been called men of action, which is relayed by the Arabic expression *aqlāmun mujannadah*' (enlisted pens). As such, contemporary Arabic novels coming from North Africa are often politically charged. Disappointment with the new government was the backdrop against which writers depicted their nations' struggle against colonialism, the fight of national independence, and the people's confrontation with rapidly changing dynamics. Understanding, the strong political undertones in Arabic novels and the historical context that frames the development of this genre of literature provides insight into the relationship between literature and politics in the Arab world.

During the romantic period, political commitment (*iltizām*) in the novel, as Ṭāhā Wādī illustrates, was geared more towards pointing accusatory fingers at western colonialism while the realistic novel tended to focus on the corruption of Arab regimes and the arbitrariness of their ruling systems (40-47)[30]. In the literature of the latter period, which many critics argue is still

[30] The romantic period in Arabic novel refers to its early emergence until the late 1940s. The realistic novel, on the other hand, emerged at the end of the Second World War.

relevant today, writers struggled (and are still struggling) against the regimes that suppressed any political dissent. The aim of such resistance was the aspiration to establish a society based on justice and equality. Realism, which accompanied the national movements that insisted upon the relationship between socio-political, economic and aesthetic reform was no longer a dominant literary paradigm in the literature of North African writers. With the failure of the Arab *nahḍā* (Renaissance) and the birth of a new successful nation-sate, North African writers and intellectuals challenged the ideology of their predecessors, embracing socialist realism, and insisting upon the moral obligation of the committed writer.

The disenchantment from and because of authoritarian regimes in the Arab world is a topic that Arab writers, North African particularly, continue to examine into the present day, since the issue has never left them, never ceasing to haunt them as their countries struggle to establish themselves once again. With the emergence of such writers there emerged a new literary direction and aesthetic values, with writers attempting in one way or another to represent the new social and political reality that culminated in the appearance of dictatorial regimes which led to further disappointments in the decades that followed independence. Much of the literary output of such writers called into question the myth that had come to be associated with the establishment of the post-colonial nation-state, a nation-state whose success is also being increasingly called into question. In their efforts to do so, North African writers play on the rhetorical deconstruction of the history of their nations by de-mythologizing the myth/s of dictators and their being.

Among the most interesting and important voices on the topic are the Algerian writer Ibrāhīm Saᶜdī and the Moroccan Rashīd Jallūlī, who have authored novels that explore the issue of decaying regimes and suggest possible ways to dress the scars left by authoritarianism. Saᶜdī has authored eight novels: *al-Marfūdūn* (1981), *al-Nakhr* (1990), *Fatāwī Zaman al-Mawt* (1999),

Bawḫ al-Rajul al-Qādim min al-Ẓalām (2002), *Baḥthan ᶜan āmāl al-Ghābrīn* (2004), *Ṣamt al-Farāgh* (2006), *Kitāb al-Asrār* (2007), and *al-Aᶜẓam (2010).* As for Rashīd Jallūlī, the Moroccan critic and writer, *al-Khawf* is his first novel. Rashīd Jallūlī's novel, *al-Khawf,* provides an in depth examination of *dictatorship* in North Africa and the Arab world. Narrated in fifty short chapters, *it* is set in an imaginary country called *Baḥr al-ᶜAdhra's* (The Sea of the Virgin) which is under the leadership of "Shfyān al-dāwūdī" or "The godly president" as he has also been referred to in the novel.

The concern of this chapter is with Saᶜdī's last novel, *al-Aᶜẓam*[31] and *al-Khawf by* Jallūlī. In these two novels, Saᶜdī and Jallūlī address a number of issues that many post-colonial Arab writers are trying to deal with, namely the struggle against the practice of authoritarianism with the hopes of educating the people about the history of dictators and construct not only fictional outcomes but suggest a means of resistance. The two novels work in two different ways for the same goal: they both depart from the idea of literature as a catalyst for change, and aim at not only resisting closure but also creating a new readerly aesthetics and environments that undermine the autocratic and repressive power of dictators. They do so by attacking the sensitivities of those who ultimately authorize the emergence of dictators by bombarding them with examples of atrocities committed by the government. Simultaneously, these texts exploit the reader's ability to relive the past vicariously through the act of reading to suggest the implicit demythologization of dictators.

The two novels will be examined in light of the concept of novelists as legitimate agents who re/write the history of nations. I aim to show how they combine realistic, fantastic, historical

[31] Because there is the character in the novel named al-Aᶜẓam and the novel itself is called *al-Aᶜẓam,* when this word is italicized I intend it to refer to the novel otherwise it refers to the character in the novel.

and mythological elements to create a story which educates the current people of the history of their country and challenges to the dictators' hegemony. I will demonstrate how they both vigilantly inscribe and critique *al-Manārah* (*The Minaret*) *and Baḥr al-ᶜAdhra's* (*The Sea of the Virgin*)[32] histories to deconstruct and call attention to the rhetorical processes used by the oppressive regimes to subjugate the people. As a historian, the writers of the novels acknowledge a basic problem of history—that truth disintegrates over time. And so, it becomes very hard for us to have a good grasp of the past. The perception of past events becomes something that is unrecoverable. This is why, and I will elaborate on this more later on the chapter, the role of the novelist as historian intersects with that of the archeologist whose endeavor is more of approximation of the past. In real life, this intersection of history and archeology are hard, if not impossible, but in the fictional world it seems to be quite possible.

In reading these texts, I will make use of Roberto González Echevarría's *The Voice of the Masters: Writing and Authority in Modern Latin American Literature, and* Ross Chambers' *Room for Maneuver: Reading (the) Oppositional (in) Narrative* to show how the history of Arab nations under dictatorships has undergone a process of maiming or, to use Said's own words, how "human history is made up by human beings" (Afterword 42). The texts under analysis in this chapter, I argue, explore the theme of collective memory and indicate ways in which writing not only creates a room to maneuver but also uses it innovatively to turn the rhetoric of dictatorships in such a way that allows the writers to prevail against dictators metaphorically and literally. They also provide a reader-directed alternative to the official history of dictators. By so doing, the created fictional space in these two novels becomes the mask which the author, the narrator and the characters take role in wearing to distort the truth of dictators. This is to say that the writers of these novels engage

[32] These are the fictional names of the States in the two novels respectively.

in a project of archeology that is in line with Michel Foucault's work, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, in which he argues that: "History, in its traditional form, undertook to 'memorize' the *monuments* of the past, transform them into *documents*, and lend speech to those traces which, in themselves, are often not verbal, or which say in silence something other than what they actually say; in our time, history is that which transforms *documents* into *monuments*" (7). It is this kind of reading and re-reading of historical documentation that I am engaging in in this chapter to argue, as Chambers emphasizes, that the oppositional text recreates hegemonic discourse by locating itself at the heart and, in fact, within the dominant culture. In my analysis of *al-Khawf*, I also make use of Brian Richardson's *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction*, to show how even at the level of form this novel marks a significant development in the Arabic novel. Both the content and the form of the novel work intricately to create a narrative that creates a potent criticism of dictators and their mechanisms to maintain their control over the nations. My choice of this book is based on its deep analysis of the creation, fragmentation, and reconstitution of experimental narratives and what authors actually do with narration.

My main argument here is that these writers use narrative to explore, deconstruct, and then reassemble the historical record of a society caught between colonialism and authoritarian regimes. In other words, this chapter not only highlights the historical fact that Arab nations have suffered at the hand of the colonizers in their early days of inception and then at the hand of their own dictators, but shows as well how historical events inform the fictional space/s in the novels, and how these same spaces undergo a fictional transformation. Unlike the early postcolonial Arabic novel which, inscribed by its temporal perspective, looks back to colonialism, these novels, and the dictator novel in general, concern themselves with the future more than the past because it grants the promise of a better nation-state after the fall of the dictator. The two novels are involved

in a post-colonial aesthetic heavily invested in a critique of the excesses of the post-colonial dictatorial nation-state. This critique is directed against the dictators' repression of their nations and citizens.

To understand and engage in a discussion of not only these two novels in particular but also of the oppressed subjects in general, it is imperative to examine the mechanisms utilized by the authoritarian powers to maintain the enterprise that Jacques Derrida suggests created a "disorder of [being] (14)" in the organism of Arab nations and their people. Without a contextualization of the rise of dictators and the multilayered attempts to prevent and unmask the power and authority Arab dictators have attributed to themselves, the depths and complexities of the relationship between fiction and reality that novelists explore will not be clear. Because of the complexities of the topic, the approach here will be multilayered with first, an examination of the colonial policy in the Arab world, followed by a critical analysis of the texts.

The colonial enterprise left an indelible impact on the Arab nations even after independence. Arab nations endured the trauma of European colonialism and its legacies, leaving a scar on the people and the landscape. One of these legacies is the policy of ruling by force which characterized many of the ruling regimes in the Arab world. For although they, the colonialists, created new Arab states "with central administrations, legal systems, geographical boundaries," they implemented a policy of divide and rule by creating nations of "different ethnic and religious groups" (Owen 14). The result of such legacy, as Roger Owen argues, was the creation of "a difficult balancing act that was, in some cases, to pose enormous problems for nation building" (Owen 14).

Many of the Arab presidents who assumed power after independence found themselves in a hard position of, to use Mohammed Ayoob's own words, "acute sense of internal and external insecurities" (qtd. in Owen 15). This sense of insecurity stemmed from the fact that they failed to create "a legitimate political order at home" (Owen 15) due to the absence of an adequate understanding of the definition of a state. This means that their understanding of the state deviates from the general understandings of a state which include: a group of people comprising the government of a sovereign state, a politically organized body of people under a single government, or the ruling of people in a particular territory. In other words, the state under the dictator revolves entirely around his rule and excludes the participation of the citizens.

And, of course, this is not the understanding that political scientists have of the state as a structure of authority with particular features or core institutions. In an article entitled "Failed-State Fiction," John Marx attributes, as core, the following institutions to a state: a competent domestic police force and corrections system, an efficient and functioning civil service or professional bureaucracy, an independent judicial system that works under the rule of law, a professional and disciplined military accountable to a legitimate civilian government, and a strong executive /legislative leadership capable of national governance (599). Failing to perform these functions, and in the case of the Arab states one can fairly say all of these functions, would lead to a failing state because the governing body is unable to provide the core institutions needed to stabilize the state. In such failing states the political and public order has broken down but the leadership retains authority due to its control of the coercive powers: the armed forces, police, security and intelligence. According to the framework laid out by Marx, many of the Arab states would be considered failing states.

Citizens of these failing states began to lose hope and confidence in their governments. As a result, they became apathetic to the socio-political and economic situation, a phenomenon which Okafor Dubem attributes to the disillusionment with independence, as people realized the similarities in the aims and practices of the succeeding elite and the former leaders from the colonizing period, resulting in cynicism and apathy.

This sense of unrest in the newly mapped nations has been hijacked in a bid to salvage the floundering state by a number of officers, who with the aid of the military or soldiers, staged coups d'état, which as Owen argues, gave birth to what he terms "the second-generation Arab regimes"(17).[33] Although there was a change in the names of some of the leaders, it was not the change that the people desired; rather, they wanted a revolution to reclaim their rights as citizens of the state and to ensure its proper functioning. The problem with coups, as Patrick Chabal argues, is that they are partial solutions because they lead to different regimes that tried to expand their armed forces and deploy them against their internal foes. Moreover, they undermine the legitimacy of the regimes and make it possible for the armed men to claim to be the "voice of the silenced civil society" (Chabal 140), leading to coups and counter coups.

Al-Aʿẓam is set in the fictional republic of "al-Manārah," which is governed by its post-independence ruler "al-Aʿẓam" (the greatest) and who is sometimes referred to as "al-ṭāghiyah" (the dictator). The novel, in part, tells the story of the ruler and his regime which made of him the untouchable being, a godly figure at times who is capable to "end lives and resurrect people" who

[33] In *The Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life,* Roger Owen writes: "The primary exemplar of this new system was the Nasser-led military coup in Egypt on 1952, spearheaded by the Revolutionary Command Council. […] This was followed by roughly similar coups in Iraq and Sudan in 1958, Algeria in 1965, and Syria in the late 1960s. Paler imitations of the same process took place in Yemen from 1962 onward and Libya in 1969" (17).

is also considered to be "the past, the present, and the future of al-Manārah" (Saᶜdī 320, 323). The novel documents, in the aim of dissenting, the political intrigues of the dictator and his regime. Essential to Saᶜdī's novel is the illumination of the life and times of contemporary Arab nations, represented in the fictional state 'al-Manārah'. The novel's concern with al-Manārah's postcolonial history, political corruption, the idea of justice and the transfer of power is reflected in the diseased political and economic situation. Within this context, the novel presents a varying conception of the typical daily life of Arab nations before and after the fall of the colonial regimes. Furthermore, it enriches our apprehension of the complex history of the country through the production of a cultural memory. According to Jan Assmann and others, cultural memory is described as the process through which society reconstructs the past "within its contemporary frame of reference" (130). The promise of cultural memory is to provide counter memories of the past—memories which are "somehow deemed closer to the past experience of 'ordinary people'" (Rigney 16). The main concern of the production of cultural memory is the question of how the past and the present can interact with and be linked to each other.

Al-Aᶜẓam is a collection of lengthy tales about the title character, al-Aᶜẓam, in the format of oral narratives. The narrators are Peter, the journalist who is interested in writing a history book about al-Aᶜẓam; Lamīn Sharīf, an old friend of the dictator who fought with him during al-Manārah's war for independence who is currently living in exile; Mamdūḥ, the previous advisor of the dictator; and Mamdūḥ's mother, Maymūnah who used to be a friend of the dictator's family before and after he came to power. *Al-Aᶜẓam* is a collection of tales woven together into a textile that flawlessly incorporates the lives of people who have known the dictator in three different eras: Maymūnah tells his story before he came to power, Lamīn Sharīf narrates his story when he was

a fighter for the country's independence, and Mamdūḥ who is central in the life of the dictator and his regime from the moment he assumed the presidency of al-Manārah.

The dictator of al-Manārah, we are told about, rules for forty years before his son succeeds him after his death at the end. The novel is not limited to a single narrator; rather, there are multiple narrators making the story complex, like the topic it is addressing. In his first meeting with the journalist, Lazhar Lamīn appears contemplating a picture that was taken of him and all the "leading members of the revolution" (Saᶜdī 11*)*, including Lazhar Klob, the current dictator. Later in the novel, we learn that some of these leaders passed away and some have been killed by the dictator himself. What is most important about this is actually that it stages the project that the novel is about to embark on: meeting the ones who are still alive to re-write the history of al-Manārah.

Thus, while the details and the narrative voices may have changed, they are woven into the same frame and tradition whose aim is to form, as Ross Chamber's describes, an "oppositional narrative" which inhabits the margins of the dictator's central rhetorical system. These stories, therefore, reject the dictator's system of power from the periphery. This strategy of bringing the margin to the center and marginalizing the center unreservedly seeks to institute the voices of the once marginalized as alternative voices to the dictator's all-pervading oneness.

There is not one specific protagonist in this novel, thus giving voice to oppressed people in general. The stories of oppressed people are also emphasized by Saᶜdī's decision to, not incidentally, have one of the voices be that of the historian, Peter, whose main goal is to re/write the history of al-Manārah. This character of 'the implied historian' one can argue is the voice of the author of this novel himself who, knowing the consequences of writing a history book about a

real and present dictator, chooses to fictionalize it by creating his own world where he becomes the master of narration controlling the course of the narrative..

The protagonists of *al-Aʿẓam,* Lazhar Lamīn, Mamdūḥ, Maymūnah and Peter, embody the figures of the people who struggle for freedom and desire to rise above their sufferings. Through the memories of these protagonists about the history of the ruler of al-Manārah and how he came to power, the history of al-Manārah emerges from the chronicle of the country's to overcome his authoritarianism.

The novel suggests that written history does not lend itself to a singular account of historical events, like that put forward by authority. Rather, it foregrounds the artifice of literature and by analogy associates it with the history of dictatorship to produce its own readerly estrangement. One can then argue that, perhaps more than anything else, this novel illustrates what Linda Hutcheon refers to as "historiographic metafiction" (Hutcheon 93). By foregrounding the questionable nature of the historical account once paved by the dictatorial apparatus and rejecting it as the "only history [which] has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses" the novel then becomes a source of authority which demythologizes the paved history (Hutcheon 93).

The opening words of the novel "al-Aʿẓam māt, ajal, māta fi al-Akhīr" [The greatest died, indeed, he has finally died] (Saʿdi 1) challenge the authoritarian power by putting an end to it before the narrative of telling the story of the dictator even begins. Gérard Genette terms this kind of beginning as prolepsis which he argues "refer[s] in advance to an event that will be told in full in its place" (73). In the case of this novel, this prolepsis does, in fact, allude to a future event to be told—the myth of the dictator's rise to power. This opening alludes to the aim of the novel to

challenge a totalitarian power. It is clear that the reason for confirmation of the dictator's death is to encourage the people who will to participate in this project to speak with freedom. It is as if, Peter, the journalist knows that the reason for the people's unending silence is fear and he wants them to overcome this fear. He wants to urge them to participate in a collective re/telling of the history of this dictator. To this end, the novel suggests that without freedom of expression and dissent apathy develops towards the social and political realities that then prevent them from speaking and resisting, people's voices can never be heard.

In the remainder of the first paragraph in the novel, the writer relays this fear that people have adopted through the years from even the thought of imagining an end to the dictator only in an attempt to subvert it and to offer a more complete picture of the reality on the ground and the trauma that ensued as a result of this fear. The beginning of the chapter sounds like the staging of a scene in a play; there is a certain affirmation from the writer that this time it is completely different. As if he is saying that unlike all the previous efforts to overcome the power of the dictator, this time he is already dead. The voice of confirmation comes from the text itself which announces that:

> Although he was in a deep coma for several months, afflicted by an illness that shows no mercy and old age, people continued to believe that he would be cured. He has always survived many illnesses throughout his life, each time thinking during the illness that his end was near. However, he was always saved from the assassination attempts which he was exposed to throughout his long bloody life, to the point that people came to think that his end would never come (Saᶜdī 3).

This account reveals the obsession, with the need to be able talk, which the implied historian, Peter, requires of the people for him to launch his project. The desire for freedom of expression, revealing

the concealed, and who controls the gaze are all intertwined in a description like this one. In this proclamation of what was once a taboo, the ability to speak freely, the writer creates a text whose goal is to return the gaze to the dictator and to reveal the violence and thus give voice to the silenced. And, here, we are reminded of the significance of "memory" as understood by the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who defines it as collectively shared experiences and occurrences of the past. In Halbwachs words, memory is "an original 'lived memory' (*mémoire vécue*) that is carried and hence kept alive by the participants in some original experience (qtd. in Rigney 12). This "'lived memory' is constantly on the brink of extinction or erosion with the passage of time as the richness of experience fades and those who did the experiencing die out. At a certain point, the only way for the memory to survive is to be written down" (Rigney 12).

Peter's project then goes in line with memory studies which originates from the stance that the discussion of memory involves history and its mechanisms. A look at contemporary studies of memory shows that the main concern of such studies is a re/consideration of any kind of standardised history by exploring how memory functions, so as to propose other versions of the past that is intentionally or mistakenly absent from official historical records. To this end, memory allows new perspectives in looking at the past; which can be "defined in opposition to hegemonic views of the past and associated with groups who have been 'left out,' as it were, of mainstream history" (Rigney 13). The goal of memory studies is twofold: to rebuild and recover the hidden and forgotten past as well as to show the impossibility of providing a complete account of a past that remains beyond representation and perception.

The "urgency to write" demanded by the implied historian, Peter, harks back to the stench of the novel's title and is another example of the way in which words become important to unveil the larger socio-political "filth" created by al-Aʿzam's regime. It can also be recognition on Peter's

part of his own implication in "ethical, aesthetic, or political failure" (Esty 34). It is not only that the state has failed its people but that the intellectuals, and the people who have been always silent, have also failed to successfully challenge the repression of the state either by political action in the public sphere or by subverting power through literary production.

The need for an alternative political order and a different historical narrative is reflected in the hopelessness of the people striving to reach an end to the dictatorial regimes. This sentiment is clear in the following quote: "The people started to think at last that his end is never going to come" (Saᶜdī 3). Throughout the novel, the godly image of the dictator is repeatedly challenged. This image emerges through the descriptions of the dictator: "Al-ʻaᶜzam is capable of everything, and that he is not a human being (Saᶜdī 6). For Saᶜdi, these images of the dictators mask the violent realities that lie at the heart of the project of re-appropriating history. These descriptions of the dictator illustrate the urgency of re/writing the historical narrative. This project is undertaken by juxtaposing the historical account put forward by the dictator with the oral accounts of the people. Their oral accounts consequently subvert the hegemonic discourse of the dictator and his proclaimed history. The people's memory of their past becomes a materialised medium used to produce information about a collective historical context or past events. Jan Assmann reminds us that among its many characteristics, cultural memory is unique in its ability to reconstruct the past, by relating it to actuality and offering new perspectives. He points out that "cultural memory exists in two modes: first in the mode of potentiality of the archive whose accumulated texts, images, and rules of conduct act as a total horizon, and a second in the mode of actuality, whereby each contemporary context puts the objectivised meaning into its own perspective, giving it its own relevance" (130). This understanding of memory offered by Assmann reminds us of the fluidity attached to any re/presentation and re/reconstruction of the past.

As such, and to use Echevarría González' metaphor, *al-Aᶜzam* symbolizes the rocket which was used by Paraguayans to "[blow] the dictator to bits" (5)[34] after his death. After it announces the death of the dictator, the novel begins its project of challenging the dictator's historical narrative in an effort to dismantle it. Unlike what González considers to be "useless act" (5), one can argue that such an action of destabilizing the history of dictators is actually an inevitable in the process of dismantling the rhetoric of dictatorship for two reasons: first, it asserts the ability of literature to provoke readers' actions and educate them of their own history; second, it offers an action of search and remembrance through the illumination of the life and tales of certain people and the memories of a number of places that are connected in the collective memory of al-Manārah with specific histories.

In the second numbered chapter in the novel, Peter persists in the need to document the history of the-now-deceased dictator by playing the role of a journalist whose job is to report what people say. He meets with "al-muᶜāridh al-ᶜajūz" [the old leader of opposition] who shares with him "the same disappointment and bitterness, after our [their] dreams of the old revolution have turned into ashes" (Saᶜdī 11). This attempt to play the role of a journalist and, in fact, archeologist who recognizes that a basic problem of archaeology seems also to apply to writing, which is that substantial evidence can deteriorate and be lost ver time if not documented. The process of constructing an alternative historical narration is threatening to the dictator's establishment because it gives voice to an account that was once silenced.

[34] The reference here is to the assassination of General Anastasio Somoza in Paraguay. For more about this refer to Echevarría González. *The Voice of the Masters: Writing and Authority in Modern Latin* American Literature. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985.

Because of his understanding of the fact that any concrete evidence for an historical account might deteriorate over time—as time passes it becomes thorny for us to recall the historical past—*al-Aʿzam* immediately launches into a project of excavation of the past and a re/construction of the narrative which is filled with holes in the confirmable body of information in order to create an alternative narrative. This is why the old man, Lazhar Lamīn, is described as a contemplator who starts to "recall fifty years, and maybe more, of the history of his country" (Saʿdī 13). History seems to be, at the fictional level at least, recoverable and the artifact of the archaeological endeavor will help us to understand historical events through another perspective outside of the dictator's. As an archaeologist, journalist, and an agent of history writing, Peter acknowledges that his project requires digging below the surface, both literally and metaphorically, and this is why he needs insiders i.e. people who knew the regime and its apparatus closely.

This role of the writer as an archeologist is buttressed by my reading of Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* in which he argues that: "What archaeology wishes to uncover is primarily —in the specificity and distance maintained in various discursive formations—the play of analogies and differences as they appear at the level of rules of formation" (160). Saʿdī's approach to writing is archaeological because he searches for artifacts that problematize the hegemonic narratives. These artifacts call into question the circulated narrative because they suggest an alternative reading. Saʿdī engages in this archaeological approach when he seeks to depict the differences between the history of the dictator through and within the writing and, in fact, the shaping of the form of his novel. This approach is clearly articulated by the implied author for the readers when he describes the nature and the method of his writing:

> After I have extensively explained what I want from him, he suggested that the project would not be in the form of question and answer and that I would let him talk freely about

> the al-Aᶜzam without any guide from me. I accepted this proposal with no objection. And verily, this is how I imagined the project to be like from the beginning (Saᶜdī 13).

The allegorical decentralization and the metaphorical silencing of the dictator, whose voice controlled every aspect of the people of al-Manārah's life for "approximately fifty years"(Saᶜdī 11), represents a certain act of both subversion and victory declaring—even if it is only symbolic and fictional. This self-consciousness of narrative calls attention to the rhetoric and artifice of fiction, and the creation of a narrative that is contingent on the collective memory. This approach of re/writing history, where the writer uses the memories of the oppressed to scrutinize the fundamental rhetorical intercepts drawn between history and fiction, calls into question the concepts of both authorship and dictatorship. The interplay between the authorship and dictatorship to occupy and take over a space is eloquently stated in the work of Antonio Rojo Benítez who writes that:

> [P]ostmodern literary criticism's concern lies in demystifying the concept of the author, and erasing the […dictator's] aura with which modern criticism endows him. For the poststructuralist critic, looking at the literary task from the postmodern standpoint, the author [… becomes] a technician or artisan whose job is controlled by preexisting practice or discourse [but does not] lack the requisite authority needed to take over a space" (Benítez-Rojo 153)

This is why in the previously quoted excerpt from the novel the implied writer says: "I accepted this proposal with no objection" (Saᶜdī 13) to have the old man be the master of narration; the one who narrates freely without being questioned or interrogated. Peter's acceptance of this proposal is metaphoric but it does imply something about the text and the project that is about to begin. The focus now, in this text at least, is more on the voice of the oppressed who sees this project as a

chance to silence the voice of the dictator and to have his voice, once and for all, rise above the dictator's voice.

In so doing, Peter uses the memories of the people that represent physical and psychological oppression in order to offer another account of the history that the dictator once utilized to sustain his power. This process is also a means of empowerment for the people who participate in sharing their memories and this is why Peter remains constantly cognizant of their right to be free to tell their own stories without any interruption, in effect redefining the space that they occupy. The multi-layered narrative here becomes one intertwined thread which masks the demarcations between literature and history in the created story that is being materialized along the way.

Only after this negotiation of the space of both the narrator and the author, does the old man, Lamīn Sharīf, start his narration holding "al-Ṣūrah al-Qadīmah bimā yaqrub min khamsīna ᶜāman" [the old picture which goes back to approximately fifty years] (Saᶜdī 14). He tells the story of coming to power of "Lazhar klock," the dictator, and how he was at the beginning of the formation of the nation state. His narration is an allegory of the failure of the al-Manārah state under the regime of Lazhar. Many of the activities that he narrates about the dictator involve corruption at all levels to enrich himself and attain more power. This seems clear in the juxtaposition of what the old man says about the dictator and the incident of the killing of the leader of the liberation movement, ᶜAbd al-Bāqī Bāqūr, and what the history books have written about this incident. "Some of the newspapers and the history books have mentioned that ᶜAbd al-Bāqī Bāqūr was a victim of some of his companions, in fact, there was a direct reference to the major Lazhar by name, who was in undercover contact with the enemy" (Saᶜdī 19-20).

The state of affairs in al-Manārah, is as a result of a lack of political accountability. Political accountability, according to Patrick Chabal, means that rulers must give the citizens enough opportunities to be part of the government of the state through representation in order for them to accept the legitimacy of the state. He writes that the colonial government was legitimized by using local rulers, and during the creation of nation-states in the Arab world, the nationalist elite used the promise of representation and access to the power, to gain legitimacy. However, after independence, this became an unfulfilled promise. Although Chabal focused on the manifestation of power in African states, his argument is still relevant to the project here when he writes that: "The politicians for their part no longer needed to justify the legitimacy of their power. Their tenure of power, the proof of their nationalist success, was their badge of legitimacy (Chabal 67).

The reference to the practice of the politicians mirrors that of the dictator in the novel who started to "practice a different strategy with his opponents" (Saᶜdī 23). Moreover, this is significant because it is illustrative of the history of many postcolonial Arab nations. The most important aspect, however, is the sentiment that relayed at the end of the passage about the new regime when we are told that the dictator "started, from the very beginning, to imprison those who challenge its legitimacy, and treat them with the iron fist" (Saᶜdī 23). This reference to the policies of the new regimes captures what dictatorship inflicts on the Arab people psyche and history. The melancholy experienced by the characters reflects the struggle that Arabs have to endure, which forces a negotiation of history "bi'atharin rajᶜī" [retrospectively] (Saᶜdī 19).

The dictator's historical account resides in an ambivalent space between presentation and acceptance. It is presented by authority as a manipulation of historical events to sustain its legitimacy, and yet it is acceptance by the people is what the novel is problematizing through the skepticism of us as readers and through the memories that are being collected about him. The

history of the dictator and his machine of self-empowerment become a history that is authorized by those who are in power to tell their story and a history to be challenged by a counter narrative to be told by the people. A good example from the text that illustrates the immediacy for this project is when the father of al-Aʿzam begins to tell people to resist the subjugation by his son:

> The father of al-Aʿẓam used to stand in the popular markets to talk to people inviting them to fight when he calls corruption and unfairness, saying to them: oh believers! Keep your heads up, do not be afraid of those who blame you, rescue yourself from the shame and subjugation, is this the independence that your martyrs have died for (Saʿdī 44).

Since the dictator was not prepared to practice representation, which Chabal refers to in the above mentioned work, where the people could be brought in to share power, he kept them out of the affairs of the state and claimed that as long as he had power, he is legitimate. This is why, sometimes, coercion in various forms was used to keep the people outside the state in agreement with the politicians and their policies. The authorized history which was created by authority is dynamic ; it continues to develop endlessly, and is always supported by rhetorical centrality. It is this centrality that matters to the holders of power. For this reason, the moment the dictator felt that the centrality of his rhetoric was being challenged by even his father, his response was brutal. The dictator sends this message to his father through al-Mustashār Mamdūḥ:

> Listen, you shaykh, you are free to choose not to see my face, and by the way, I do not care about this, what I really want from you is only one thing, not more, which is to keep your mouth shut as the rest of the people do. And as far as you keep talking about equality, it is not fair to prevent the people from talking in certain topics out of their respect for the law while you talk freely about them day and night (Saʿdī 55-56).

The message the dictator sent to his father portrays the way in which oppostional narratives compete with the authorized history because they divert readers's attention away from the authorized history. Al-Aᶜzam's father reminds him that if the silenced people voices were heard they would destabilize the authorized history of his regime. Thus, his father represents the alternative narrative that has been marginalized. This action of shifting away, 'placing and displacing,' in other words placing a new narrative in the center and moving, with the aim of deliberately displacing, an authorized history or narrative toward the rhetorical periphery, even if it is symbolic and metaphoric, is threatening for authority. The history which *al-Aᶜẓam* is narrating and claiming, thus, is positioned in direct rivalry with the authorized history.

The act of empowering and disempowering which *al-Aᶜẓam* is engaging in and the space it is creating reflects what Ross Chambers refers to as "Room for Maneuver": a space which enables the writer "to elude both repression and recuperation, or more accurately, to 'maneuver' within the 'room' that opens up *between* the two. These are the characteristics of address that imply reading as a mode of reception inscribed *without closure* in time, and hence, history" (3)[35]. The key word in this quote is "closure" which is, not only, being rejected but also challenged from the very beginning in *al-Aᶜẓam* when it announces the death of the dictator to transfer his voice to the people whom he silenced during his life. This approach of reading art and literature echoes the work of nineteenth century novelists such as Dickens, Balzac, Flaubert and others who, through their powerful imaginations, created fictional societies that paralleled their own societies. In addition, this novel is heroic in the sense that it gives its people enormous power, a power emanating from its aim to reclaim the right to speak. Roberto Gonzalez Echevarria eloquently addresses this point when he writes: "There may no longer be, as in the epic, heroic protagonists who are at the center

[35] The emphasis in this quote is from the original text by Ross Chambers.

of harmonious totalities, but there is the implicit, powerful author, who probes the inner workings of an entire society to lay them bare in his novels, and who within the confines of the text is a partially veiled god. He has the vision afforded by a reflexive and reflective consciousness, less grandiose" (*The Dictatorship* 207-208).

The ruler of al-Manārah, al-Aᶜẓam, is fearful, restless and weak. The sources of his fear are the people themselves. The people among whom are his father, who according to al-Aᶜẓam "threatens the public safety and causes harm to the dignity of the country and its reputation" (Saᶜdī 58). The interplay between fiction and reality and the metaphorical space created by *al-Aᶜẓam* amplifies the critique of the authoritarian power of the dictator because it brings into doubt the claim that the dictator has absolute power. It casts some doubts on the one who is described in the novel as "al-hay al-qayyūm […] [al] qahhār [al] jabbār" (Saᶜdī 20) [The Living, The Everlasting, The Subduer, The Omnipotent]. These descriptions are particularly noteworthy because they are among the 99 names of God in the Islamic tradition. Thus, by describing the dictator with these names the author gestures tothe divine-like qualities that the dictator employs to instill fear in the citizens. This fear stems from the feeling that the dictator has of the falseness of his legitimacy to be the ruler. He knows that he has proclaimed power and the people are forcefully accepting it.

The fear of the dictator is best described in the work of Robert H. Jackson and Carl G. Rosberg, in *Personal Rule in Black Africa*, who argue that fear is the thing that haunts the dictator, following him where ever he goes. Fear, they write, "is with him every day in the sense that he rules not by institutional right but by personal domination, intelligence, energy, and fortune […] [He] may rule for many years, but there is always a possibility that legitimacy will be lost, that ability and loyalty will decline, and that misfortune will overtake his power" (27).

The fear of losing legitimacy, power, and thus the once acquired authority is the motivation of the brutal and tyrannical practices of dictatorship. This is why when al-Aʿzam's father continues to preach against the tyranny and the wrong deeds of his son, the latter shows no mercy. In fact, al-Aʿzam spreads a rumor that there was a reconciliation between his father and himself in order to cover the truth which the narrator unveils for us by saying:

> I was really surprised, for the news that was spreading in the east about a reconciliation, at the end, between the father and his son. But the truth […] was not like that, it was that the supporter of al-Aʿzam spread this rumor among the people, this news not more than that. The truth, Peter, is that the father was kidnapped (Saʿdī 62-63).

By mixing the literary with the nonliterary, i.e. the history of the narrator's nation, as means of opposition, the novel seeks to expose the brutality of the regime. It deconstructs the narrative process of the dictator by immediately juxtaposing it with a counter narrative that unveils the truth of what happened to the father by systematically breaking down the boundaries between the 'truth and the 'lie' and blurring the distinction between them. In so doing, the novel expands itself beyond what is fictional to create a space for the narrator to produce a narrative which, not only deconstructs the dictator's own narrative but also unveils its lies and mends its historical rupture.

Peter, the narrator/imagined author who gathers information to re/write the history of al-Manārah, is the character that represents Saʿdī the author. Peter as the foreigner, the European who comes from Europe, is the only one who is allowed to write something that challenges the account of the dictator. He is beyond the control of the dictator and his surveillance as he is a European whose concern about al-Manārah results from human rights motivations. This choice portrays a sense of what challenges Arab intellectuals face with dictators and the price that they might pay for trespassing. Peter, therefore, is able to construct the counter narrative by collecting the

memories of the people who know al-Aᶜẓam. It is possible, hence, to hypothesize that since Peter and Saᶜdī, the author, are mirrors of each other, the former's narration of the novel revives the intention of Saᶜdī the author who employs the same rhetorical process to produce a counter narrative that allows him to call attention to the process by which dictatorial regimes construct historical accounts. At the aesthetic level, this becomes a literary intervention in the Arabic novel.

In this sense, then, we can understand *al-Aᶜẓam* as Saᶜdī's desire to re/write his own story and the story of his own people. Through this intervention, the novel suggests that breaking free from the dictatorial account and control empowers its readers by providing them with a "room to maneuver" where they are able to reject the strictures of dictatorial power. The relationship between the narrator and readers, "is no longer the dyadic relationship of seducer/seducee" Leonard Tennenhouse argues. Rather, it is incorporated "within a triangulated relationship which enacts the cultural system as an inevitably mediated one" (440). Here, Tennenhouse does not negate the position of the reader as the object of the narrator's seduction, but he attributes to him/her also the role of a participant in making the text.

While *al-Aᶜẓam* suggests a sense of oppositionality and breaking free from the dominant narrative of the dictator, al-Aᶜẓam, it reiterates that this goal is still a readerly function which transcends the textual sphere and transpires beyond the limits of the written words. The role of the text then ends after creating the fictional space only to await its success and/or failure which is assumed to be judged by the reader. Oppositional reading, Tennenhouse argues, requires embodying the reader: "achieving oppositionality simply entails situating oneself in the reading position" (439).

The created space, allotted to the writer, becomes a means to assert the silenced voice and overcome the narrative censorship imposed on al-Manārah during the dictatorship of "al-Ṭāghiyah."The idea of opposing oppression and dismantling dictatorship is echoed repeatedly throughout the novel. And in his role as the re/writer of history, Saᶜdī gains his creative liberties which were once profoundly constrained through the attention he pays to words and textual disruption in the novel. Through the interplay of narrative convention, readers' expectations and the inherent discrepancies he creates between the maimed history and the told history of al-Manārah which he has chosen to unsettle, Saᶜdī is able to produce a novel that overcomes all these obstacles.

In this novel, the contested point in the struggle for hegemony is space in its fictional as well as real manifestations. This is why the dictator, Lazhar, is concerned about dominating this space in an effort to stop any attempt that might lead to the inevitable—the loss of control. One of the ways to gain legitimacy and maintain the sustainability of control over space is religion. At a moment of defenselessness and panic the dictator sends a letter to Nūr al-dīn Ṣuṭūrā, the minster of religious affairs, asking him "to change the format of the Jumᶜah speech, in which they start mentioning the name of the dictator and pray for him in all the mosques of al-Manārah" (Saᶜdī 90)[36]. The reference here is to a phenomenon that came to be applicable to, almost, all the ruling powers in the Arab world to which Ramaḍān Bilāl refers to as "The Phenomenon of the Prayer to the Ruler" when he says: "Al-duᶜā' li al-ḥākim ẓāhirah ṣanaᶜatha al-diktāturīyah bism al-dīn" [The supplication that people make for God to protect the dictators have played a role in the making of

[36] Friday's *khuṭbah* (sermon) is a speech that takes place before the congregational midday *prayer* that Muslims hold every Friday.

dictators under the name of religion][37]. This misuse of religion to promote one's own interests is well studied by Cunningham, who argues that the aim of theology is not to get finally to God but rather "to bring the audience along to the end of new forms of thought and actions" (312). He critiques the religious rhetoric and how sometimes it is used as a conduit that might help manipulators to reach their goal of convincing the oppressed to accept their ideology.

In the formation of a god-like dictator, religious thought plays a crucial role the novel suggests. In the war of independence, Arab resistance movements used Islam as a source of inspiration and guidance in their struggle against European colonization. Arab nationalists at that time formulated their discourses and ideologies around the idea of establishing an Islamic State ruled by Islamic laws. The manipulation of religion as a tool to form an imagined community, guaranteeing happiness to the adherents in the hereafter or when, if ever, the Islamic State is established is at play in this novel. By giving priority to religious belief, one's life becomes only a means through which a larger goal, namely the dream of an Islamic State, governed by a president whose obedience is juxtaposed by that of God himself can be achieved. For the leaders, the ultimate aim is to achieve political gains and claim power and for the citizens is to pay allegiances to the leader of the nation. Sacrificing one's life for the sake of the nation/president is and remains an abstract idea, for it cannot be dealt with rationally.

In order to legitimize their perpetual powers, dictators must control the way people view them through the use of religious discourse. The dictator of al-Manārah, therefore, tries to achieve this in several ways. He asks the religious leaders to bring him into the religious discourse where his obedience is juxtaposed with the obedience of God himself "[wa-tudaᶜu maᶜa] ism Allah wa-

[37] Translation to English is mine.

Rasūl" [and put side by side by the name of Allah and the prophet] (Saᶜdī 91). The aim of such manipulation, Bilāl argues, is to "gain a sense of legitimacy that allows [him] to stay in power through the support of the religious leaders".[38] They have to place obedience to him, like God, in the center, partly as a defensive measure against challenges to his authority. He becomes a centripetal force, so to speak. He not only seeks to manipulate the use of religion to his ends, but he also casts a broader net to ensnare the people's sense of religiosity. When Nūr al-dīn Suṭūrā rejects the order of the dictator, to associate his obedience with the obedience of God, he faces serious consequences. He resigns from his cabinet and his life becomes difficult. The dictator marginalizes him and brings someone to replace him. Someone who is willing to conclude his khutbah, this time, by mentioning al-Aᶜzam, asking "Allah to keep and protect him as the leader of the nation and to grant him victory over his enemies" (Saᶜdī 94). What deserves careful attention in this quote is the all-encompassing use of religious terminology which alludes to the greatness and the blessings of God, remind people to be patient and united and praise the rulers' right policies and decisions. By doing so, the state aims at drawing a parallel between its official nationalistic discourse and the religious one in order to give legitimacy to its acts and to fix, propagate and reproduce its own power structures. In this respect, religion is used as a pervasive and crucial element in "the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture. It does involve the use of language, of signs and images which stand for or represent things" (Hall 15).

In stark contrast to the orders of the dictator, Suṭūrā's decision, to reject, embodies the very essence of liberty in his eyes. He is dazzled by the consequences of this decision as he looks at the men who came to arrest him on the night of his wedding. While telling Peter the story of what

[38] Translation of this text from Arabic to English is mine.

happened to Suṭūrā, Lamīn remembers the terrible day when detectives came to arrest him and says:

> One of the two officers had presented to him a document that shows that he is under arrest and they asked him to accompany them to a black car parked near the sidewalk […] Then, Nūr al-Dīn said but this is my wedding night you kids. (Saᶜdī 97).

The paralysis experienced by Suṭūrā in front of the orders of the dictator to arrest him reflects the inability of the whole nation to overcome the constraints and control of dictatorship. The image portrays Saᶜdi's critique, not only of the brutality of the regime but also of the people's lack of resistance. For although they were gathering to celebrate Suṭūrā's wedding, they were not able to stop the detectives from arresting him by saying: "Naḥnu āsifān… al-Shaykh… al-Awāmir awāmir" [we are sorry…. Sheikh… orders are orders] (Saᶜdī 97).

Saᶜdī critiques the dictator by portraying his lack of any humane traits and mercy. He is dismantling a narrative that emphasizes the power of the dictator without revealing the corruption and cruelty. He depicts the dictator as the one who undermines the people and reduces them to slaves who live, move, and dream according to his orders. By foregrounding the intrinsic tension between history and fiction, Saᶜdī points to a kind of history which destabilizes the established narrative in order to relay the stories of the people who are oppressed by the leaders and the official account.

Al-Aᶜẓam is meant to be a critique not only of the dictatorship of the fictional regime of Lazhar and his abuse of power but it also challenges hegemonic narratives that aim to silence. He is described as the most brutal one, as the narrator indicates in the novel: "[laa] yarḥamu ayy wāḥid" [does not have mercy for anybody] (Saᶜdī 104). This intervention in the genre of the novel can be read as a commentary on dictatorship in general and the mechanisms that are employed to

maintain it. This point is in line with Mikhail Bakhtin's argument about the novel as a reflection of a real society in *Discourse in the Novel. The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M Bakhtin*. In this book, he argues that the novel is the word of the society, it is its discourse and thus it is considered as the ideological and social evidence as well as the tool of consciousness (Bakhtin 43-47). *Al-Aʿẓam* alludes here to the means of empowerment used by the dictator to maintain his power. Although the novel reasserts the very structures used by the dictator, it does not do so to contribute to the empowerment of his dictatorship. Rather, *al-Aʿzam* artistically uses narrative to emulate, denounce and displace the power of the dictator "to undermine the myth of [dictatorship] and create a game of mirrors that corrodes the relation that [he] had established between myth and history" (Echevarría 83).

The novel goes beyond only resisting to search for a "room to maneuver" within the structures used by the dictator. In other words, being a critique of the apparatuses used by the machine of the dictator, the novel engages the issue of writing as a means to possibly know one's own history and orienting truth. In so doing, and to use Echevarría's, the "novel demonstrates in its very structure that in reality dictators are not powerful telluric forces, but ideological diversions, shadows cast by the true powers" (Echevarría 83).

By establishing credibility with its readers, the novel enshrouds the legitimacy of the dictator and his history with a sense of uncertainty. The society that is described in the novel is a society of enslaved or "drugged" citizens, to use Miriam's Cooke term, who are living within a lie that the regime is constructing of itself (Cooke 138). In addition to the use of religion as a means of empowerment by the regime, the narrator tells us about the destiny of Īmān Zūkū, the author of the national anthem of al-Manārah which was entitled "fidāka ya baladī" [long live my country] (Saʿdī 113), and who is also a minster in the government of the dictator. Īmān was asked by the

regime to build a statue of the dictator "to be displayed and centered in the heart of al-Manārah" (Saᶜdī 113). Upon his refusal to contribute to the process of mythologizing the dictator, Īmān was not only excluded and individually punished but the whole city, "ᶜAzīzah", has to suffer from "two enemies and either one of them is not less in its ruthlessness than the other: the plague and the dictator" (Saᶜdī 132).

There are two important points to highlight in the example of Īmān Zūkū. First, the insistence from the authority's side on having the author of the national anthem after the independence of the country play a part in mythologizing the dictator and become part of his apparatus, and second, the consequences of rejecting to be part of this corrupting regime. The novel problematizes the dilemma of many intellectuals in the Arab world where dictatorships emerged. Īmān's position represents the role of the Arab intellectual who has always been the primary oppositional figure to the leader and who challenges the established accounts. He rejects submission to the orders of the dictator although he knows what awaits him. It is either "[i]mprisonment […or] death" as an "effective means of silencing" (Allen 39). In repeatedly calling into question the insistence on using Īmān by the government and laying bare the rhetoric of his rejection, the novel reveals the processes of his dictatorship.

The description of the dictator's power reminds the reader of the message of power exemplified by the images of political leaders throughout the Arab world. The novel therefore becomes not only an attempt by the narrator to reconstruct the history of the dictator, but also to construct a sense of collective suffering by the community of al-ᶜAzīzah, the city in which the events in the novel take place. The city is now under the curse of "al-ṭāᶜūn" [the plague], only because it is "masqaṭ ra's al-Shāᶜir" [the birth place of the poet], Īmān, whose only sin is the rejection to pay lip service to the regime. The reference here is to a specific strategy which almost

all Arab dictators have adhered to in order to repress any kind of opposition. And here, the novel unapologetically is making a reference to the massacres performed by many of Arab authoritarian powers such as the Hama massacre [*majzarat Ḥamā*] in February 1982 which took place in Syria under the regime of Hafez al-Asad[39]. To this end, then, *al-Aʿzam* becomes not only a novel about dictatorship, but also a dictator novel because it silences the dictator only to make room for the narrator to speak about what once-considered-to-be unspeakable because it seeks to unveil what is forbidden by the dictator. This role is what Echevarría refers to when he writes: "The emergency of the figure of the [narrator], who can bear no authority except that of negation, pries apart the relationship between authority and voice" (14). This is what the narrator is trying to do when he describes the brutality of the dictator and his cronies who destroyed the whole city in which Īmān resides. The description itself is telling: "Nothing was in its place, the attackers started to even walk with a sense of disorientation towards the ruins of the place while their weapons are dangling on their shoulders…After everything was obliterated" (Saʿdī 156-157). *Al-Aʿzam's* use of power through his cronies serves as a disciplinary apparatus which aims at creating, in Lisa Wedeen's words, "a politics of public dissimilation in which citizens acted as if they revered their leader". And in so doing, she further argues "the regime [exercises] a subtle, yet effective form of power" (723).

[39] This massacre, to which the Syrian official history books refer to as the events of Ḥamā, is best studied in Miriam Cooke's *Dissident Syria, making oppositional arts official.* Duke University Press, 2007. On February 1982 the Syrian town Hama a city by the banks of the river Orontes, was overrun by Syrian Special Forces in an operation that lasted for three weeks. During this period, Cooke writes that thousands of people were killed (according to Human Rights Watch between 5,000 and 10,000). A large part of the town was completely demolished, and later on modern houses, among them a five-star Cham hotel, were built on the ruins.

The sound of the narrator is now the sound of the survivor. And here, Robert Spencer argues that the novel "performs a dictatorial power and does so […] in such a way as to allow readers both to interpret the origins of crime of dictatorship in a durable system of colonial power and to appreciate dictatorship's vulnerability to democratic forms of government (Spencer 146)". The question of whether this novel is a documentary of Arab nations' experience after independence or whether it combines both, the real and the imagined, is relevant here.

The story of Īmān is not arranged according to chronological order; rather, many flashbacks interrupt the fluidity of the narration in which memory from the past and the present are conjured up in the mind of the narrator. Through the skillful interplay between the present and the past, the novel demonstrates the intersection of the past and present to suggest a different trajectory for the future. Peter, the writer of history, must construct a narrative that addresses the past and the cycle of suffering and to provide a means for the voice of the people to be relayed. Writing for Peter becomes not only a means to document the lack of freedom, but also, a tool to remove the veil from the tortures of the dictatorial power to expose its tyranny.

A few years after independence Arab "presidents for life," to use Owen's words, came to power, and they began, in these decades of dictatorships, to piece together a sort of rationale for their regimes. The core and the aim of this philosophy was to justify the total and absolute control of the new nations. *Al-Aᶜzam* insists on resurrecting the memory of the making of dictatorship. In a meeting with Bīda, one of the cronies of the dictator at the time of the Massacre, the narrator asks him what happened to "al-ṭāᶜūn" [the plague] which spread in al-ᶜAzīzah:

> I asked after that what about the plague, Bīda? And he said which plague? Which plague I exclaimed! He said do you really believe the cronies of the greater? […] al-ṭāᶜūn for the

> dictator is Īmān, the poet. But after his death, al-Aᶜzam decided that the city is cured from the plague (Saᶜdī 157).

The memory of the massacre undertaken by the dictator and his cronies to establish authoritarian presidency for life juxtaposed with the memory of the killed men and women who are taken away by al-Aᶜzam, is a recurrent theme in the novel. It portrays clearly the lies of the regime. The importance of this theme is even stressed by the fact that Bīda himself is questioning the legitimacy and honesty of the regime when he says "Do you really believe the cronies of the greater?" (Saᶜdī 157). The memories of this massacre and similar tragedies, at the hand of Arab dictators, are materialized in the descriptions of the house of the poet which became "then nothing but a lifeless and motionless heap" (Saᶜdī 157). The strategy of foregrounding the damage left behind the forces of the dictator is central to the novel's project. This is further anchored by the use of multiple voices. It tries to get beyond the telling of history which involves constructing new stories to challenge the singular account of the dictator, since the story of the nation is that of its people.

After the killing of the poet, and in a form of flashback, the narrator tells us about the manipulation of al-Manārah's State Television to construct a history that makes of the dictator a hero who has conquered and managed to kill those who are plotting against the security of the state and its well-being. The novel mimics and undermines "faḍā'īyāt al-Aᶜzam" [al-Aᶜzam's TV channels] which attempt to blame the chaos and the killing of the poet on the terrorists and the people who are agitating (Saᶜdī 157). What is important here is the unveiling of the dictator's attempt to produce and enforce a "one-sided" version of history on the people. The appearance of the dictator's statue on the State Television, which is shown in the following quote, creates a sense of fear and revulsion among the people who know his bloody history but are now doomed to stand

by helplessly because they are trapped within the dictator's circle of power. This feeling is expressed in the words of Peter when he says:

> At night on that same day I saw for the first time on one of al-Aʿzam's channels, during the news time, the statue which was put on the heart of the capital shortly after the killing of the poet. It was a big statue, many times of the size of the normal human being. […] It was a body full of youth, energy and confidence. It has been there for almost 30 years now, it is there, in that place, at the heart of al-Manārah (Saʿdī 157).

The immediate juxtaposition of the official response to what happened after the killing of the poet with that of the real story shows how *al-Aʿzam* uses history as a point of departure to construct a fictionalized account of the dictator and his regime. It not only unveils the lies of the regime but it also creates a room for another account to be told. The text, thus, tries to (re)present the ugliness of Arab dictators. Despite its desire to teach the people about this history and how the dictator was able to remain in power for more than thirty years and to maim the history of the country the way he wanted, the overriding question for the re/writer of history, Peter, in the above quote and throughout the novel remains, how will the dictator be remembered by the future generations. Peter attempts to gather all the information about the dictator. Along with policies that aimed at repressing any dissidence, the dictator of al-Manārah, like all dictators, had to paint a specific picture for his citizens that would justify his mission; thus, narrating events in the past in a specific version of "history" became a necessity. This is why Peter is most concerned with meeting anyone who knows the dictator "ʿan qurb" [closely] (Saʿdī 178). Thus, as commentary on dictatorial regime, the novel uncovers the realities of the regime. Fredric Jameson argues in regards to the novel that the goal of artists as detectives is not only to unmask isolated acts of corruption and

brutality but also to trace the source of what is corrupt, unequal and unfair to fix it in the society (Jamson 37).

There are two major simultaneous acts involved in the re/telling the history of al-Manārah in relation to the dictator and his regime: storytelling and writing. These two activities recall the dichotomy of oral versus written. Storytelling itself is an act of release and at the same time, of creation. Lamīn Sharīf, Mamdūḥ, and Maymūnah are telling their stories to release their frustration with the dictator and his regime and by having these stories written and documented by a historian who is not appointed by the state; the novel not only challenges any existing history but also casts doubts on the very being of that history. Joanne Frye argues that storytelling plays an essential and vital role in the nature of humans when he writes, "the need to narrate is an apparently pervasive human need: the need to tell stories, hear stories, read stories; the need to make sense of lived experience through setting events in narrative relationship to each other" (Frye 433). Writing, on the other hand, serves as refuge for the historian, Peter, whose testimonial initiates a personal search to reveal, once and for all, the brutality of the dictatorship.

The powers of genesis created from the interplay of storytelling and writing are evident in the novel's title, *al-Aʿẓam* which indicates a possession of absolute power. This is clear from the Arabic meaning of the title, which is one of the Islamic attributes for God. Thus, the historian, Peter, is consumed with the idea of power and the image of it that he creates a fictional narrative that echoes the same power but only to reverse it in order to capture the various aspects of life in al-Manārah under the dictatorship of Lazhar, the dictator. The novel shows how the dictator, al-Aʿzam, monopolizes power by dictating the fates of the individuals within his state. This power is manifested in many ways. It dictates where the protagonist should go and so there is always a

constant sense of confinement. "Gharīb fi-l-nihāyah maṣīrunā jamīᶜan" [We all have a very strange destiny]", Lamīn tells Peter:

> Nūr al-Dīn Sutūra is decaying in the corners of prisons, Ḥamdān committed suicide, the poet has fallen captive in the cage of al-Aᶜzam's forces, Bīda is waiting to be sentenced to death, Safwān, the General, has run away with the revels, and I am there dislocated as a dog in the ground of the cave in the middle of the forest in an abandoned place waiting for a sleep that does not seem to come and a fate which I do not either know anything about (Saᶜdī 212-13).

This statement made by Lamīn here portrays the state's coercion and control which Foucault refers to when he argues that the punishment of humans which is meant to discipline their behaviors, is exercised through power and leads to an abuse of power, sustaining control of the soul inside the body itself and of the body in relation to space (Discipline and Punish, 11). The use of the nominal phrase "maṣīrunā" [our fate"], is a potent word in any discourse which tries to dismantle the ways power manifests itself. The term "maṣīr" carries a sense of fatalism in which one's destiny is controlled by another. The word also reminds us of the existence and the power of God. Lamīn is aware that the dictator assumes to a certain degree the role of God in deciding the destination of his citizens.

Lamīn's sense of alienation and his detachment from his surroundings is made all the more apparent when juxtaposed alongside the descriptions of the places from his past. Running away from the forces of al-Aᶜzam that chase him, he arrives at a place he recognized from the early days of his fight for independence from the French colonizers. He decides to sit and contemplate in the hope that his memory still lives there. Lamīn retraces the route he took with his companions who fought for independence: "I was still sitting there, on top of the rock looking with astonishment at

the forgotten about village, then I got from my food package what has remained of bread and dried figs and I started to eat" (Saᶜdī 213). This reenactment is immediately followed by a longing recollection from the past, in a flashback: "Until I reached a piece of land full of grass… surrounded by circles of stones, a small cemetery in which we buried our friend who died in the revolution for independence. The voices in this place are quite different from the ones that I used to hear then" (Saᶜdī 213-214).

Here, the novel deviates from the depiction of Lamin as apathetic. This memory is replete with emotion, the place is described extensively, and the past is relived in his mind through the sights and sounds surrounding him. This shift is all the more apparent when juxtaposed with the disillusionment which he has developed from the practices of the post-independence rulers and dictatorships. The description of the place lacks all of the patinas of the memory of the past. Instead of finding refuge in the recollection of the past, he becomes further disappointed which he describes in the following way "faqadtu al-amal fi-l-ᶜuthūr ᶜalā makhba', alūdhu bihi" [I lost hope in finding a refuge from the dictator] (Saᶜdī 214). This confusion and sense of despair which he is experiencing here reveals the same apathy and lack of emotion that we as readers come to expect of the protagonist.

This sense of loss pervades not only the present of the protagonist's life but also his past experience. Not only is he pushed to accept the current state of being as someone who is sought for imprisonment by the forces of the dictator but he is also at loss at his experience of the old domestic space. In an effort to capture the relationship between past and present, Lamīn says:

> I began creeping toward the source of the disturbing and strange noise in order to figure out what was going on since I had trouble believing what I saw at that moment. It had nothing to do with villagers coming to gather firewood or to tend their flocks, as I had first

> guessed. But rather, a most fearsome array of policemen, soldiers, and tracking dogs, who were advancing toward the slope of the mountain and coming up in my direction to seize me like a ripening, near-ripe fruit (Saᶜdī 214).

The fear of incarceration and surveillance which dictates Lamīn's relationship to both the place and the space is reinforced by the interplay of narratives and how time operates. The depiction of the protagonist's loss of the past and the present creates a sense of frustration which mirrors the torture and pain suffered by Lamīn who is now trying to flee the country.

This theme also occurs in *al-Khawf*, the second novel that I will devote the rest of this chapter to examine, as well. At first glance, the title of the novel, *al-Khawf (*fear), raises some kind of curiosity. What does the writer mean by fear? What is the source of this fear and from what or whom? These are all questions that attract our attention, as readers, from the beginning and thus we spend the whole novel waiting for answers. Jallūllī, like the author of *al-Aᶜzam*, introduces an innovative element into the discourse. From the beginning, the novel raises the significance of this factor, *al-Khawf* (fear), while simultaneously placing the dictator, and by extension, the reality of ᶜIsá, the main character at the heart of the issue. The story opens with a scene that reflects the richness of the narrative strategies which the writer employs to build the narrative. The novel begins with: "ᶜindamā intahat al-ḥarb fī hādhā al-yawm, wa fī hādhihi al-sāᶜah, wa baynamā kāna ẓalamu al-ghurbah yurkhī sudulahu ᶜalá al-arḍ kāna ᶜIsá ibn as-Sī ᶜabdallah qad taḥawwala ilā kalb [When the war ended in this day at the same hour, as darkness spreads through out, ᶜīsā the son of ᶜAbdullah has been transformed into a dog"] (Jallūlī 11). This early use of the adverbial time clause to start the story of ᶜIsá who magically has been transformed into a dog, demonstrates the novel's play with time, vacillating between fantasy and reality in order to set the stage to dismantle the heinous deeds of the dictator without fear. Magic realism, in the novel, serves as an important

structural device, because it offers a means to express resistance without explicitly critiquing the authoritarian regime. The opening of the novel with the transformation of ᶜIsá into a dog is reminiscent of the world of fantasy created by Scheherazade, who she had to tell a story every night in order to escape execution. The novel takes the story into the world of fantasy to be able to document and challenge the dictator's reign without fear of repercussion. Employing fantasy is an important structural device for Arab writers who want to critique dictatorship because it draws from a rich oral literary tradition that would not appear threatening on the surface.

In the first chapter, Jallūlī's novel relates the story of ᶜIsá, the protagonist who has transformed into a dog. In so doing, the writer uses prolepsis which Genette Gerard defines as "brief allusion: they refer in advance to an event that will be told in full in its place" (Gérard 73). We did not know why he becomes a dog, but we learn from the descriptions given to him, that he was:

> The educated, who obtained two doctorate degrees in comparative literature and an undergraduate degree in philosophy, the ideal man who is also unemployed, a dreamer of freedom and poetry who was forced, by the struggles of his life, to sell vegetables and cigarettes (Jallūlī 11).

Thus, the prolepsis here alludes to a future event (resistance and objection). ᶜIsá rejects the corruption surrounding him, and in an effort to challenge the hegemony of the dictator he has been transformed into a dog. By transforming into a dog, ᶜIsá is able to subvert the absolute power of the imagined president whose given name is "Sufyān al-Dāwūdī" or "The godly president" (Jallūlī 11). Hence, ᶜIsá is able to give us a more complete picture of the reality on the ground and the trauma inflicted on the people by the dictator's regime. This type of beginning also, Colson argues, "establishes a central element of the formal logic of the novel, futurity," and therefore, he furthers

writes, "creates the readerly expectation of a future [fall] for the Ruler" (Colsen 134). The future event, however, does not occur until chapter 41 when the dictator loses control at the hand of ᶜIsá and his people. The narrator tells us that:

> The president realizes now that as a politician he has to deal with the changes and the new conditions, especially after he has been told by one of his close advisors that the fate of the nation is now contingent on the new thoughts that are spreading around about him, and also on the mood of ᶜIsá and his friend. Then the president himself came to be sure about the fact that the two men now completely control the nation… Sufyān al-Dāwūdī, the dictator, has no choices now. So he decided to do one last thing to rescue the remains of his collapsing power and some of the glory that seems to be threatened. Thus, he decided, while competing with time, which is not running according to his will, to send his minister, ᶜAbd al-Qahhār who was the minister of communication and who happened also to be an old friend of ᶜIsá to resume the very critical negotiation with ᶜIsá. Everything, he thought, depends on this negotiation (Jallūlī 182-183).

Just as the stories of Scheherazade seduce the king, Shāhrayār, with their erotic and fantastical elements, so do the words of the prolepsis in the novel seduce the readers. This beginning alludes to the conquest of ᶜIsá over the dictator and the retelling of the history of the dictator. Here is a president who is weak, who lives in fear and whose claims to absolute power are shown to be unfounded. His panic stems from the fear of power and for power, the fear from opposition, the fear of the end of his rule, and ultimately the fear for his life. Jackson, Robert, and Carl G. Rosberg describe the dictator's fear and its consequences when they write: "There is a vicious circle of tyranny: the more a Tyrant persists in his rule, the more violence he must do; tyranny cannot come to an end except by the only justice inherent in it, which is the overthrow of the Tyrant and his

regime—if necessary, by the killing of the Tyrant" (239). The feeling of being haunted by fear indicates the vulnerability of the dictator. His uncontrollable desire for power and gaining it by any means reflects a greater love for the self. This is a narcissistic trait of all Arab dictators and more specifically the dictator of "The Sea of the Virgin," the imagined state in this novel. His appearance in a weak position points to the focus of the novel —to deconstruct the myth of his strong persona and break down his absolute authority. This transformation of the dictator, Sufyān al-Dāwūdī, from the position of power to that of weakness is deliberately blurred to mock him and his power.

This engagement in deconstructing the image of omnipotence that dictators have created of themselves, to see everything and control everything and being likened to God is what Gitahi Gititi is criticizing African literature for lacking, and can be applied to Arabic literature when he writes:

> [T]his particular category is not much in evidence in [the] African critical vocabulary as it is in, say, Latin American letters, especially of the twentieth century. (This by no means implies a dearth in Africa of creative writing that features the theme of dictatorship.) Neither has sufficient critical attention been paid, in my view, to the African 'dictator' novel as an arena in which contending ideologies as well as the discourse of authority engage in a dramatic display of claims and counterclaims all geared toward the acquisition of a form of hegemony (Gititi 212).

It is relevant to Arabic literature because it is only after the disillusionment post-independence that the novel is used as a means to challenge the hegemony of dictators. There is a divine trait that surrounds the leaders that produces fear, so that there is a sense that his power transcends the natural limits. Not only is he the godly president, but he also gives power to all of

those who work with him: his government and even his police officers. In this novel, this omnipotence is clear from the absolute power which the narrator gave to the policeman who hit ᶜIsá and spit on him saying: "Son of a bitch. The blood of anger was obvious on ᶜIsá's face, but time has taught him how not to show anger in the presence of the soldiers, police officers and those who have power" (Jallūlī 19).

This scene provides a sharp satire of the ruler and his ruling powers in the imagined state "Baḥr al-ᶜadhrā'" [The Sea of the Virgin] (Jallūlī 23). The dictator, through the police, argues Colsen, "attempts to maintain his power by limiting the freedom of the people and by exercising his power authority over time to rule eternally" (134). The figure of the police and soldiers here, one can argue, are the symbols of the repressive force of the state apparatus which bears down so heavily upon ᶜIsá, who is choked by the surveillance of the modern state apparatus under the rule of the dictator. It is this system of state coercion and control as described by Foucault which came to be a means of ruling in the Arab world that the novel is problematizing here. As a means of ruling and controlling their nations through surveillance and examination, dictators managed to maintain control of both the body of citizens and of the body in space, the nation. The nation becomes a prison for ᶜIsá in which he feels that he is continually violated.[40]

It is ironic that the same dictator who runs this oppressive regime is actually the one who celebrated: "The twenty thousand and five hundred years for the birth of democracy…that was established by the poet Nizār after two months of the birth of the Sea of the Virgin" (Jallūlī 22). This sarcasm is one of the narrative techniques the author uses to construct the story. There are two ironies here: the birth of democracy, which implies that it exists in this imagined state and the

[40] For more about this see *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison.* Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage, 1995

exaggerated number the narrator uses to date the birth of this state. This act of juxtaposing two ironies next to each other shows how the dictators create an aura around themselves that they do what is impossible, for example ruling endlessly, in order to appear larger-than-life. They not only dictate, but also manipulate the truth to their ends to ensure that people sense fear and display obedience. Or, to put it in the words of Lauren Derby when she describes the image that Rafael Trujillo created of himself: "So exalted, extraordinary and seemingly perfect in life, it was hard to believe that Trujillo could actually expire as a mere mortal" (Derby 94).

The dictators' omnipotence is reinforced by the inscriptions of their presence on the geo-political terrain of their states. Moreover, they celebrate something that does not exist, democracy, which was best demonstrated by the policeman when he was dealing with ʿIsá. This manipulative trait of the president, is apparent, for example, in the descriptions which the man in the restaurant gives to Sufyān al-Dāwūdī when he started telling another citizen in the coffee shop how Sufyān al-Dāwūdī has a plan to overcome any threats that the country would face internally or externally. Sufyān al-Dāwūdī, the man says: "[O]ur beloved president, Mr. Sufyān al-Dāwūdī, was able to hack all their secret plotting. He is a devious fox, do not you agree with me that he cannot be outsmarted, what a great president he is" (Jallūlī 27-28).

The descriptions of the dictator here portray the charismatic image that the dictator was accorded in the collective imagination of his people as the one who has a providential role as a protector of his nation. It is an image that shows how he is capable of miracles and supernatural deeds. This capability, one can argue, is what actually helped him to consciously style himself as a fearsome god. In this sense, the novel becomes a means of dealing with another issue of great importance to the post-colonial Arab nation, "The Sea of the Virgin," namely, how to write record personal and collective memory, by reinterpreting the nation's colonial history and the sensibilities

of the post-independence era. Offering imaginative challenges to the country's actual situation characterised by corruption, poverty, injustice, it seeks to put into question the personal and the collective history, in an attempt to spot the flaws of the past and search for explanations to the miserable conditions of the post-independence nation-state. Literature, then, becomes an important medium to bear witness to the tyranny of the dictator..

The man in the restaurant added: "The president will let them [the enemies] enter the city, and then he will surround them, and they will fall down like flies" (Jallūlī 28). This image of a dictator, who is feared, capable of anything, makes the locus of his charisma not in what he says but in what he does and more importantly I would argue that it does actually resembles that image of "muchachitos"[41] which Derby refers to when she talks about Trujillo in Latin America. The image of the dictator, however, is challenged immediately by the image of the hopeless citizen, ᶜIsá which does not go in line with the image given to the president. In the description of ᶜIsá, the narrator says that he "has been walking in the same cursed path as the billions of the silent men before him…he has failed to fix the rusted pipes through which his drinkable water runs only to come out from the water fountain as black as dirt itself" (Jallūlī 35). The "rusted pipes" here is an allegory of the dysfunctional state used to artistically represent the larger socio-political "filth" created by the dictator's regime. It is interesting that this is the regime of the one who has just been presented as the one who would prevent any harm from reaching his people. The narrator not only implies the failure of the state, but he also demonstrates a recognition of his and the people's own

[41] This term is used by Latin American critics to refer to the sorcery used by Latin American dictators, especially Trujillo, to create a magical aura surrounding their presence so people would always be afraid of even thinking of getting closer to them. For more about this, refer to Lauren, Derby. *"The Dictator's Two Bodies: Hidden Powers in the Dominican Imagination".* Chicago: University of Chicago. *ETNOFOOR,* 12 (2) 1999: 92-116.

ethical and political failure. In other words, it is not only that the state that has failed its people but the people, who have been walking in the same cursed path themselves like the narrator, have also failed to successfully challenge the repression of the state either by political action in the public sphere or by subverting its abuse artistically.

Again, the novel paints a very sarcastic and quite dramatic scene of this image that the dictator cultivates for himself in order to routinize and justify his being in the office for a long time. The novel juxtaposes the image of the ruler as sustainer whose "unique longevity in office [becomes] but one more miracle explaining his special power to combat enemies and confound foes against all odds," and a failure at the same time to rupture the absolute power he had possessed and unveil its lies (Derby, 95). The description of the small space where ʿIsá lives and its disfunctionality mirrors the bigger space of a nation transformed its decay and rottenness. This image of an old, collapsing, almost dilapidated house which the protagonist lives in is used artistically to show the overlap between the private and the public space to express the state of a failing nation-state where things get convoluted. It is this private space of the home which is often portrayed in cultural imagination as safe and desirable, a space in which we seek protection and shelter that is being challenged here. And, it becomes a place of discomfort which hides the presence of violence under the ruling of the dictator.

The novel does indeed employ dark humor to cut through the customary layers of dictatorship. The narrator is concerned with the history of his nation and his overriding question becomes why the people of "The Sea of the Virgin" allowed Sufyān al-Dāwūdī to continue for so long time "ʿishrīna alf wa khamsmi'at sanah" [twenty thousand and five hundred years] (Jallūlī 22). Through a combination of bitter sarcasm and personal experience, the narrator tells us the story of ʿIsá's father in law, who worked all his life to be able to build a very humble, small house.

The narrator says: "Seventy years of non-stop, hard work Mr. ᶜAbd al-Salām was able to have a house that has two bedrooms and one very small bathroom" (Jallūlī 34). The essence of sarcasm here lies in the discrepancy that the novel draws between the situation of ᶜIsá's father in law and the dictator. The implied juxtaposition of the two men, ᶜIsá's father in law and the godly president portrays a comparison between the situation of this poor man after he has lived for seventy years and that of the dictators, be it Hosni Mubarak, Ghaddafi, Ben Ali, or even Sufyān al-Dāwūdī who *we only* know to be the one who "wears the white presidential uniform from his garment and scarf to the leather shoes" (Jallūlī 22). This indirectness in comparing the path of a commoner to that of a dictator enables the author to question the legitimacy of the wrong doings of the dictator and also makes his narrative an invitation for resistance. Arab critic and writer Abdelrahman Munif argues that in this essence the novel becomes the conduit which "has the ability to unveil the unsaid in both the political and the ideological discourse" (Munif 34). As soon as he, ᶜIsá, reached this realization he:

> vomited what was left in his stomach from acids and yellow bile, terrified by the intensity and speed of the will of death against the will of life…then he thought that what the victims and injured consider to be their death, some other animals such as, bees, owls, hyenas, germs and vampires consider to be the source of their life (Jallūlī 55).

Only at this point in the novel, does ᶜIsá realize the reason why dictators kill. It is the fear of death that motivates them to justify everything that they do. They become akin to animals that use the body of other animals to live. With all the terrible scenes and dead bodies that ᶜIsá encountered, he comes to understand the puzzling portion of this cruelty. It is the struggle for hegemony where the imagined ruler in the novel "seeks to stop the march of time in an attempt to suspend the inevitable, the end of his rule" (Colsen137). This realization comes to the mind of ᶜIsá, the

completely drugged citizen who discovers now that he lives within a lie. Vomiting as a bodily excess staining the space, of the nation as a whole, becomes a natural reaction for a trauma survivor and it is testament to his recognition of the filth and failure of the state. This painful description of what causes ᶜIsá to vomit is part of the post-colonial aesthetics that Jallūlī utilizes in his critique of the nation-state. It becomes a reminder for the reader of the denigration of human beings at the hand of the regimes. Joshua Esty argues that such a description has a "political vocation: it draws attention to the failures of development, to the unkept promises not only of colonial modernizing regimes but of postindependence economic policy" (Esty 32). The narrator does not even let us wonder for a moment about the lies and the abuse of power. He states from the outset that ᶜIsá is now hearing the voice of the corrupted regime that asks its people to stay silent so they can live without any state crackdown-everywhere. Describing the scene, the narrator says: "The voice was getting closer and closer to the place where ᶜIsá was laying. Then he started to hear it, the voice, promising people protection and safety if they prove their good intention (Jallūlī 55).

The connection that is made here is between dictatorship and the inability to speak about it. Unable to say what he thinks, "he withdraws from this idea" (Jallūlī 55). Instead, the narrator tells us that ᶜIsá turns to silence, and yet his creative impotency to speak is reflected by his disgust from being silent so he vomits over speaking. The act of vomiting thus becomes the privileged site of agency; it takes the place of political or intellectual activity. Here then is the citizen, ᶜIsá, under the dictatorship of Sufyān al-Dāwūdī: pathetic, hopeless, and no longer certain of his purpose. The transformation of ᶜIsá into a dog then becomes another form of agency for him in a space of imprisonment, in which the state monitors and controls him and prevents him from engaging in any act of resistance. Interestingly, no matter how much he tries to escape from the "abstract

space," he is always surrounded by the "space of power" in which "the bureaucratic and political authoritarianism immanent to a repressive space is everywhere" (Lefebvre 51).

The novel then continues to tell us about the story of ᶜIsá who is stuck between his two realities: the painful one created by the dictator who suppresses and controls all of ᶜIsá's movements, including the words that come out of his mouth, and the desire to speak and unveil the cruelty of dictatorship. Only in chapter twenty two, almost half way in the novel, does the narrator intervene for the first time with an editorial commentary in a kind of political doublespeak. The narrator appears as a character that has a real and dynamic role in ᶜIsá's deep inner life to engage with him in a dialogue where he says:

> You fool…protect yourself until death, or you will turn into a pool of blood and its redness will be mixed with that of your mother…wife… or daughter... Protect yourself… fuse your claws deeply inside their necks the way they stick their teeth inside your liver […] But if you do not intend to defend yourself, then let them through your corpse to the trash of the forgotten world, with waste, leftovers, and the inside of the dead animals. After all of that, the spokesperson of the worldly government will appear on the TV of "Ṣawti-l-ᶜarab" to say one word, we are sorry. The victims were in the wrong place at the wrong time (Jallūlī 110).

Many significant things happen here. At the structural level, there is a shift in the form of narration from third person to second person. In his book, *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction*, Brian Richardson talks about the use of multiple voices in the narration and the shift from one form to another. This shift brings the narrator closer to ᶜIsá to create a sense of trust between the two of them which, in return, would make the narrator's words more effective because it creates a sense of "greater degree of dialogism" (68). And in this novel then the shift is

necessary because it tells us that, and to use Richardson's own words again, "even where the narrator's speaking situation seems fixed, alternative voices often threaten to destabilize the situation" (63). Nothing seems to be static no matter how stable it appears. Also, in a project like this one where there is a struggle to challenge hegemony in this novel between people and dictators, then this shift becomes necessary because "it defines more sharply [the need to break away to make what seems to be stable] collapse more effectively" (Richardson 67).

To this end then, the constructed conversation in the passage above relays the ugliness of the dictators' rule in their nations as they establish a dominion over time. Furthermore, it presents the protagonist with two bitter ultimatums: either to challenge and stand against this unfair power or to accept the ultimate end like those who were killed and forgotten. This image of the dictator's character develops a sense of fear inside ᶜIsá and motivates him to accomplish the people's most desired wish which is to remove the ruler. However, this wish is dangerous; it is difficult for ᶜIsá even to consider it "because to even hint at it would be not only treasonous, but deadly" (Colsen 140). The narrator's consistent rejection of the wrong doings of the dictator and his regime, an attitude established from the beginning, is repeated throughout the novel, presenting a challenge to this absolute authority and a vision for ᶜIsá's nation. Although the narrator, as the master of narration, has the ultimate control over the course of the story, he chooses to utilize this power and transfer it to ᶜIsá, the citizen. The narrator, thus, gives him multiple possibilities and allows him to choose. In so doing, the narrator utilizes dialogue rather than foreclose possibilities in an effort to both destabilize the situation of a dictator who portrays himself as someone who is above the reach of anyone, and to demonstrate to ᶜIsá what is the meaning of a free will by creating a metaphoric buffer zone for him to say the unsaid. As a result of this interplay, we see the contestation over power articulated as a contestation over space between ᶜIsá and the dictator.

This scene also problematizes the sense of fear discussed earlier in this chapter that the dictators create for themselves in the hearts of their citizens. As Derby puts it, the dictator "did cultivate an extraordinary image of himself as a person capable of miracles and superhuman feats" (Derby, 86). This constructed image then, is one of the images that the writer utilizes to develop a potent critique of the mechanisms of the dictator's regime. It provides an additional example of the dictators' lack of understanding for space and their consistent attempts to control even in a spatial sense which speaks to the problematic interference in the personal life of the people. Their main objective in general is to maximize control, even if it is at the expense of permanently preventing freedom and violating the rights of many citizens. And, this is the image that the novel artistically confronts here to, not only to challenge the discourse of dictatorship, but also to create a discourse which stands in sharp contrast to the dictators' attempts to forcibly construct their nations in their own images. In other words, these dictators want their citizens to blindly obey them and trust their actions because they would always do what is the best for the country. This blind obedience when given to a regime that is already corrupted, suggests the control of dictators and their organizations occupies all the aspects of the nation's life, the political, the cultural and even the thoughts and actions of the people. From the last line in the passage above, it is clear that silence and 'living within a lie' have become strategies for survival for the whole nation. The rationale for this silence and seemingly complete submission is fear. It is this fear that the novel concerns itself with to not only challenge but to suggest new or renewed methods of contextualizing and historicizing to carry out an act of resistance against the dictator.

Moreover, this image reveals the regime's obsession with power. The very obsession with power which the dictator strives to justify by all means to kill and punish is hacked by the novel and the gazes of the people, represented by the protagonist, are all intertwined in a description that

leads the protagonist to challenge this power. The novel presents how the dictator's divine image is propagated and how the people receive this image. It subverts the history and the mechanism by which the power of dictatorships are made, hitherto assumed to be divine and hence unquestionable, wielding political power within a particular historical and fictional context. Through the novel, Jallūlī shows his concern with the ideological mobilization of power. Moreover, the novel also attempts to develop a sense of revolution and liberation.

The novel itself is remarkable within the context of dictatorship and fairly straightforward about it as a literary work. It concerns itself with "The Sea of the Virgin" republic and is exceptional in its telling about the people and their history to pave a clear sense of what they have experienced of abuses at the hand of the dictator and, by extension, of a nation victimized by its ruler. Later in the novel, Jallūlī addresses the question of the people's courage to challenge this power by showing that police repression is something that binds all the people of this fictional state. More explicitly than anywhere else in the novel, the narrator makes it clear that ʿIsá, the protagonist, and the victimized people of the republic have to oppose and confront the dictator:

> You have caused my heart to bleed…stop weeping…you might get lucky and then you will be included in the mercy of god…everything is possible. Do not surrender for your fear, the bullet will not any more affect you. And, at the end of the day, the well of life overcomes the well of death […] Thirty years of poverty; hunger and marginalization did not kill you. Resist and insist on having your life back…Do not surrender to the rules of the game…Do not tremble before this jungle scene…the light of your heart is stronger than the power of their claws and teeth… you will not die (Jallūlī 115).

In this effort to challenge the power of the dictators, the writer reveals the illusions upon which the dictatorship depends. They are capable of anything and just as the individual freedoms are

eliminated in favor of sustaining their control, the interests of the whole nation will then be replaced by their own interests. By using the same language dictators would use, violence, the scene stands as a method to urge the people to return the violence and to give voice to those who have been silenced. Jallūlī also continues throughout the text to exhume the protagonist, who like many other people, has faced a permanent silencing at the hands of the dictator. For Jallūlī, the attempts by the dictators to mask the violent realities need to be challenged; this lies at the heart of the project of bringing justice. What is interesting here is the reference that the novel is making to what might be considered as reasons for a wave of protest: lack of political democracy, freedom and justice. It is a reference to the suffering of leftist intellectuals, academics, journalists and Islamists and any member of the political opposition who have experienced the authoritarianism of the states, its violence and intimidation of citizens. The absence of citizens' rights is amplified by capitalism and elitism which caused the people to live in hunger for more than thirty years as indicated in the passage above.

Interestingly enough, these are the issues that have been the catalyst for extraordinary uprisings and led to the "Arab Awakening" and "Arab Spring" (Shafik 1). If we look back at any of the Arab dictators who have already fallen such as Mubarak, Bin Ali and Gaddhafi, whose own history and lies now are unveiled for us, then we can find parallels from which the novel is drawing. So much so, that violence, the police and dictatorship became intertwined in the post-independence state. The novel becomes one of the means that intellectuals in the Arab world have used in the last decade to force the masses to confront their reality and therefore wake up from beings victims to in order assess their failure and challenge the egotistic pursuits of dictators' aggrandizement. This point goes along with what the Arab critic, Shākir al-Nābulsī, refers to in his *Mabāhij al-ḥurriyyah* as the highest level of sacrifice and the noblest form of struggle when he argues that the

situation in the Arab world would be different only if intellectuals accept to sacrifice their lives for freedom (al-Nābulsī 70). The novel then strongly critiques dictatorship and at the same time it dutifully offers feasible alternatives which could lead to an optimistic future. This glimpse of hope is situated not only in ᶜIsá, whom the narrator is trying to liberate from his age-long fear, but in the readers. This is to say that by understanding the process of dictatorship, we realize its essence and we deny the dictator's absolute control.

This is what Jallūlī obviously utilizes to build his narrative; ᶜIsá, the protagonist and the savoir of his nation is constantly reminded, to face the violence of dictatorship as a way of breaking free of its dictatorial process. This break away process is manifested by foregrounding the ultimatums offered to ᶜIsá to either kill or be killed: "fuse [your] claws deeply inside their necks the way they stick their teeth inside [his] liver [or to] let them through [his] corpse to the trash of the forgotten world, with waste, leftovers, and the inside of the dead animals"[42] (Jallūlī 110). This persistent focus on ᶜIsá's only two choices, suggests that breaking free is the novel's intent and the rhetorical space created by the novel does actually bolsters this assertion by the momentum it creates for an action. To this end, Jallūlī, one can argue, empowers ᶜIsá as his protagonist (and the reader) to see that breaking free from dictatorial powers ultimately requires a world of actions where sacrifice becomes a necessity without which one's freedom cannot be attained. The narration continues with ᶜIsá suffering from a grave fear and feeling crushed and defeated even after all the empowerment offered to him by the created space and after his dialogue with the narrator who brings out all his inside thoughts. His spirit is forever in shackles and he seems to be

[42] This text was transliterated and translated earlier in this chapter and so I only used the translation here.

continuously struggling with how he can escape from this unjust system; he is in a state of ambivalence:

> He walks toward the police car, negotiating the state of surrendering over being killed…the officer turned down the sound coming from the radio broadcasting a song by John Lennon which begins by 'imagining the world with no power hierarchies, it would be easy to imagine if you try'…then, he gave him a Marlboro cigarette… and promptly asked him a question which he did not understand 'Hey man! Listen! Are you ready to help in turning the table over? (Jallūlī 146-147).

At this point in the narrative, the narrator is the one who is driving ᶜIsá. What is interesting in this passage is that even the officer who is, at least in ᶜIsá's mind, considered to be the one who defends the dictator and his regime, is willing to participate in relieving the nation from the undesirable dictator and in "turning the table over." The coming together of an officer and a citizen who is oppressed by the dictator and his regime provides a critique about this authoritarian regime because it undermines the claim by the dictator of complete control. It is at this critical state where ᶜIsá is lost that the narrator creates this imagined community where he, ᶜIsá, and the officer share the same ideas. Just as the lyrics of John Lennon's song in the above passage seduce both ᶜIsá and the officer, we, as readers, are also seduced by their own words. The text here transforms itself into a machine of reciprocal seduction—it seduces us and we also seduce it to make it our own. So the story of '*al-ḥākim al-mustabidd'*, the dictator, is not only the story of ᶜIsá and the officer, rather it is becomes our story. This act becomes a mirror for the readers to have a reflective moment in which they recognize their role in providing the dictators with a platform to exist, or to put it in other words, to admit their complex responsibility in the process of dictators' creation and empowerment. It is the people's silence which stems from fear that has given dictators the very

reason to exist. The addressee in the song when it says "imagine the world with no power hierarchies, it would be easy to imagine if you try" is not only ʿIsá, I would argue, it is the readers as well. The novel here is trying to implicate the readers with the crime of empowering dictators and to urge them to symbolically, at least, disempower dictators by reading the novel. By extension then we reach both the moment of epiphany and feeling of the revulsion for being, obliquely part of the dictatorial machine. By extension, then, the novel shifts from emphasizing the feeling of fear to creating the desire to change. And this is what Chambers refers to when he writes:

> Desires can be changed because they are mediated by power: being mediated, they are subject to the operations of appropriation and seduction—operations that are not exploitive or violent when their effects is maieutic, and when the deflection of desire results from a self-education, an awareness of the damage done, to ourselves and to others, by the desires that are being controlled by power (Chambers 232).

It must be us, readers, the people that the novel is seeking to change their desires because we are at the heart of any equation of social change where all the textual, extratextual, intratexual and even the paratextual narratives try to reach through their interplay. "The Sea of the Virgin" can be an allegory of any of the Arab countries and by the same token that Sufyān al-Dāwūdī, the imagined dictator, can also, be an allegory of any Arab president.

Again, in a scene similar to the previous one ʿIsá is listening to the new member of the imagined community, the officer, to challenge the supernatural power. To ʿIsá he says:

> This is the best time, and if you agree with me we can return to them some of what they have been punishing us with for thousands years now. Tell me, honestly. Are not you mad

> at them? Was not the first thing you have seen in this life is the scene of your parents who have been struggling from hunger and poverty? (Jallūlī 147)

The dictator's campaign to rule the nation by establishing dominion over time is countered by the narrative form of the novel, and its created characters and space in particular. The novel's form sets the reader up from the outset to view the dictator with an expectation of his future weakness and ambivalence, which is a sign of the collapse of his power. This sign of his weakness contradicts his supposed temporal hegemony. The novel form is capable of turning and reversing the order of things in this fictional space because it empowers ᶜIsá and the officer who have already "Sayṭarah tamāman ᶜalá kul makhabiʾ al-aṣliḥah al-nawawīyah" [completely controlled all the secrets of the nuclear weapons] (Jallūlī 182). The use of the phrase "the secrets of the nuclear weapons" in the above quote is metaphoric and it refers to the means of controlling that the dictator has used to maintain his power which is no longer in his hand. Keeping their people in need all the time is one of the stategies that the dictators use in order to solidify their power over time. They must control their people through basic necessities such as food and work. They try to do so by many means among them is controlling the resources of the country so they, the dictators, become the center of everything. But these weapons are no longer under the dictator's control; rather they are now at the disposal of ᶜIsá and the officer.

It is at this point in the novel that the dictator "decided to undertake one last resort to rescue the remains of his collapsing power and some of his glory that remained" (Jallūlī 183). Here, at the site of the power exchange, the dictator's absolute control of his nation is squashed by the emerging power of ᶜIsá and the officer. He is not the feared Lord any more, as his names—al-Aᶜzam, al-Raʾīs al-Samāwī [the godly president]--implies, and his weakness and effort to remedy the situation signal the end of the efficacy of his demonic system. In the final analysis, the story

the novel creates and disseminates about his collapsing power is disempowering. The novel is dictatorial in the sense that it marks the people's discursive power over the dictator. Here it demonstrates its capacity to give individuals and communities a venue to comment on what impacts their lives. Working in a more symbolic register, it also symbolizes the dictator's character, motivations, and fears. The fictional free space created by the novel creates a momentum towards us as a reader to say that such a reading stems and rests with us as readers.

The repetition of dialogues, which the narrator utilizes to give an account of the dictator's regime "[present] a challenge to the Ruler's authority and vision for the nation" (Colsen 140). From the beginning of the novel, the narrator tries to elicit a sense of resistance inside the protagonist. Only towards the end of the novel does the narrator succeed in convincing ᶜIsá to accept the challenge when he says:

> And then, ᶜIsá stood at the intersection. After a long history of hesitation, he decided to resist and enter the war instead of being like a worm that has been smashed by the walkers…He calmly walked toward the officer…and said 'let us go your excellency, we have being waiting for so long to be decisive (Jallūlī 174).

In this long hesitation, the narrator creates a space for multiple stories and accounts about the dictator. Colson argues that "Rather than utilize[ing] this power against the dictator, the narrator elects to allow multiple voices to speak" (145). ᶜIsá has already heard about the story of the old man who has been killed and all these people who have been suffering under the oppressing regime. This technique of multiple voices/narratives, Colsen argues, "create[s] a multivalent reality" which allows the narrator to comment on and counter the figure of the dictator by creating this egalitarian voice (145). This voice has led to a collective *you* at the end of the novel when the people defeated the dictator and he sent someone to negotiate with them the mediator said "the

president is ready to accept *your* suggestions. Do *you*[43] have any suggestions?"(Jallūlī 185). This "*you"* is the sense of futurity and collectivity in the novel. It refers not to ᶜIsá alone, nor to the officer but to the whole community of "The Sea of the Virgin" and all the Arab citizens. In his analysis of the form of narrative in Ngūgī Wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow*, Colson argues that "it implies a future that includes those who were present and those who were not, and perhaps indicating those who were children or yet to be born at the time of the novel's event" (149). Only after victory is achieved by ᶜIsá and the officer, who represent the citizens of the whole imagined nation, does the dictator start to negotiate with his citizens. This is why the novel and the novelist are the opponents of the dictator. They both create in the citizens a sense of "willingness to resist exercising hegemony" (Colsen 151) and dismantle its absolutism. They endorse the existence of an imagined democratic society that all the people have been longing to have.

Al-Khawf, one can argue, is innovative not only in its pointed satirization of the dictatorial regime in "The Sea of the Virgin" but also in how it represents a significant development in the genre of the dictator novel. This is to say that the ultimate success that might lead to change in the nation of "The Sea of the Virgin" for *al-Khawf*, and its alike from the Arabic novels would be actions rather than thoughts. For despite its fragmentation and fantastic fictional nature, *al-Khawf* is a coherent story that has a clear destination: as the novel comes to an end so does the power of the dictator. This is clear when the narrator describes the dictator and his attempts to maintain his power by utilizing all means to control thus exercising his authority over time to rule eternally:

[43] Emphasis is mine.

> He thought while he was racing with time that runs against his well now, and so he has choosen ᶜAbd al-Qahhār,[44]his minster of communication and his reliable person who is also a childhood friend of ᶜIsá … and he sent him to his old friend to perform the important negotiation upon which everything is contingent on (Jallūlī 183).

The work of the affects in *al-Khawf,* which concerns itself from the beginning with expressing the anger and frustration of ᶜIsá, the embodiment of the whole nation, serves as a powerful commentary on the revolts that took, and in fact are still taking place, in the Arab world. The above quote is the inauguration of the whole "writing and demonstrating" project which as Tarek El-Ariss, argues, "work in tandem to stage the production of aesthetic and political change" as well (El-Ariss 146). And to use and build on El-Ariss' argument of fictional texts functioning as hackers[45] and a "mode of subversion that empowers a new generation," one can argue that the novel actually succeeded in reaching its goal of shaking the foundation of dictators and exposing their lies even if it is not able to overcome them (El-Ariss 146). As big as it is of a claim, the success of the novel's project lies in the implication of an optimistic future it creates by situating hope in us as readers and in our ability to, by understanding rules and the manipulations dictator

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[44] It is important to note here that the name of the minister who has been chosen by the dictator to do the negotiation with ᶜĪsa and his friend is ᶜAbd al-Qahhār (the slave of the crusher). Al-Qahhār is one of the names of Allāh in Arabic. It is use here is not random however, rather it is a well thought of one that functions as a mode of subversion which aims at exposing the moribund dictator who is perceived as God in his nation and among even his government's officials. For more about this, see Ignacio López-Calvo *God and Trujillo: Literal and Cultural Representations of the Dominican Dictator*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005.

[45] The act of hacking here aims at gaining access illegally. The novel not only challenges the political dictatorship but it actually tries to hack the canon of Arabic novel and its thought-to-be static mode to create a room for new aesthetics in Arabic novel "departing from the project of modernity associated with Mahfouz, Haqqi, and others" as El-Ariss notes. For more about this see Tarek El-Ariss. *Trails of Arab Modernity: Literary Affects and the New Political*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2013.

use, deny their dictatorship. The novel in this sense is not individualized history or story of ᶜIsá's life, rather it is a narrative space where a compelling critique of dictatorship is delivered not only from the novel's content, but also from its form, a form that privileges mobility and rally for a political change. This new form, El-Ariss writes: "[M]oves us from the literary staging of the experience of modernity to *interactive writing*, which calls on the reader to *experience and react* to the text itself (147)[46]. The form of narrative and its temporality are intricately linked in such a way that mirrors the action which the novel concerns itself with through the readers' attitudes toward the dictator in the novel. The image of a weak, "ungodly" dictator portrayed in the above quote does indeed counteract his attempts to permanently consolidate his power over a stagnated nation and does expose the dictator's image as a false god. As such, *al-Khawf,* participates, theoretically at least, in the deconstruction of the myth of dictators with the goal of disturbing, interrupting and eventually hindering the dictators' chronic state of tyrannical rule.

To conclude, both, *Al-Aᶜẓam* and *al-Khawf,* unmasked the reality of North African dictators whose myths make them appear as freedom fighters while their actions reveal their tyranny. The two novels foreground the sources of dictators' empowerment, snatch them away and turn them against dictators via the threads of narratives.

[46] Emphasis is mine.

CHAPTER THREE

Majnūn Performing Autopsy: Exposing the Ugliness of *Ṭā'ir al-Kharāb*

> Love runs the gamut of contradictory feelings all at once—joy, sorrow, dedication, pain resentment, anger rebellion, revenge, death—which always tend to spin out of control, to escape the controlling grip of sanity, or reason, and to relish in chaos. Love is madness, and to love a nation-state is to go mad (Ouyang 79)

The creation of national, postcolonial Arab states led by Arab nationalists during the fifties and the sixties left a number of legacies. The most longstanding of these legacies was the perplexity and challenge of dictatorships that citizens in the Arab world faced as a result of the discourse and policies which strips people off their rights under the name of nationalism—one of the numerous tactics that authoritarians use to ensure the survival of their regimes. Yemen has been and continues to be one of the most poignant and wretched examples of the damage caused by dictators and their dictatorships. The country, like many of the Arab countries, endured the trauma of dictatorship for more than thirty years under Ali Abdullah Saleh—a man who employed many tactics to ensure his survival among of which is the purposeful production of chaos. This dictatorship left a scar on the people and the landscape that has never left the country. The work of novelists is among the most interesting and important voices on the topic of dictatorship and its impact on the formation of Yemeni history.

Unlike their counterparts in novels coming from the centers of culture in the Arab world—Cairo and Beirut— which many Arab scholars argue made its first appearance in the first half of the 20th century (Allen 23), the novel, or the "travel[ling] genre" in Mary Layoun's words, reached the shores of peripheral places in the Arab world such as Yemen later on. This is not to deny the contribution of acknowledged and celebrated Yemeni novelists such as Zaid Muti Dammāj, Hussein Salim Basidīq, Mohamed Ahmad Abd al-Wāli, Mohamed Sagīrī and others but rather to say that, at least, until the late 70s Yemeni novel was still at its infancy struggling to gain a foothold

(Ibrāhīm 24). As nascent as it is, the Yemini novel is very rich in narratives about the Yemeni's exile, emigration, and the reconstruction of Yemini rural society. The Yemeni novelist sometimes goes to great lengths to unfold and reveal the ugliness of reality and those who control it for the sake of exposing and hacking the power of authority. All of this, Tarek El-Ariss argues, is performed "[t]hrough modes of revealing (kashf) and hacking (*ikhtirāq, tansīf*)" (El-Ariss 3). To this, I would also add performing autopsy (*tashrīḥ*). These three actions require some act of knowledge on the part of the performer. And if we are to play with the order of these three, we can see them as actions that can be performed by a doctor. But then, is the novelist a doctor? 'Why not?' the answer could be. The novelist might be a doctor whose tools are narratives and words rather than medical equipment. The novelist as a doctor brings with him a body—in this case a female body, a survivor—which wanders, runs away, shakes, faints and panics before it collapses in France to be brought to the laboratory for autopsy.

Given Richard Shusterman's main argument about the body being "the organizing core of experience," it is not surprising then to see how it is used in narratives sometimes as the locus because, as Shusterman tells us, "[the body] expresses the ambiguity of human being, as both subjective sensibility that experiences the world and as an object perceived in that world" (3). What this tells us is that the reconstruction of dictators and their regimes stays unavoidably incomplete and marred by holes that must be filled by a tangible informed conjecture which takes the body as its departure point to create an overarching story and/or narrative. Through the created story that constructs/deconstructs the history of the dictator which utilizes unveiling (kashf), hacking (*ikhtirāq, tansīf*) and performing autopsy (*tashrīḥ*), the product of excavating endeavor becomes necessarily an approximation of what happened. The depiction of the body as a site of rupture is not a new motive in Arabic novel. In his article "A Room of One's Own: The Modern

Arabic Heroine between Career and Domesticity,"[47] William Granara writes: "The female protagonist has often been constructed or manipulated as allegory of the nation in modern Arabic literature" (3). This chapter offers a close reading of how *Ṭā'ir al- Kharāb* by Ḥabīb ᶜAbd al-Rabb Sarūrī had to struggle with new socio-political practices which create aesthetics and thus require a new or rather different interpretative modes to unveil the ugliness of dictatorship in Yemen. The aim of this chapter, therefore, is to show how *Ṭā'ir al- Kharāb* uses narrative to deconstruct and dismantle the political oppressive regime in Yemen. The novel problematizes the traumatic impact of the dictatorship on the female body, and by a means of allegory on the body of the nation, as exemplified by the female character, the protagonist, Ilhām. The juxtaposition of both the story of the raped female body and the rape of the nation by the dictator, who is referred to throughout the novel as Ṭā'ir al-Kharāb (the bird of destruction) as well as *shaykh al-qabīlah* (the tribal sheikh), will be read as an anguished cry for normalcy sought by not only women in Yemen but the entire nation. Exploring the female body in sexual encounters interspersed throughout the novel echo, for the sake of unveiling and violently exposing, the discourse of Arab dictatorships in relation to the body which has been transformed from a source of lust and desire into a marker of a nation. In *Ṭā'ir al-Kharāb* there is an obvious gendered reproduction of the nation. My goal in this chapter is to analyze the ways in which the novel represents the dictator's power. In so doing, I would argue, that the novel provides a space to shift the paradigms of the politically charged Arabic novel "from questions of representations and cultural exchange to an engagement with genealogy of

[47] This chapter appears in D'Afflitto, I. C., El-Enany, E., Boustani, S., & Granara, W. (2014). Desire, Pleasure and the Taboo: New Voices and Freedom of Expression in Contemporary Arabic Literature. *RIVISTA DEGLI STUDI ORIENTALI, 87* (Supplemento 1), 3-284.

symptoms and affects [… represented by] disorientation, anxiety attacks, and physical collapse" (El-Ariss 2).

I am, of course, aware of how controversial this reading is given the polemic exchange between Fredric Jameson and Aijaz Ahmad over the former's formulation of what he terms "national allegory" as a theory through which we can read 'all' third world literature (Jamson 1). In an attempt to integrate what he refers to as "third-world" literature into world literary canons Jameson ran the risk of essentializing when he argued that all postcolonial texts are, in one way or another, "national allegories" (Jamson 69, 74). I agree with Ahmed's concerns in regards to the problematic use of words such as "all", "necessarily", and "primarily" by Jamson to plea for a change in the syllabus of teaching and reading third world literature in western venues simply because the use of words like these in any discourse is an essentializing process in and by itself. Even the most sympathetic scholar of a forging culture runs the risk of othering when he/she walks on that path. Or to put it in Ahmed's own words, "[i]t is not a good feeling" as it makes you feel that you are the "civilizational other" (Ahmed 4). However, my reading of this specific text through the lenses of national allegory, I would argue, enables us to see how the agony of dictatorship reinforces the trauma on the besieged female body and by means of allegory the modern nation state of Yemen which consequently becomes the site of struggle for its freedom. The experience of dictatorial power in the Arab world bears uncannily on the literature produced and the relationship between allegory and the role of the intellectual becomes as permeable as this experience. In this discourse, the voice of narrative becomes a trope of empowerment in which the narrator transgresses, dismantles, violates and speaks of the violation committed against the body of his beloved, and in the case of *Ṭā'ir al- Kharāb,* Ilhām, which he metaphorically uses to draw an ugly picture of the rapist, the dictator. It is the linking of the corporeal violence to that of the

linguistic, sociopolitical, and critical discursive that this chapter concerns itself with only to confront the former as the contested site of resistance and de-silencing. To this end, the novelist becomes an archeologist whose tool for the approximation of the history that reflexes the experience of dictatorial regimes requires some digging below the surface with the literal and metaphoric sense of the word 'digging.' What I am suggesting here is the interplay of history and archeology in the same sense that Foucault articulated in his book, *The Archeology of Knowledge*. In this text, he argues that schemes of thought and knowledge, which he terms as "epistemes" or "discursive formations" are governed by rules that transgress to what is beyond grammar and logic (Foucault 191, 160). These rules, he argues, operate in the consciousness of individual subjects and define a system of conceptual possibilities that determines the boundaries of thought in a given realm and era. What is most interesting and relevant to my project in this book is the distinction which Foucault draws between history and archeology when he writes:

> History in its traditional form, undertook to 'memorize' the monuments of the past, transform them into documents, and lend speech to those traces which, in themselves, are often not verbal, or which say in silence something other than what they actually say; in our time, is that which transforms documents into monuments (7).

In this statement, Foucault points out that history seeks to translate and, more often than not, document an existing memory of the past. Archeology, on the other end, tries to reveal, in the sense of unveiling "the play of analogies and differences as they appear at the level of rules of formation" (160). And, thus, it is this play of analogies that the narrative process—in its totality: content, words, characterizations, signifiers and their signified—utilizes to form a textual artifact which embodies an inherent tension. The inherited tension stems from the transgression of narrative from merely documenting a memory to unveiling, hacking and ultimately enabling the

process of representation by performing the autopsy to shake and undermine the "level of rules of [history] formation" referred to in the above quote. All these issues are evident in Ḥabīb ᶜAbd al-Rabb Sarūrī's novel, *Ṭā'ir al-Kharāb.* In the pages to come, I demonstrate how Sarūrī represents and portrays the dictator of Yemen when read from within a Yemeni context. Sarūrī's representation of gender may be looked at as an index of his position on dictatorship, its nature, the relationship of the individual to state and society in it, and the place of authoritarianism within the decaying body of Ilhām which he uses as an allegory to the body of the nation. The writer, then, is a 'political intellectual' whose imagination is impacted by the fear imposed on them by the authoritarian power and thus must resort to allegory which neutralizes the political criticism inscribed in their fiction and therefore they keep at both their lives and the lives of their texts. Thus, the transformation of documents and of the past is treated as a source of knowledge where the texts are able to speak, even if it is allegoric, to the present.

To engage in a discussion of Sarūrī's text specifically, and of the oppressed subject in general, one must first understand the historical background of the political crisis in Yemen. Although Yemen has a long standing history, for the sake of clarity, this chapter will focus on the unified Yemen, if we are allowed to call it so.[48] Studies on the Yemeni political system during Ali Abdullah Saleh rule, argue that the political system was a pluralized authoritarianism where the Yemeni regime consciously framed itself as democratic but muzzled any effort or initiative which might have led to facilitating a democratic consolidation. Sarah Philips, a prominent analyst and a researcher on political reform in Yemen argues that: "There has been a marked increase in the

[48] Throughout history, Yemen has never been unified under common rule but a formal one has been imagined in 1990 with the two Yemens (North and South) becoming one. The population of the North is almost five times larger than the South, so Sanᶜā' became the capital and Ali Abdullah Saleh served as the president with Salim al-Beidh as his vice president.

level of popular political activity, but the country's power structures have proven resilient to political reform" (3). This means that the authoritarian rule in Yemen is actually permeated by a wide variety of practices which combine the authoritarian concentrations of power with the deliberative influences to produce what political scientists refer to as "Authoritarian Deliberation."[49] According to Habermas, deliberation is a mode of communication which embodies persuasion-based influence. From the early time of the unification, Saleh has created a system that shows his intention to democratize the country but he fostered it in such a way to ensure that the swing vote on crucial issues and affairs of Yemen are always under his control.

This is made clear, Stephan Day argues, when Saleh made sure that: "The executive authority of government was a five-person body comprising three northerners and two southerners" (4). Over the last two decades, the authoritarian regime in Yemen has increasingly experimented with controlled forms of political participation to maintain its power while deceiving the public by creating a variety of hybrid regimes permeated with a wide variety of participatory practices. Saleh has done so through mixing his authoritarian rule with political devices including elections, consultative forums, political parties that we would normally associate with democracy. One of the examples that illustrate how manipulative this regime was, is the country's first national elections of 1993 and its results. Day, writes "Saleh's General People's Congress (GPC) gained 40 percent of the seats in parliament but received only 28 percent of the vote. Islāh a northern Islamist party whose name means 'reform,' was the direct descendant of an Islamic front Saleh created in the 1970s to prevent the spread of southern Marxist influence; it gained 21 percent of

[49] For more about this, see Habermas, Jürgen. "Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy", translated by William Rehg. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press (originally published in German in 1992).

the seats. The YSP[50] placed third, with 18 percent of the seats and 18 percent of the votes, the remaining seats were won by independent candidates and small parties" (5). What this means is that although Yemen remained an authoritarian country led by Saleh, its government became permeated by participatory practices with many innovations such as: an increasing use of Peoples' Congresses to discuss policy, and acceptance of some kinds of autonomous civil society organizations, and initiatives to decentralize the government. Put in Saleh's own words, the regime sustains its existence by "dancing on the head of snakes", as he liked to tell journalists who write about Yemen.[51] While Saleh managed to stay in power for more than thirty years, he and his regime have failed to show any apparent interest in regime-level democratization. It is, rather, a regime that benefited from tribalism and its interplay with military officers and businessmen; yet it "failed to forge a national bond between northerners and southerners" (Day 7). This explains the sense of ambiguous domination that Saleh's regime had for so long of a time in Yemen and perhaps in most of the Arab countries under the rule of dictatorships. And here I am reminded of Lisa Wadeen's *Ambiguities of Domination* in which she argues that the Syrian regime of Assad operates by compliances rather than legitimacy. This claim, one can argue, points to the fact that these dictators know that they are authoritarians and thus they self-consciously try to invest in rhetoric, symbols, and strategies to make themselves look otherwise. (Wadeen 732).

One of the characteristics of the regime in Yemen during Saleh's era is its ability to disguise itself sometimes as a shadow government and by this I mean its ability to function as a combination of both a tribal and a patronage system. In her article about Yemen, "The Rules of the Game: Unpacking Patronage Politics in Yemen," April Longley Alley unveils the dynamics of autocracy

[50] YSP stands for the Yemeni Socialist Party.
[51] Victoria Clark. Yemen: Dancing on the Heads of Snakes. Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2010.

used by Saleh among the elites in his country to maintain control over them. She suggests that the rule of the game depended on four well-used and managed processes of bargaining and decision-making starting from "inclusion, exclusion, rewards, and punishments" (385). What this tells us about Yemen then is that it is not just a failing state rather it is a state which has a double sense of itself—on one hand, and on paper, it "has an elected parliament and president, a multi-party system, an independent judiciary, and the framework of a democratically elected local government. In reality, however, these institutions do not produce or transfer political power. Instead, power and wealth are produced and transmitted through a […] patterned web of tribally-and regionally-based patronage relationships" (386). In this context, citizens have no option but acceptance of the political structure because the other options are exclusion and death. If you comply with the rule of the game and do not push for any change in the status quo, however, you will be included and rewarded. As random as they appear to be, the rules of the game of patronage are certainly organized and carried out in such a way that ensures the satisfaction of the recipients and guarantees their willingness to reciprocate. Elites for instance, Alley argues, are placed into patronage networks that take into consideration "elite identity, grassroots strength, proven loyalty, and tribal, family, and regional affiliation" (399). Saleh, like any Arab dictator played skillfully with these policies and strategies that are aimed at effacing any trace of "crossing red lines," in Alley's own word (400). This strategy helped him, like it did other dictators, to paint a specific picture for their citizens and themselves that would justify their mission. Thus, crafting events and preambles that fit their own objectives became a necessity. In other words, to achieve their objective, dictators first had to study their citizens and find a strategy that could be utilized in convincing people to accept, accommodate and to force them, if need be, to stop short of crossing

red line. The accounts that emerged out of this desire took on a theatrical quality which has embezzled writers and intellectuals.

Ḥabīb ᶜAbd al-Rabb Sarūrī is a Yemeni computer science professor and writer who lives and teaches in France. He was born in Aden in 1956. Upon finishing college, he moved to France where he pursued his graduate studies obtaining a Master's degree from the University of Paris in 1983 and a PhD from the University of Rouen in 1987. He has been a Professor of Computer Science at the National Institute of Applied Sciences in Rouen, France, since 1992. He has published literary works in both Arabic and French. As a writer, he has written several novels in both Arabic and French. He also writes short stories and has a collection of short stories entitled *Hamasāt ḥarrá min mamlakat al-Mawtá* (2000). Among his novels are: *al-Malikah al-Maghdūrah* (2002), *ᶜAraq al-Ālihah* (2008), *Damlān* (2009), *Ṭā'ir al-Kharāb* (2011), *Taqrīr al-Hudhud* (2012), and *Arwā* (2013).

The focus of this chapter is *Ṭā'ir al-Kharāb*, a graphic and poetic novel which emanates from the terrifying and terrified experience of a violated female body. The scars of the social and physical suffering of the violated body which explode after a long period of silence are as large as that of the nation itself. The novel presents a fictionalized and imaginative reality that explores both the physical violation and the developing subjectivity of a Yemeni woman whose story reconstructs and parallels the experience of a silenced and abused nation. For, after all, what nations are but narrations that we read, map and construct through "textual strategies metaphoric displacements, subtexts and figurative stratagems" Homi Bhaba tells us (14)[52]. For Benedict Anderson, however, the nation is an "imagined community" constructed as random as it is by

[52] The reference here is to *Nation and Narration*.

people who "will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). The analysis of the novel will demonstrate how stories told about a single woman in a nation grant it, the nation, a sense of being through the voice of the once-silenced victim and their lived experience. Is not history making after all a transformation/s of lived experiences into narratives?

The novel is a heart breaking love story between an immigrant Yemeni professor, Nashwān, who works and resides in France and a Yemeni student, Ilhām, whom he met in a conference in France. The love relationship is told in a way that unveils and chronicles the cruel life that they have experienced in Yemen which has forced both of them to leave. After they meet in France, Nashwān and Ilhām get married but he has always felt that there was something missing in the relationship because Ilhām was never been able to express herself even in the most intimate times. She loves him, but feels that she cannot offer him anything. This is why, at the end, she disappears from his life leaving him a letter telling him what she has never been able to verbalize, that she was raped by a man whom here father brought and watched him do it just to prove to his people that his daughter is virgin and he is dignified. After her departure, Nashwān sells his house in France and goes to find her in Yemen but he never manages to. While in Yemen, he meets Ilhām's twin, Naʿīm who tells him the story of her and her sister. The reading of all of this will be within the framework of symbolized gendered violence.

In her book *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary,* in which Veena Das examines some cases of extreme violence of the Partition of India in 1947 and the massacre of Sikhs in 1984 after the assassination of then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, she critically studies violence and how it affects everyday life. Unlike much anthropological inquiries, her major concern was to trace how violence has entered the recesses of normality to be viewed as normal

instead of being viewed as an interruption of life to which we simply bear witness. It is this project—that "some realities need to be fictionalized before they can be apprehended" (Das 39)—that the novel under scrutiny is engaging. The theme of the female body as an allegory for the rupture of the body of the nation or "body politics" as critics refer to it is not new in Arabic literature (Faulkner 3). Rather, many writers such as Naguib Mahfouz, Mohamed Hussein Haykal, Nawal El Saadawi, Hanan al-Shaykh, Liana Badr, Shar Khalifa, Fawaz Turki, Mahmud Darwish, Ghasan Kanafani among others have explored the themes of exile, psychological trauma, physical displacement, nostalgia through the imagery of the female body. In the regards to what critics have been writing about when it comes to this theme, the focus has always been on the reading of these novels against an external oppressor, colonizer, or against the patriarchal hegemony of the society ascribing its origin to the feminist movement as the norm in Western literary tradition. My reading of this novel is driven by and focused on the issue of rape on the female body. This rape, however, differs from that of France of Algerian female body and by a means of metaphor the body of the nation-state as represented in the writing of Assia Dejbar and other writers or that of the imagery of a male's fractured and castrated body which stands for raped and colonized Palestinian state in Kanafani. It is a rape of a trusted figure in the family, a father, of his own daughters, the twins: Ilhām and Naʿīm.

The opening of the novel is an epigraph by Gustave Tibon which says: "Who are you, then, my beloved? The mirror that reflects me or the destruction which I get lost in the middle of" (Sarūrī 13). This opening presents both the time and space of the novel— through the relationship between the, so far, nameless protagonist referred to as the beloved one (you) and a nameless lover on the first person (I and me). This beginning alludes to the love story that is to be told in which the nameless protagonist becomes known to us in the first paragraph, Ilhām. The description of the

space in the first paragraph in the novel is very poetic and suggests a momentary relief for Ilhām to inspire her to talk, to reveal:

> Ilhām is swimming beside me elegantly and professionally! Nobody is around us, in this spring, warm morning, except sea gull's swarms and colorful butterflies… A chain of lakes and sea basins, for evaporating water, is aligned adjacent to the ocean. They look like glass, azure chess squares. Hundreds of pelicans and flamingos are laughing, pushing and jamming exultantly, there… The light has pearly shining color. Pine trees, palms, berries, cherries, grape fields cover the wide open land (Sarūrī 13)

Ilhām is now free of all the restrictions that were once put on her and this is signaled through the picturesque scene that the narrator paints in this quotation where the "flamingos are laughing, pushing and jamming exultantly." This is a scene where they both are supposed to reveal their love to one another. In the second paragraph in the novel, the narrator provides more details about the geography and the landscape of this place when he says: "[it is an] aristocratic villa on a far steep, on the French Atlantic's beaches. I rented it for this eternal day, after hard, long and carful searching. This villa is the only one that fulfills the small and holy details I aspire to!"(13). What is significant about this place that the narrator has chosen to unite with his beloved is that it is in an exile from the homeland; a place that he has found "after hard and long careful searching." This place, their effort to experience a sense of home in exile, is very telling of the struggle of both Ilhām and the narrator in their own nation, Yemen, that they have to find their own sanity somewhere else.

The action of swimming, where the body is completely free to do any move to guard the soul of the swimmer, in juxtaposition with the natural beauty of the space itself allude to something Ilhām craves for: peace and tranquility. The absence of other human beings is a precondition for

her to be able to talk, "Nobody is around us," the narrator reassures her. This precondition is very significant here as it captures, both, the sense of estrangement and alienation that the protagonist experiences. The sense of estrangement, I would argue, stems from the change in the physical place in the journey of the body that protagonist who is attempting to escape. Alienation, however, becomes one of the primary ways to articulate the physical change. The vivid description of the beauty of the place, when juxtaposed with the sense of estrangement and alienation, becomes necessary then to illustrate the protagonist's immense desire for a safe place to momentarily forget about the trauma and seek solace in the physical beauty of the place around her. And again, if we are to think back to the analogy of the novelist as a performer of autopsy and the protagonist as the body on which the autopsy would be performed, then we can imagine how important it becomes for the former to create a peaceful place for the latter so the autopsy is not interrupted. The vivid description of the striking beauty of the new place here does not only bring peace and tranquility but it also interestingly foreshadows the horrors of the events, to be told later, about home.

After this detailed description of the place where the telling of the love story is taking place, the narrator moves forward in time when he says: "This spring, quiet day: 22nd of May, 1990, was a secondary coincidence, very minor, that does not equal anything compared to the beach's sand that we will lay on soon"(Sarūrī 14). This specific date is very significant to the time of the story because, as it is footnoted by the author himself in the novel, it is the day of the unification of the two Yemens: North and South. And this is the main plot of the story of their love which does not seem to be able to survive the present and the unfolding of the past of Ilhām. This past, as we shall see in this chapter connects the suffering of the female body to that of the whole nation in a way that leaves us wondering how could such past ruins impact the present and end the love relationship

between Ilhām and the narrator. The whole story then plays with the connection of the personal to the public space in which the suffering of Ilhām mirrors that of a nation suffering from the disappointments of the failed state and the transformation that have beset Yemen since Saleh's coming to power. Needless to speak of the restrictions imposed on them in their own nation, they take shelter in exile. This exile, one can argue, is not voluntary one, rather it is involuntary.[53] The comfort given to Ilhām from the beauty of the new space is momentary because it is interrupted by the recollection of her hostile past in Yemen. The image of a horrifying home becomes the reoccurring theme that seems to haunt Ilhām throughout the novel and it is against the troubles of this past that the protagonist seems to struggle.

In one occasion, for instance, the narrator tells us about his encounter with Ilhām and how she came to know everything about his past—his life in France, his education and even his childhood in Yemen. He, however, failed to gather any information about Ilhām simply because she intentionally avoids speaking about her life in Yemen. It is as if she is trying to forget this life by imagining that it has never existed. The narrator relays how Ilhām would listen to him with vivid joy as he told his story but she remain silent about her own story:

> She would prompt me to speak excessively about my childhood in Yemen too, as though seeking an alternative childhood to her own. She took great pleasure in this. Perhaps she

[53] The use of the words "voluntary" and "involuntary" exile was first by Bettina L Knapp in which she argues that the first is the case of someone who leaves to escape persecution or evade punishment or even to seek a new existence for oneself. The second, however, is when someone is forced to leave ones homeland by "authoritative decree". Although, I do not agree with her concept of voluntary as I see them both falling within the category of involuntary knowing that there is a force that drives someone to leave. So my usage of voluntary and involuntary here is a bet different. Voluntary for me is a case of someone who leaves for the betterment of a position, economic or educational system. The involuntary for me, at least in this context refers to either one of Bettina's categories.

> was looking for something or other, allowing me to immerse myself like that in recounting all the details of domestic life and street life in Aden, childhood adventures and pranks, all the day-to-day affairs of my poor city… She insisted I tell her day by day, hour by hour. I elaborated on every single friend, and laid out every frivolous story and occurrence in the greatest detail. Yet, she would content herself with being oddly selective about the minor events she related from her life in Yemen, speaking at times about her tastes in Yemeni cuisine, describing certain villages, veering off in recalling a certain place or giving a protracted description of female friends she held dear. Yet she was careful not to delve into details concerning major crossroads she had met with in life; neither did she talk about her home, her early childhood or her relationship with her parents, especially her father, of whom I soon realized she was immensely frightened, and whom she refrained from mentioning by name or alluding to in whichever way. It was as if she was struggling to forget her childhood completely. If I would ask her to recall some incident from her early childhood, the answer would always be: 'I don't remember anything from those years! (Sarūrī 26).

The desolation of Ilhām's life in Yemen which is alluded to by her avoidance to talk about it triggers her reminiscences of the past. It is like after becoming at ease, she just wants to be overlooked. She does not want to talk; rather, she wishes to remain silent. Talking for her does not offer solace; speaking about the trauma for Ilhām, conjures up the pain of the past, thus producing more pain. In the above scene, there is a reference to the figure of the dictator, the father. This reference establishes the temporal and dehumanized character of this one who occupies this seat of power. Her fear from the figure of her father, the head of the power hierarchy indicates that his power is demonical as it possesses not only her body but her soul, which also seem to be haunted

by this image. In so doing, the novel allows the reader to capture the subjectivities of the female body, and the body of the nation—its struggle, its trauma, its loneliness and the new challenges it is facing. We are introduced to a body that is not only collapsing but rather traumatized and simultaneously haunted by the history and the geography of the place left behind. And here, I am reminded of all of the Arab dictators who are fully aware of their abuse of power. They do such not only by exploiting and degrading their victims; rather, they make them even more afraid and ashamed to tell others about their wrong doings. The dichotomy between fear and silence that the novel relates here is the thematic basis for the sense of discomfort of Ilhām. It also portrays a sense of satirization of the abuse of power which is superficially represented by her father.

The narrator is *Majnūn* (a word meaning crazy in Arabic)[54] for attempting to remove the cover from all of that. He is a narrator who portrays, as Tarek El-Aris argues, that his role is of both "an act of sabotage […] and of play and negotiation" (543). In the context of this novel, the narrator is very aware of his role as the destroyer of everything that is assumed to be settled. He is the one who does not take "no" for an answer. In one occasion where he tells us about his childhood friend, Shihāb, who taught him to question everything, the narrator says:

> I am indebted to my friend Shihāb for instilling in me the love of birds. Perhaps from all that observation of bird rituals and scrutinizing of every possible condition of their rest and movement I became like a bird myself and grew invisible wings! I turned into a bird in a man's body! But, first and foremost, I owe this friend one critical moment in my life, which

[54] The concept of *junūn* in Arabic Literature is one of the stages of love. The stages are seven and these are: *ḥubb* (attraction), *un*s (infatuation), *ᶜishq* (love), *ᶜaqīdah* (trust/reverence), *ᶜibādah* (worship), *junūn* (madness) and the last stage is *mawt* (death). When a lover loses his mind upon reaching stage number six he is called *Majnūn*. For more about this refer to: Tarek El-Ariss, (2013). "Majnun Strikes Back: Crossings of Madness and Homosexuality in Contemporary Arabic Literature." *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 45(02), 293-312.

> I will now describe, that transformed me into a new man. But for this moment, I would never have been swimming now where the Atlantic Ocean and Mediterranean intersect, alongside my immortal Ilhām, the queen of birds (Sarūrī 40-41).

He is suitable for "revealing (kashf), hacking (ikhtirāq, tansīf)" (El-Ariss, 3) and performing autopsy (tashrīh). Nothing will stop him or his imagination from encoding the crimes of the dictator. A new conceptualization of the role of the intellectual emerges through this writing. It is the intellectual who fears no power, the one who challenges any attempts to stifle his intellect and silence him. Shihāb, he tells us later on, is the one who "rescued me from all the evil spirits which haunted all my childhood nights. I am indebted to him for the rest of my life. It was because of him that I started to think, interrogate, learn, use my mind, rebel, reject. I even started to say the most powerful word, the most sacred and holy word: 'No'" (Sarūrī 46). The three processes above provide a critique of the dictatorial, tribal and political system of Yemen through problematizing the discourse of history writing and the very meaning of the culture of blind obedience.

By introducing us to the two main characters of the novel, Nashwān and Ilhām who both are Yemeni living in exile, both seeking salvation, the novel marks a significant innovation on the author's part. The presentation of the protagonists in such a way portrays a sense of the loss, humiliation and impotency that Arab people in general, and Yemenis in this novel in particular, are facing in the post-independent dictatorial state. The novel thus becomes a domestic tragedy which offers a compelling narrative of the devastation faced by the victim/s who suffer/s from the rape and its aftermath. This is why, I would argue, that unlike the Arabic novels that dealt with the exploration and the representation of the city of exile, the focus here is on the abandoned city, the one left behind, the home. Reading novels about the experience of living in exile from what we

often refer to as "East-West encounter,"[55] more often than not we get a sense of estrangement, marginalization, separation from one's family that the protagonist experiences.[56] In this novel, however, although the story of Ilhām is being narrated from a city in exile, the focus is more on the suffering and the pain that Ilhām had to endure once at home at the hand of *Shaykh al-qabīlah.* Early on the novel, for instance, the narrator says:

> I could easily perceive from our first encounter that her previous life in Yemen had left a large wound, an unmitigated pain, deep within her and that she had decisively resigned from that life or even spit on it with eternal disdain. It suffices to hear her covert moaning sobs and see her shriveled eyelids when she tries to approach her memories from those years. She would not talk for long, nor passionately and with genuine concern on any living being she sympathizes with and strongly loves besides her only younger sister Naʿīm, 'my spiritual twin', as she called her. I learned that they spoke regularly on the phone, and Ilhām would tell her all that was happening in her everyday life (Sarūrī 26-27).

The trauma of dispossession and its aftermath creates a body-in-exile which subverts facile binarisms in which Ilhām rejects the efforts to prevent objection and at the same time the resistance to signification. The sense of her vulnerable, female material body that patriarchy has always marked as "definitively other and as uniquely vulnerable" leaves her speechless (Bergoffen 117). In her book *Remnants of Auschwitz: the Witness and the Archive*, Georgia Agamben argues that any subject when feeling shame "becomes witness to its own disorder, its own oblivion as a

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[55] For more about this please refer to Rasheed El-Enany. *Arab Representations of the Occident: East-West encounters in Arabic Fiction*. Routledge, 2006. Although El-Enany is not the first who addressed this issue when it comes to Arabic literature, he is the first to write about this issue in English.

[56] What is in my mind here are writers like Bahaa Taher, *Love in Exile*; Muhamed al-Bisaati *Daqq at-Tubūl;* Tayeb Salih, *Season of Migration to the North* and many others.

subject. This double movement, which is both subjectification and desubjectification, is shame" (Agamben 106). It is this feeling that renders Ilhām speechless because she knows that to speak means to talk about the shameful, sexual violence of her body being raped by her father. The crisis of Ilhām and her besieged body depicts the crisis of Yemenis and, in a broader sense, the crisis of Arab intellectuals living under their repressive regimes. The dilemma of Ilhām is that of an intellectual who strives to reconstruct and remap a sense of him/herself in the face of the increasingly repressive presence of a failing state.

Discussing Egyptian writers and their role within the Egyptian literary sphere, Samia Mehrez argues that writers are the "conscience of the nation, responsible for articulating its collective disillusionments and for voicing its silenced realities" (148). The silenced realities of intellectuals is represented by Ilhām and her inability to speak. This is why in the above quote the narrator tells us that it is from Ilhām's "covert moaning sobs [… and] her shriveled eyelids when she tries to approach her memories" that he can understand her suffering and confused being. He, the narrator, becomes the conscience of Ilhām and by a means of allegory, I would argue, the "conscience of the nation." In attempting to speak of a destroyed female body, the narrator reminds us of Edward Said's famous articulation of the role of the public intellectual as one who "is endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public" (Said, *Representation* 11). Reading the novel in this framework does not render it to politics; rather, it demonstrates how writing in the Arab world under dictatorships has a political as well as artistic purpose. As such, the novels can also be conceived as the artistic expression of the people and/or of the nation in which writers try to realize their function as public intellectuals in the face of dictatorships. And here we are talking about the emergence of a new literary direction and aesthetic values, with writers attempting in one way or

another to represent the social and political reality that culminated in the practice of the dictatorship/s of *Shaykh al-qabīlah* which led to further disappointments in the years that Ilhām had to endure in Yemen. This new literary aesthetic calls into question the absolute use, and in fact abuse, of power that had been firmly established and practiced in many Arab nations in the aftermath of the anticolonial movements of the 1940s and the 1950s in which dictators consolidated their grip on power by arresting, torturing, detaining anyone who poses a potential threat.

In a semi-hallucinatory scene where Nashwān and Ilhām are contemplating their sense of loss, Ilhām asks him to read her fortune by looking in her cup of coffee after she finished drinking it.[57] The novel explores absurd humor, a non-traditional style of writing, as a vessel for conveying a stronger message than the one that traditional narrative can convey. When she asked him to read her fortune, he replied:

> Certainly!
>
> Then [he continued] I looked at the side opposite the heart on the inside of the cup. There were many scribbles. Scribbles if looked at in separate sections, but, if looked at as a whole, are more interesting, more complex and miraculous, more terrifying, more perfect…
>
> I focused my gaze on the inside of the cup, to make sure that I wasn't dreaming, up close or from afar. In reality I wasn't dreaming, and I took enough time to confirm that…

[57] Arabic coffee, or Turkish coffee as it is known in the US, differs from the coffee we know in the West in the way it is grinded and served. In the Middle East, coffee beans are roasted a few times and then grinded very fine. The coffee, then, is prepared in tiny pots called *Bakrag*. What is unique about this coffee is neither the way it is grinded nor the way it is boiled, but rather the culture practice of reading fortunes by looking at the cup. This custom of coffee cup reading is at least as old as the coffee itself, and it is repeated with each and every cup consumed. While this can be done casually among friends, it is also possible to consult professionals.

I was, in fact, at the height of my concentration when I saw: a majestic image of a detestable bird of prey, wings outspread, claws visibly frightening, neck turned upward, licking the sky with a long tongue, as if it had been etched with a fine pin by the hand of a skilled artist...

A terrifying bird!

A bird of destruction!

I was truly astonished, extremely awestruck! I felt a strong blow to the backside of my fanatic secularism…with a sharp slap on the cheek of my rationalist arrogance, intense superiority…I was overcome with a combination of anxiety and chills…

Ilhām asked me once again: What do you see?

I secretly put the tip of my index finger and the middle of my right hand into the cup. I unwillingly shook them, two swift, fleeting, deceitful movements, in order to mix everything together. To make this mysterious, terrifying mural disappear! To make the "walls" of the cup stop "praising"! To erase the effects of this sudden irrational, metaphysical, satanic attack!

Then I handed her the cup, commenting:

"Oh, nothing, nothing…just scribbles, nothing more nothing less!"

Fate had not been this honest, obvious, transparent and trustworthy with me before this day, and it was pointing with its forefinger toward my ultimate, radical enemy.

My fateful enemy: the bird of destruction! (Sarūrī 56-58).

As absurd as it is, the invoking of fortune telling as a means to understand the present and future of Ilhām describes how ridiculous her situation is. Absurd humor in literature uses absurdity and irony as tools and is often satirical in nature, meaning it uses wit to criticize faults in a person,

institution, or society[58]. Upon looking at her *finjān (cup),* Nashwān was struck by the terrifying image of the bird of destruction. Albert Camus, the distinguished French writer, points to the emergence of this type of writing after the Second World War and says:

> A world that can be explained by reasoning, however faulty, is a familiar world. But in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile, because he is deprived of memories of a lost homeland as much as he lacks the hope of a promised land to come. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity (qtd. in Esslin 23).

The novel employs this subversive theatrical art to mask its resistance to the unjust social and political circumstances. The disappointment in the postcolonial leaders as well as in the institutions of religion and tradition resembles what Kafka referred to in his definition of the Absurd: "Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose […] Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental root, man is lost; all of his actions become senseless, absurd, useless" (qtd. in Esslin 23). This lack of hope and frustrating experience are reflected in the form of the Absurd. Nevertheless, ridiculing such meaninglessness of life and bitter experiences urges and inspires the audience to reject stagnation and to change the status quo. By using the tactics of the Theatre of the Absurd, its writers subtly engage their audience in their quest for freedom and justice and push them to make a change in their lives.

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[58] Olaniyan, Tejumola. *Scars of Conquest/Masks of Resistance: The Invention of Cultural Identities in African, African-American, and Caribbean Drama*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, touches upon this topic but it is also treated by Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, New York, Pelican Books, 1982. Esslin argues that the Theatre of the Absurd deliberately reduces and sometimes abandons the traditional theatrical features of characterization, plot, development and even common sense to convey, as Esslin puts it, "its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought" (Esslin 24).

In her book, *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body: Women's Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century,* Sidonie Smith emphasizes the place of writing and its ability to turn the corporeal into narrated subjectivity. In looking at the female body as the locus of cultural motives, it becomes a discursive sign which lays barefoot the female oppression. Writing the body, then, becomes a practice that aims at exposing oppression; it is a practice, I would argue, not a process because it becomes a site of history, politics, violation, woven into the history of a given nation. As much as it is relevant to what I am doing here, I am interested most in the connection that Smith draws between the female body on one hand and the metaphor of what she terms as "being home." In her analysis, the body is viewed as a space inhabited by the self. If the self is embodied in this space then the body is home with sanity and stability. Contrary to that, if the self is not embodied in the body—when there is a split between the self and its space—then the body is "not being home" (Smith 128). And this is evident in *Ṭāi'r al-Kharāb* which implies a split between the self and the body in which the latter experiences the feeling of "not being home" (Smith 128). This split between the self and the body is the source of Ilhām's being at loss. This feeling is expressed in the novel when the narrator gives us a description of the nation, the space, that Ilhām went back to in order to search for her being "You don't recognize the country to which you return July 17, 2000, either up close or from a distance! [59] You're not sure you have any tie to this place! You feel a complete stranger here, stripped to the marrow of your bone!"(Sarūrī 161). Because the narrator is Nashwān not Ilhām herself, the novel becomes a discursive diptych between Ilhām, someone who has experienced and lived in this nation—a sort of an eye witness—and Nashwān who bears witness and testifies to the horror of the unseen and the unheard of in Yemen which

[59] Author's Note: The war that devastated Yemen and that proclaimed Aden fair game for the victorious tribes ended in July 1994 (on the 7th) and July 17, 1978 was the starting date for the system that has ruled Yemen up until now.

stays unknown until he himself loses his beloved who now disappeared. The young Ilhām throughout the entire novel for Nashwān is not going crazy but becoming sane—defiantly attempting to regain her lost self and bodily home and by extension her raped body. And in so doing, the novel introduces us to its central metaphor. The question of what the narrator articulated as "How can Ilhām be two beings: The first is pure and crystal clear and the second is black and mysterious" (Sarūrī 145).

Images of the female body as the raped nation of Yemen are scattered throughout the whole narrative. The journey that Nashwān undergoes to Yemen is not just a visit of an immigrant to his family and his country; rather, it is a journey of excavation to introduce us, the readers, to the sources of Ilhām's miserable life, her oppressor/s and their wrong doings. In the last page of the second titled part of the novel, right before it embarks on a new part entitled "Celebratory Fireworks in Honour of Defloration" (Sarūrī 159), Nashwān speaks about his journey by saying, "I determined the plan of my journey: Aden, my mother, my friends,…excitement, longing, gifts, memories, tales… then to Sanᶜa, Naᶜīm, her husband, her two kids … and then Thulā…I determined the direction and the destination of my plan: the bottom of the destruction" (Sarūrī 158) . Nashwān has a vision of and for his journey to unveil the mysteries of a revolutionary character, Ilhām. Ilhām here represents a reincarnation of both women and Yemen itself at once as the body of Ilhām which was stripped of any kind of life is actually the earth/body of the country imprisoned, tortured and eventually crushed and defeated by *Shaykh al-qabīlah*.

Upon his immediate arrival to Yemen, therefore, Nashwān admits his happiness that the two Yemens—the North and the South—are now united as he does not want to think of the country as North and South. But this unity is similar to the unity of Ilhām and her sister Naᶜīm who only unite in pain, suffering and violation. Ilhām's formerly violated body is a violated Yemen, the

homeland, and the personal home of her and her sister and in fact all sisters and brothers. The following is a vivid description of the body of Yemen as told in juxtaposition of the story of Ilhām:

> You touch down first at the Sanʿā Airport, which is the largest Mikhbaza in Yemen,[60] and then land in Aden's old airport, because the new one, which was reduced to ruins and devastation in the war of January 13, 1986, has never been rebuilt. You are delighted that your Yemen is finally united but actually have reservations about the nature of this unity, which is much less a coherent union of civil society, political and justice systems, cultural programmes, and progress and freedom than it is a unity imposed by the tribe that donned the state's mantle and an incoherent coalition of starvation, corruption, barbarism, plunder, gāt consumption, and jalabiyas (Sarūrī 161-162).

Though the practical purpose of Nashwān's trip to Yemen is to find his lost beloved, it is really a quest for understanding of why Ilhām, who was married to him in France, could never escape the horrors that both her body and mind suffered while in Yemen. In order to understand the continual flashbacks of Ilhām's day-to-day existence with him in France, he resorts to the history of the nation and the union of the North and the South and its arbitrariness to expose the tortures and horrors prevailing in his homeland. A home that has never been more than a jungle ruled by the "the tribe that donned the state's mantle." The departure from France, which embodies the very essence of liberty and modern nation-state, to Yemen for Nashwān is a very symbolic. It shows how Nashwān, like many Arab immigrants who live in the West, is dismayed by the lack of freedom and political liberty in his country. This reading of the novel places it within the canon of what is previously thought of as a predominantly Latin American tradition of dictator novels.

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[60] Author's Note: "*Mikhbazah*" is the name of a Yemeni chain of mass-market restaurants renowned for their constant clamor and racket and for their selection of especially delicious regional dishes.

In removing the veil from the puzzle of Ilhām's passivity and the predicament of her body, the novel dismantles the presence of dictatorship in Yemen suggesting that dictators and dictatorships are a performance of power in which the dictator 'Ṭā'ir al-Kharāb' coercively and violently performs and exerts power. And, only by unveiling performativity which this kind of novels, dictator novels, can fulfil that "power can be performed differently" (Spencer, 147). As such, writing for Sarūrī becomes both a sort of a call for political response and a means of bringing together readers, writers and the texts themselves into a collective political action in which new modes of governance are sought. And if we are to think of this novel in terms of crime fiction then the novel, as Spencer once again argues, performs "power in such a way as to unveil the state itself as the principal miscreant" (Spencer 154).

The experience of pain is also crucial to the novel not only because of what it reveals about the repressive regime but partially because of the way it is tied to the figure of the dictator. In the third part of the novel which the writer entitles: "al-ʿĀb nārīyah li iḥtifāl faḍḍu bakārah" (Celebratory Fireworks in Honour of Defloration) (Sarūrī 159), there is a reference to the novel as a literary expression of the aesthetics of pain caused to the body of the female and to the nation by the power of the oppression exercised upon the protagonist. In his efforts to understand what happened to Ilhām, his beloved, the narrator resorts to the internet to read about Yemen, his country. And this is where the female body and the body of the nation, for him, become one entity. They are inseparable in experience; the subjugation of either one is a subjugation of the other. After spending many days and nights searching, the narrator finds a short story published on Banipal. In the description of the story, the narrator tells us that it was a:

> Yemeni female writer that I have never heard of before, her name was Nādiyah al-Kawkabānī[61]. The story was translated to English by the British writer 'Jenny Steel'. The story shook my foundations from the violence embodied in its title: "Celebratory Fireworks in Honour of Defloration"! The story affected me mysteriously… Then I remembered that I encountered this title few weeks ago in the file of Ilhām which was inside a plastic bag that looks like sorcery pouches in the middle of her diary fond memory! I repeatedly read the story more than seven times to be able to retell it using the same words of the author, with the coldness of these frigid words. Here is the story in full and between four big brackets. Fasten your seat belts well, then! (Sarūrī 196-197).

The story of Ilhām in this novel is put in juxtaposition with the fictional story of yet another fictional character in the short story by the writer, Nādiyah al-Kawkabānī. By comparing Ilhām's story to the story of this character in the story, the narrator utilizes intertextuality to denote the way in which texts gain meaning through cross-referencing. This referencing, at least for a moment, makes readers feel that Ilhām's story is the actual reality and the story of the character is fictional. Both, reality and fiction, however speak to the horror done to the body of Ilhām by her father, " who was not much concerned about what he is about to do to her and how it might destroy her […]

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[61] Nādiyah al-Kawkabānī is a Yemeni academic, novelist, and short story writer who was born in Taʿz, a city in Yemen. She obtained her first degree in architecture from Sanʿā University, she then moved to Cairo where she obtained her doctoral in architecture as well at Cairo University before she went back to Yemen to take up an academic position at Sanaa University. Her first published literary work was a short story that she published in the journal *al-Thawrah*. She has also published a number of short story collections, starting with *Zafīrat al-Yasmīn* (Jasmine Sigh) in 2001. Her first novel *Hubb laysa illā* (Not More than Love) was published in 2006. It was followed in 2009 by *Aqīlat*, a story about the lives of 19 Yemeni women. Also in 2009, she formed a literary group called *Meeting Yesterday* with fellow Yemeni authors al-Kawkabānī has received a number of literary awards both in and outside of Yemen. Her work has appeared in translation in two issues of Banipal magazine, in 2005 and in 2009.

although she is his daughter" (199). The intertextualized story tells us a story of a girl whose father thought that she might have received a letter from a boy so he not only withdrew her from school but he also decided to examine her hymen to make sure that she is virgin:

> He picked her up from her nick as if he was picking a flee! She was completely silent of the shock, she did not ask or even open her mouth. Neither did she even have a chance to wake up from the nightmare that has just started. Like a big mountain, the sheikh of the tribe and its defender violently climbed her and started to uncover and examine her body. He removed her underwear to make sure that she is virgin (Sarūrī 200).

The attention given to the destroyed female body here, ultimately, testifies to not only the spiritual body but also to the corporeal, the actual body. As such, the novel then challenges the rendering of the physical female body subsidiary to the social body. In other words, the stigma and shame that were previously prescribed to the ill female body are no longer hidden and kept silent. This is made possible through the employment of the husband-wife plot which continues to represent the destroyed body of the wife as socially, politically, and linguistically absent while rendering it a central role in the narratives of the husband. Although there is much that one can say about the representation of the body as an object which is rendered to a sign of corporeal colonization by the male, I am more interested in the association between honor and pain which is drawn from the ruptured body and the flow of blood. The implied transformation of someone's own pain into a celebratory ritual that brings life and happiness into someone else is disturbing. The honor that the Shaykh is seeking here, I would argue, is obedience and it is situated in and of the body itself. For just like Ilhām's body which succumbs in complete silence to an arbitrary punishment for a doubt that her father has of her breaching his law, so does the body of the Arab nations and Yemen in this context. This is why, as Thomas Fuller has put it in his fifth maxim about the tyrant: "He

leaves nothing that his poor subjects can call their own, but their miseries" (Fuller 397). The destruction of the body of the daughter is not just carried through but is also celebrated by the father and his regime. The juxtaposition of the big body of the dictator and the daughter who is the size of the flee shows how vulnerable the body of the subject is. It is the language of this disempowered body that then speaks a fragmented language that the narrator spends the whole novel trying to make sense of. Through telling the story of Ilhām, the novel not only unveils the brutality of dictatorships, but it also challenges the Euro-American persistent belief that remembering is by definition speaking out. For it is hard for Ilhām to speak and this is why her body and the silence it relays becomes relevant to her story which, put in Alex Argeti-Pillen, becomes an attempt to "document the relative silence[…], the way people do not speak" (11). In one occasion in the novel, the narrator seems to be shocked by why Ilhām "would not talk to him about all of that […] about her father whom she rejects to even get closer to mentioning," he then continues to say "all what I know about him is that he was a respectful Shaykh in these mountains before he suddenly gained military and tribal power after some political changes and disdained conspiracy that took place in 1977 in Sanʿā'" (Sarūrī 103). It is here that the reader starts to move from the personal to the collective space. The story of Ilhām becomes the story of a nation and the father is not just the biological masculine figure who destroyed Ilhām and her body; rather, it is the political dictator who came to power in late 1970s to destroy the body of his nation and leave it both striking and disturbing. This body and the violation committed against it becomes a revealing text which aims at denouncing the very necrotic ideology of dictators and their practices. Silence becomes a more beneficial and healing approach for Ilhām who seems to shy away from telling her story which then is told through the passivity of her body. By complicating the question

of absence versus presence and problematizing the subtleties of speech versus silence, the narrative challenges the traditionally defined role of silence.

The attack that the father perpetrated against his daughter who did not comply with one of his rule of law is a parallax of that of the nation itself. When certain groups: parties, ethnicities, religious violate any of their dictators rules, they are crushed and defeated by any means. One cannot but think here of the massacres that Arab dictators have performed against their civilians. *Halabja* chemical attack which is also known as the *Halabja* Massacre or the Bloody Friday which Saddam Hussein performed against the Kurdish city of *Halabja* in Kurdistan or the Syrian one performed by Ḥāfiz al-ʻAsad against the people of Hama which is also known as Hama Massacre. There is no room for negotiation between the regime and the civilians; rather, the two cities were crushed and put to ruins. The picture that the novel draws here of the dictator resonates with the definition that Thomas Fuller painted for the tyrant as the "one whose list is his law, making his subjects his slaves" (Fuller 396).

The image of the father, though complicated, is now colorful so all the features of the dictator are clear and can be seen by the reader. Through silence and the pain that resonates from it and the aesthetics of its language the novel was able to not only speak the unspeakable and articulate the inexpressible rather it also managed to draw an ugly picture of dictators and their doings. This seems clear in one occasion when the narrator moves from the story of Ilhām to that of the nation when he says:

> Since your first hours in Yemen, you've had no trouble glimpsing a pulverizing bird of destruction. It's of fantastic size, a hybrid between an Egyptian vulture and a ghoul. It guards the door of the Kingdom of Destruction, eating its carrion, pecking out the eyes of its residents before devouring their corpses, plundering them in the middle of the night,

attacking its little birds, the youngest, weakest, and least able to stand firm and resist (Sarūrī 171).

By the double use of language, as a means of both reflection and expression, in this occasion pain becomes the language of an outcry for agency and a means of subversion. The goal of this subversion is to contest the power of dictators and to relay the disdain for their law of ruling by dramatizing the pain of the female body which symbolizes the body of the nation itself. At the same time when the nation and its body is humanized, the dictator is dehumanized to be "a hybrid between an Egyptian vulture and a ghoul" which pecks out "the eyes of its residents before devouring their corpses" as shown in the above quote. This image that the novel draws of the dictator reminds us once again how non-ethical dictators are in their governance. Acting like a vampire to make people fear them becomes their only means to sustain their power, "[a]fterwards, he regeth freely in innocent blood—is any man virtuous? Then he is traitor, and let him die for it, who durst presume to be good when his prince is bad" (Fuller 396). In order to understand the processes that have led to the destruction of the nation, the very medium of destruction must be brought to the fore. And if we are to think of this as a process of re-mapping, then the text becomes a cartographic strategy which allows the narrator to map a new relationship between the nation and dictators in which the body of the later is shown as a body of a female.[62] A female, who is perplexed by her trauma, and cannot verbalize her experience. Argenti-Pillen acknowledges this in her work about women in Sri Lanka when she writes "terror and horror have become sedimented into the body" (11). The agony of the nation and the destruction caused to it reinforces the trauma of the dictatorial control of the female body in terms of the suppression of its basic rights—freedom

[62] For more about this, refer to Alison Blunt and Rose Gillian, eds. *Writing Women and Space: Colonial and Postcolonial Geographies*. Guilford Press, 1994.

of speech, freedom of movement, freedom of choice. The body nation is denied even the right to live, let alone to speak. The body of Ilhām, thus, becomes the silent text onto which the trauma of the violence caused to it by the dictatorial power is inscribed.

The unveiling of dictators' evilness and their wrong doings to their nations is continued in the novel when the narrator links the harm done to nation to that of the body again when he juxtaposes both the "the touristic rape" and the "geographical rape" to tell the story of Yemen and Ilhām (Sarūrī 174). The vivid description of the decaying cities and their landscapes when juxtaposed with the story of Ilhām evokes in the reader, who has some knowledge about Arab dictators, the images and posters about dictators and their catastrophic ruling and ruining of their nations. The poster drawn by the narrator, as he tells us, at the end of the scene is "patriarchal pimping" that has led for the destruction of the whole nation. The narrator asks the rhetorical questions: "who has dug this swamp for them? Who has pushed them to this damn jungles?" then he sighs to conclude by saying: "How ugly is the poster of the birds of destruction" (Sarūrī 184). This juxtaposition of the story of the personal and the public transfers the body into "an intentional instrument of individual agency" in which humans write/tell their stories to cope with a psychologically, dramatized being otherwise (Mallot 165). Because the body tells the story of self which becomes the story of the collective, then the story of the body and what it might remember may unveil important truths which help us in understanding the intersection between the personal and the collective. And, it is this intersection that holds important clues for how history and narrative are intertwined. Some scholars, such as Edward Mollat, have even gone further than this to argue that "*there is no memory without body memory*" [emphasis is his] (Mollat 172). The suffering of a whole nation is placed within the suffering of Ilhām's body and the reading of Ilhām's story then places the suffering of her body within our body as readers. In this belated

witness, through the eyes and experience of readers, the novel as a literary testimony attempts to broaden the "the imaginative capability of perceiving history—what is happening to others—in one's own body" (Felman 108).

CHAPTER FOUR

Masters and the Arts of Lying: Historical Reflection and Literary Self-Consciousness in Saʿīd Ḥabīb's *Lā Yā Shaykh*

During his lifetime, Trujillo was compared with lighting, the mountain-top, the sun, the eagle, volcanic lava, Pegasus, Plato, and God. He was the object of frenetic praise and adoration that verged on megalomania. (Wiarda, *The Dominican Republic: A Nation in Transition*, 45)

The mystery of Egypt's dictators from the time of Nasser until the time of Mubarak was, and still is, not solved yet. Many political scientists and scholars have attempted to construct different theories that explain how a dictatorial regime can sustain itself for years. Like the novels studied in previous chapters, this chapter addresses the role of writers in trying to solve this puzzle. Novelists use history as a starting point to construct a fictionalized account of the history of the regime(s) and its domination of the country. Their works illustrate the intrinsic tension between historical and the fictional narratives.

The use of cultural institutions is one of the political tools that the Egyptian state has utilized since Nasser's regime to keep intellectuals and elites on its side. This strategy is not limited to praising the regimes, rather, more often than not, intellectuals and elites used it to exclude and include certain groups and movements from participation in the institutions of Egypt's cultural production. At certain points, the regime would even use cultural production as a means to create and attribute certain images and labels to certain parties or groups. Films and television serials in Egypt, for example, have benefited from the West's depiction and desire to configure particular interpretations of Islam as an enemy of the state to launch a campaign to combat extremism and lampoon and demonize Islamists. Furthermore, the Egyptian government further emphasized the prevalent Western fear of Islamists by portraying them as dangerous and a possible threat to the West and its interests. In so doing, the Egyptian government internationally portrays itself as the gatekeeper of the West and its interest to, in return, enjoy the political, financial and military

support of the West to remain in power. Fareed Zakaria, American journalist and political analyst, articulates this when he says that deep inside Western regimes are aware of how corrupt, autocratic and heavy-handed Arab dictators are, yet "they are better than the alternative" (Zakaria 23). Although this may seem to be reminiscent of the oriental discourse of the West-East encounter, the intention and focus here is more on the *othering* of Islam from within the Arab countries themselves. In other words, while the focus of the old oriental discourse, the Western discourse, was on Islam and Muslims in general terms, the new discourse employed in the Egyptian context of othering replaces Islam with Islamism and Muslims with Islamists.

In the effort to distract people from questioning dictatorships, these regimes had to create an imagined enemy for themselves and their citizens. This imagined enemy is Islam and Islamists as imagined by them and their cronies. They designate Islamism and Islamists as a political threat to the unity and the progress of their nations. So, domestically, the confrontation is now between the dictatorial regime which claims to represent moderate Islam and the Islamists, as defined by the state, who represent a problematic version of Islam. Hosni Mubarak, Egypt's former president, expressed this fear and confrontation in one of his speeches in 1995 when he labeled his enemies as "Islamic fanatics" and implying "that a sever crackdown [on them is] imminent" (Weaver13). Such a strong feeling of concern and apprehension by the government has "caused anxiety among progressive Arabs and great deal of confusion in the west" (Ghitis1). The government has instilled concerns in both the domestic and the international community that include: the implementation of Shari'ah Law, infringement on women and minorities' rights, and above all the risk to the freedom of speech. It is this specific strategy, the construction of a problematic depiction of Islam

and Islamists, that this chapter explores and the way in which writers challenge the very problematic definition of the term Islamism[63].

The argument of this chapter is twofold: historical and literary. The first part of the chapter will give a brief summary of the rise of Islamism and the social practices related to it in Egypt. The literary part of the chapter aims at problematizing the issue of how Islam and Islamists are depicted in Arabic literature and how writers use fiction to draw parallels between fiction and reality in order to explore the idea of the fantastic as a resort to portray the collective memory of reality in the texts. I will also show how one specific novel, *Lā Yā Shaykh,* by Saʿīd Ḥabīb lucidly dismantles the use of Islam as an ideological process that empowers the dictatorial regime in such a way that turns the rhetoric against itself. In other words, the chapter argues that the monolithic representation of Islamists is oversimplified and misleading at the same time because it conceals an extremely complex reality behind it and that it is among the strategies of the regime to maintain its control over the political landscape.

In his book, *Ideas as Weapons: Militant Islamist Groups in Egypt*, Ibrāhīm Karawān argues that the term Islamism refers to any attempt by a group, a movement or organization which adopt the belief that Islam is, and should be, the basis for "restructuring contemporary states and societies according to an idealized image of Islam's founding image 1400 years ago" (7). The origin of this ideology, or movement, can be traced back to the collapse of the last Islamic Caliphate in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Since the end of the Ottoman Empire, many efforts in the

[63] To register my concern over the use of Islam and Islamism, I want to note that I am fully aware that there is a difference between the two, I will , however, be using them interchangeably as they have been purposely and loosely used as such by Egypt's dictatorial regimes. For more about the controversy on the definition of Islamism and Islamists refer to Bulaç, Ali. "On Islamism: Its Roots, Development and Future." *Insight Turkey* 14.4 (2012): 67.

Islamic world, and the Arab-Islamic countries specifically, have been exhausted to, as Karawān argues relive and, "regain the glory of the past" (7). The basic premise for such effort was based on the argument that the *Ummah* (nation) is in a real need, probably more than ever before, for a Muslim leader who leads according to Islamic law and will challenge the Western colonial project that took over after the downfall of the Ottoman Empire. At a time when the West was emphasizing the separation between the state and religion, postcolonial Arab nations were keen to stress the Islamic identity of the newly mapped states. This is clear through the articulation of the second article in the Egyptian constitution which states that "the official religion of the state is Islam" (Karawān14).

This being said, many scholars such as Muhammad ᶜAbdu, Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī and other scholars started to maintain that there is a need for the Arab nations to revive themselves and gain their deserved recognition among the leading countries of the world as they were in the past. In Egypt, the focus of this chapter, it was Hasan al-Banna, a non Azharite scholar and an Islamic reformist, which means he did not belong to the religious establishment which has been at times complicit in the regime's project, who supported Islamic science and its connection to modern life style, started to call for the necessity to have an Islamic state ruled by Islamic law and stands in the face of the danger of westernization. He was influenced by scholars such as Muḥammad ᶜAbdu and al-Afghānī. In his book, *Islam and Politics*, John Esposito argues that there are two factors that influenced al-Banna's thoughts about the necessity of the connection between religion and politics. First of which is the 1919 revolution against the British colonization of Egypt and second, on a personal level, al-Banna had been a member of many Islamic and civil organizations and activities which played a big role in anchoring his ideas, especially those in regard to religion.

In 1928 and amid the pressing need to establish an Islamic state, al-Banna and six other Egyptian laborers founded al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn, the Muslim Brotherhood, in the Suez Canal City. In its early emancipation, the Brotherhood was geared towards the establishment of an organized group to fulfill, what they then thought of as, Islamic revival. The focus was on building the inner self and personality of the members and the followers to reform the "hearts and minds, to guide Muslims back to the true religion and away from the corrupt aspiration conduct created by the European dominance" (Zubaida, 48). The organization grew very rapidly in its early years and it witnessed a noticeable increase in the number of its followers which was estimated to be around 150,000 in 1930 and reached to 300,000 in 1938 (Mitchell 1993). The significant increase in the number of followers Mitchell states stems from how inclusive and all-encompassing the group was as it focused on bridging the gap between life and the afterlife through arguing that there are two aspects of religion and these are the mystical, the inner and personal one, and the political which organizes how we interact with each other in society. The agenda of the group started with the individual and moved to the family and then the whole society. Specifically, the focus of the group initially was on social work and activities and community building and this also has played a role in its success early on.

Their engagement with and participation in politics, one can argue, can be dated back to 1940 when they started to support Egypt national independence calling on the British to evacuate Egypt. Because of their rallies and demonstration against the British troops, the British authorities cracked down on them, stopped their activities and imprisoned their leader, al-Banna in 1941. This did not, however, stop them. They went on to compete in the parliamentary elections the following year. The Palestinian *Nakbah* (catastrophe) in 1948 gave them the excuse to establish what came to be known as *secret apparatus.* Blaming the Egyptian government for not being able to defend

Palestinians and the Islamic territory, the group formed its own army to fight the Israeli army. Their participation in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict provided them with legitimacy in and outside Egypt to the extent that King Farouk of Egypt began to worry about them and their sweeping power. This fear of the group led the Egyptian government to dissolve the group and imprison some of its leaders, which ironically did not include al-Banna. He was later assassinated in February 1949. It is noteworthy here to mention that his assassination followed the assassination of the Egyptian prime minister then, Maḥmūd Fahmi al-Naqrāshī. (Mitchell 48).

Although the main goal of the 1952 revolution was to oust King Farouk, the policy of the new government tilted the power of the executive, the legislative and the judicial branches to be under the control of the president. So much so, scholars such as Maye Kassem argue that it is the empowerment of the president with such sultan-like prerogative that led eventually to make the Egyptian regime after independence "one of the most resilient personal authoritarian systems in the world" (11). As far as the Muslim Brotherhood is concerned, the Egyptian government permitted them to practice their political activities unobstructed at the beginning only to benefit from them to suppress any competing parties such as the case of *al-Wafd*. Later on, however, and due to their growing popularity in Egypt, Nasser cracked down on them after he accused them of conspiring with Muḥammad Najīb in 'akhwanat Egypt' (brotherizing Egypt). So scholars argue that Nasser's relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood was one of the most incommodious in their history as he "crushed the Muslim Brotherhood movement in a manner unprecedented to date" (Kassem 137). This strategy of "cooperative" and "coercive" tactics in dealing with the Muslim Brotherhood is actually one of the common strategies of the three regimes that ruled Egypt since 1952: Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak's regime. (Kassem137). The group's influential existence in Egypt and its involvement in the network of infrastructure and the para-organization military

apparatus was concerning for Nasser who was shot at in 1954 in Alexandria while he was delivering a speech. The finger of accusation pointed directly to the Brotherhood given the tension between them and the regime. Since then, the relationship between the government and the Muslim Brotherhood has been highly strained which was inaugurated by the government labeling them as "an extremist organization" (Gordon 184).

Having reached a dead end in the fight with the Muslim Brotherhood, Nasser's regime moved to a new war with them: the war of words instead of the use of power and imprisonment. The regime began to propagate the idea that the organization has turned its leaders into godly figures who judge people and their religiosity. This move triggered the groups' Guide General, al-Hudaybī, in 1966 to write his book *Duᶜāh Lā Qudāh* (Preachers not judges) in which he stressed that the mission of the group is actually to call and bring people back to the true religion and the path of God as opposed to *takfīr* (labelling people as infidels). This book, though, did not stop a group like the "takfīrī group" (which is also known as Salafis nowadays) from emerging as a radical movement which advocates for the use of force to oust any existing regime that does not rule according to the Qur'an. The moderate members of the Muslim Brotherhood, although they are the mainstream, failed to prevent the growing militant attitude against Nasser's regime. Capturing this in his book, *Islamic Liberalism: A Critique of Development Ideologies*, Leonard Binder writes:

> Many new local and often small and secret organizations were founded after 1965, some of which challenged the vestige of the Ikhwan, and other of which did their own religious thing. Some were highly politicized and militant while others sought the comfort of fraternal association and the consolation of mutual cooperation (341).

The tension between Nasser's government and the Brotherhood continued until Sadat's presidency after the assassination of Nasser in 1970. Upon ascension to power, Sadat gestured to the Brotherhood that he intended to open a new page with them. He, thus, released many of them who were imprisoned by Nasser and gave them the freedom to practice their societal activates. All of this was informal, as Sadat refused to acknowledge them as an officially legal group. Many scholars argue that Sadat's tolerance towards the Muslim Brotherhood was driven by his desire and need to erase the remnants of Nasser's era. To convince the Muslim Brotherhood that he believed in their call for religion to be the center of the state, he amended the constitution declaring Islam to be "the state religion" and that Sharia is a main source of legislation. This freer, and less suffocating, atmosphere given by Sadat to Islamists was short lived because of his decision to sign the peace treaty with Israel in 1979. This decision was considered to be an act of betrayal not only by Islamists but also by most political parties in and outside Egypt. As a result, Sadat changed his policy and he imprisoned representatives of all the parties of Egypt political life such as the leftist, the nationalist, the Islamists and almost anyone who opposed his peace treaty. The situation escalated even more when a radical, who is believed to have emerged from within the army, assassinated Sadat during a military parade in 1981.

Amid this ambivalent relationship between Sadat's regime and Islamists, Mubarak came to power to rule Egypt under Emergency Law. In its internecine war with opposition, the regime legally vested itself with this law which gives the government the right to: arrest and detain individuals them for extended periods of time without trial, try civilians in military courts, prevent people from demonstrating, censor any publishing house or newspaper under the name of national security (Egyptian Emergency Law, 162, 1958). In regards to the Muslim Brotherhood, Mubarak tried to have them join him in his fight against radicalism. This grace period, one can argue lasted

until 1984. To be specific, it was after the parliamentary elections when the Muslim Brotherhood in coalition with the Wafd Party won 58 seats in the house. Right after this, the relationship between the government and the Muslim Brotherhood altered with the group announcing its intention to escalate its opposition to the corruption of the government and the latter denouncing the former as a terrorist group. The declared war between Islamists and the regime is very clear in the message sent by the Guide General, al-Tilmisānī who declared immediately after the election that:

> We are completely serious when we joined the elections, our aim was to reach power through a legal channel, the Wafd Party, because People's Assembly members enjoys parliamentary immunity. The brothers who will reach the assembly will speak on behalf of the Brotherhood, will urge enforcement of the Islamic Shari'a Law, and will embarrass the government without fear of detention or torture (cited in Campagna 283).

Given how threatening the collaboration between the Muslim Brotherhood and the secular party, Wafd (which acted as a cover for them) was, the government began its strategy to hinder their success and keep them under control via various means among which is monopoly over the media, restriction of opposition parties' activities, and police intimidation of voters and observers. With the exception of the occasional arrest of some members of the Brotherhood, up until 1989, the government did not explicitly target the Muslim Brotherhood. This non-confrontational policy reached its end in 1989 when Interior Minister then, Zakī Badr, issued a public statement in which he accused the Muslim Brotherhood of being the source of any discord in the country. He even went further to place all Islamists, Muslim Brotherhood, Salafis in one category regardless of their use or rejection of violence when he said: "[T]he extremists are in fact a secret organization of the Muslim Brotherhood for assassination. There is no conflict between the two tendencies, as some

want to believe, and they are in fact a single association" (Campagna 285). The quotation above illustrates how the regime considered Islamists as one composite (extremists), whose main goal is to disturb the national security and cause chaos. This belief runs against the main argument of scholars who specialize in the study of Islamism and Political Islam. Mohammed Ayoob, for instance, underscores this point when he writes "they [Islamists] are not cut from the same cloth, they were and continue to be very different sorts of organization in terms of their strategies (Ayoob 75). In response to these accusations and many others, the Muslim Brotherhood started to raise the voice of its protest against the government. In protesting the absence of complete judicial supervision, the Muslim Brotherhood, Wafd and the Labor parties decided to boycott the parliamentary election in 1990. The limit of their criticism did not stop there; rather, they started to severely push for a need to change the Emergency Law.

Through the first few years of the 90s, the Muslim Brotherhood achieved a substantial involvement in the social and political life in Egypt; it dominated almost all the boards of the professional syndicates. The regime which perceived these successes as "a formidable threat to its own declining legitimacy" could not remain silent and helpless in front of all of this and thus the grace period that Mubark had provided for the Islamists ended (Campagna 280). The government began to detain members of the Muslim Brotherhood and other organizations under the charges of conspiring against national security. In 1995, the NDP (Mubarak's Party) won 94 percent of the parliamentary seats in an election which was described as "heavily marked by fraud, coercion, and bans on many potentially competitive parties" (Stepan and Robertson 39). In his article, "More than a response to Islamism: The political deliberalization of Egypt in the 1990s," Kienle Eberhard argues that the government wanted to flex its muscles over all the parties which opposed its authority. The regime's supreme military court, for instance, sentenced 54 members of the Muslim

Brotherhood to prison and detained thousands without a trial with charges ranging from reviving an outlawed movement and arrangement to overthrowing the regime. In spite of Mubarak's coercive regime, the Muslim Brotherhood's sun has never abandoned the political arena in Egypt. In 2005, for instance, the Muslim Brotherhood won 88 seats in the parliament.

In tracing the history of the Muslim Brotherhood and its relationship with the regime in Egypt, one finds that they constitute the afflictive opposition to the regime. It is no doubt the undesired opposition by the regime, if we may refer to it as such, as it refuses to adhere to the regime's rules of participation. In a nondemocratic regime like that of Egypt, the government allows political pluralism as far as it does not interfere in its dominance. The main goal of such tolerance is to legitimize the regime by giving some semblance of democracy. Since the Muslim Brotherhood has never fulfilled this function for the regime, it comes as no surprise then that they would be considered as the enemy, the other, and the radical. That is to say that because as oppositional party they genuinely engage in criticizing the regime and are more concerned about national interests, they clash with the government, making them appear as reactionary, if we are to use Lisa Anderson's term.

In *Lawless Government and Illegal Opposition: Reflections on the Middle East*, Lisa Anderson provides us with an approach on how political opposition works which she terms reactionism. By reactionsim, she means that the oppositional party's course of action might be interpreted in light of the dominant ruling system and its action. This is to say that the oppositional party tries to unveil the lies and the hidden corruption while the regime with its demeaning and mostly coercive tactics tries to destroy and demolish the oppositional party. The opposition in Anderson's own words is defined by " having the unusual characteristics of being defined partly by what it opposes; it develops within and in opposition to an ideological and institutional

framework and, as such, reveals a great deal not only about its own adherents, but also about the individuals, policies, regimes and states in authority"(18-19). Rather than engaging and responding to the criticism coming from their opponents, in their efforts to demolish their opposition, dictatorial regimes portray an image of their opponents as being unfaithful and rejectionists of any plan to move forward. As such, it is not surprising at all then to hypothesize that any official discourse whither it is through history, media or even literary modes would be a discourse of exclusion, marginalization, and stereotyping.

The proclaimed war against Islamists and their activities, including the very simple performance of a prayer, is then motivated by the regime's drive to legitimize itself domestically by sustaining internal political and social stability which can only be interrupted by Islamists, and internationally by establishing strong relationships with Western powers through depicting Islamists as potential enemies and thus threat. In the aftermath of 9/11 and in an attempt to show their solidarity with the West against its war on terrorism announced by George W. Bush in 2001, many countries in the Middle East, for instance, labeled all kind of Islamists as terrorists whose main goal is to destroy the West. Rather than engaging in how Islamists were represented in the official discourse in Egypt, the pages to come in this chapter will trace the depiction of Islamists in the genre of the Arabic novel and how their portrayal is utilized to obscure their role as the unwanted other to serve the dictatorial political and ideological ends.

For decades, the historical and political ramifications of the religious/secular dispute has not only created hostility between Islamists and secularists but also undermined the possibility of initiating any kind of dialogue between the two groups. As the religion of the failing Ottoman Islamic State at the turn of the 19th century, Islam was almost always marginalized and stigmatized in the process by which Arab nations came into being during the first six decades of the 20th

century. Specifically, to put it in Christina Philips own words, Islam has been treated as "other in modern Arabic literature" (118). This otherness of Islam and Islamists in modern Arabic literature emerged from the interplay of both identity and modern nation-state building. This interplay between nation-state and identity does "constitute a theme in Arabic literary text [where] Islam frequently emerges as a 'domestic other', alongside the better-documented western other (Philips, 120). In the writings of secularists, or rather nationalists, one can see the tension between traditional interpretations of Islam and modernity and how the former is being pigeon holed as regressive. In her argument to show how Islam is othered in Arabic literature, Philips identifies two operations at work by intellectuals and secularists to realize their project: "(1) the objectification of religion and religious discourse, and (2) a process of differentiating critique" (120). In the work of the writers who fall within the first realm, religion is turned into an object through a Manichean and dualist approach in which what Muslims produce is Islamic and therefore outdated and what comes from the non-Muslim, be it the west, the secular or the modernist, is progressive. The problem with this process is that the criteria for evaluating Islam as an object— product, custom, way of life— is based on a modern, secular and nation-state identity, as it is formulated by its originators and promoters. It is not engaged as a spiritual system performed by followers.

Sabry Hafez in the article "Islam in Arabic Literature: The Struggle for Symbolic Power" traces the way in which Islam has been addressed in Modern Arabic literature, specifically the genre of the novel. Hafez maintains that since Islam plays a significant role in the cultural, social, and political reality of the Arab world, permeating every aspect, it is necessary to examine how it is engaged by Arab writers. He argues that there has been transition in the way the Islamist character is depicted that reflects a changing process. He, further, argues that the tension between

religion and secularism, from a literary point of view, has undergone different stages starting with discrediting the old religious elite, engaging in a process of rationalizing the sacred and accommodating it into the secular, moving into the secularization of religion and finally the questioning of religion. (42). For the sake of exemplifying this point, I will touch upon the work of writers who have engaged this tension.

In reading *Zaynab,* by one of Egypt's main social reformers, Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal, one can see how this is carried out through his secular approach which he applies through his criticism of religion as an object. *Zaynab*, which revolves around the story of Hamid who is the embodiment of what is modern and progressive as he is a student from the city as opposed to Zaynab a peasant girl, tells the story of their numerous frustrations in love. Love and the veil in this novel, as Philips argues, "are not depicted as endowed with religious significance but as social institutions" (122). It is religion that is blamed for the failure of both Ḥāmid and Zaynab and ʿAzīzah to realize their dreams. In one occasion, ʿAzīzah laments the day she decides to wear the veil and says "It was a momentous day, which I do not remember without regret" (Haykal 192). ʿAzīzah's statement here is not just a statement of a confused individual; rather, it speaks to the problem of a society that is at the intersection where different approaches are categorized in problematic binary terms where what is considered traditional, Islamic and regressive is countered by a modernist western orientation with all that it encompasses. Intellectuals, such as Haykal, turned their backs to blind obedience and absolutism to embrace rationalism, they abandoned conservatism for liberalism. They seemed to be content with the principle, theoretically at least, of separating state from religion. Haykal's attack on Islamists is clear in *Zaynab* when one of his characters, Ḥāmid, bitterly describes Shaykh Masʿūd as a hypocrite and swindler. He is described as the one who has no conscience, "[had he] possessed a soul or conscience with some compassion,

he would have been embarrassed to see himself." To further berate him, Ḥāmid sarcastically exclaims "[how] conscience would inhabit the heart of a pretender with no education or lineage, who simply followed this path of deception in order to live by means of it" (167). The religious character, the Shaykh, in the above quote is portrayed as an ignorant, traditionalist who does not apply critical thinking to any of his decisions in life. Being as such, religion seems to stand in the way of modern, rational life that the novel is calling for. Religion, as Philips argues, is "[n]o longer a fact of life, a way of seeing" (122).

Ṭāhā Ḥusayn's *al-ʻAyyām* stands as a prominent example of how religion contradicts modernity and the forward moving process. The narrative thread in *al-ʻAyyām* is built around education and science. As readers, we are carried along with the story of a boy and his days of schooling and study from *kuttāb* to al-Azhar. Being the first and probably the main source of religious education, these two institutions are thrust into the forefront and showered by the narrator's critique. This biography manages to critique the backwardness of religious education through the juxtaposition of both the headmaster of the school and that of the shaykhs of al-Azhar. The headmaster is "ignorant, arrogant and generally unpleasant individual. His teaching method is deplorable, consisting of rote learning a holly book of which he has little understanding" (Phillips, 123).

Unlike Tāhā Ḥusayn and Haykal, who put in Hafez own words, engaged in "discrediting the old religious elite [and] rationalizing the sacred," Mahfouz pushed towards "secularizing religion" (Hafez, 42). In his novel, *Awlād Ḥāritnā* (translated as *Children of the Alley*), in which he allegorizes the human condition and its relationship with major world religions, the Abrahamic traditions, Mahfouz tells the story of Jabalāwi's ally which repeatedly faces social inequities and injustice. The novel is divided into 5 chapters: Ādam, Jabal, Rifʿāh, Qāsim, and ʿArafah. The first

four chapters draw on the stories of prophetic figures in the Abrahamic traditions, specifically: Adam, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. However, Mahfouz does not simply retell their stories; rather, he empties them of their mythical frameworks and focuses on these figures as reformers who challenge the social fabric in order to redress the corruption, inequities, and injustices that have permeated the society. Thus, the religious narrative is significant only to the extent that it demands of believers to follow these figures as models to act in reforming their societies and not to simply focus on individual salvation in a future afterlife. The chapter on ᶜArafah introduces science into the narrative and its capability to alleviate social ills. However, like religion, the novel demonstrates that science can be employed by corrupted regimes to the detriment of society. Being skeptical of the stories and the leaders of the Ḥārah, ᶜArafah does not accept its memories and resort to exercise his profession in a secret laboratory to prepare for a project of revolt. The secularization of religion in the novel is embodied in the character of ᶜArafah who, unlike all his predecessors, has never received any revelation from the old patriarch. In fact, he kills Jabalāwi by mistake. The attack in this specific novel was heretical because of its satire of the holy figures of the Abrahamic religions as well as its suggestion that Muslims in Egypt are at some level idol worshippers.

Writers in Egypt did not just stop at targeting the religious institutions, some Like Nawal El Saadawi, for instance, took it to the next level where religion itself came under fire and this is what Sabry Hafez refers to as "questioning religion" (42). *Woman at Point Zero* is probably El Saadawi's most known fictional work. The novel was first published in Arabic in 1977 as *Imra'ah ᶜinda Nuqtat al-Ṣifr* and was translated into English in 1983. This novel relates the story of Firdaus, a woman in prison awaiting execution for killing a pimp. Before the fictional story begins, El Saadawi writes in the preface to the book that the novel arouse out of her encounter with a prisoner

in the Qanāṭir Prison in Egypt in 1972 while she was conducting research on women and neurosis. What this preface does is to destabilize the reading of the story by creating an air of ambiguity around the true nature of the text.

Although the larger umbrella of the novel embraces the concern of all women, El Saadawi does lay blame on Islam and Islamic society in her text. This allusion seems clear in looking at the character of Firdaus' uncle, who is highly educated at Al-Azhar University, one of the central Islamic institutions in the Muslim world and her husband Shaykh Mahmoud. This allusion also places the text within an Islamic context by the very fact of those characters' titles imply religious training. In one occasion in the novel, the writer suggests that the underlying reasons of women's oppression and difficulties in Egypt stems from particular patriarchal interpretations of some Muslims who maintain that Islam is the source for giving men the right to for instance beat their wives. Firdaus tells us about a conversation that occurs between her and her uncle's wife when she complained that her husband beats her:

> But my uncle told me that all husbands beat their wives, and my uncle's wife added that her husband often beat her. I said my uncle was a respected Sheikh, well versed in the teachings of religion, and he, therefore, could not possibly be in the habit of beating his wife. She replied that it was precisely men well versed in their religion who beat their wives. The precepts of the religion permitted such punishment. A virtuous woman was not supposed to complain about her husband. Her duty was perfect obedience (El Saadawi 44).

El Saadawi does allude to Islam in the above quote by the very reference to the verse in the Qur'an about "beating" women and the supposed connection between increased religiosity and that act of

violence also provides a culturally specific context for the novel.[64] The depiction of Islam in the work of secular writers in Egypt has played a role not just in tempting Western audiences to want to read in *such novels* a critique of Arab Islamic culture to support the general stereotypes of Islam, but also in problematizing the stereotypes further to construe Islam as regressive and counter-productive in the face of secularism. My main point is that there is a stereotyped image of Islam and Islamists generated by the authority to maintain their power and authority and that intellectuals and writers in Egypt have participated in this project. This process of stereotyping is very urgent to the repressive regime in Egypt which defines itself as the opposite of this created other. And here, one is reminded of Homi Bhabha's argument in the employment of constructed images in the colonial project when he writes that in furthering their colonial project colonialists employed these images as "a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place', already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated" (95). If we take this onslaught of religious criticism into consideration we can reach a kind of understanding for the ambivalent rejection and acceptance and the vacillation that took place in the relationship between Islamists and the regime in Egypt since the time of Nasser. What this means is that while the dictatorial regime in Egypt appeared to have rejected and fought against Islamists and their ideologies, the latter existence was crucial to the former as it gives them a chance to form their discourse of reform in a secular and, by definition, anti- Islamic rhetoric.

To go back to Hafez' previous article, we notice that in reading earlier works of fictional writers, he illustrates that characters that function as conspicuous representatives of a Islam

[64]While the context of this verse no doubt exists in the Qur'an, it is not sufficient or accurate to see this as simply indicting Islam as a faith that oppresses women. The source for women's oppression here is the patriarchal interpretations of such verses. Hence, one could argue that the responsibility for the abusive behavior is not on the actual verse, but the way that men understand the verse and contextualize it incorrectly.

(shaykh, clergy, Islamist) are often portrayed negatively. They are hypocrites, swindlers, misogynists, etc. However, with the shifting landscape of the Arab world, the literature of the region also changed and this can be seen in the way that these same types of characters are portrayed in a positive light; but, he contends that these depictions are simplistic, demonstrating the Islamist agenda as the only focus. Furthermore, Hafez suggests that this focus does not reflect the increasingly secular reality of the Arab world.

Hafez's article is useful because he documents the aesthetics related to the depiction of religious and political commitment as it relates to Islam in Arabic literature. He recognizes the development of a phenomenon in which characters with conspicuous Muslim identity have been portrayed in response to a changing social and political reality. He offers examples from various writers that represent the spectrum from secularist to Islamist, and in some case within an individual writer's body of work. Writers like Naguib Mahfouz, for example, according to Hafez, engaged the issue of religion in works like *Children of the Alley* and *al-Liṣṣ wa al-Kilāb (The Thief and the Dogs)*, in different ways. Hafez maintains that after negative response to *Children of the Alley* from the religious establishment because it was deemed to be heretical that Mahfouz included a positive representation of Islam through his character Shaykh al-Junaydī. In addition, Hafez cites examples from what he refers to as Islamist literature. He asserts that this type of literature found "its ultimate realization" in the trilogy of Alī Abū al-Makārim (47). Hafez argues that the success of Abū al-Makārim trilogy stems from the fact that it gives Islamists a chance: "for the first time in the history of the Arabic novel, to successfully manipulate the secular discourse of narrative, expound their ideology and present their struggle against a profoundly malicious establishment" (48).

While Hafez provides a useful point of departure, his reading does not reflect the more nuanced reality in which performance of faith must be distinguished from participation in an organization that employs religion in the service of a political agenda. There may be intersection between the two; however, in Hafez's assessment one seems to automatically imply the other. This overlap results in a framework that fails to address the complex literary reality of these writers. Moreover, Hafez asserts that these same writers are divorced from their political realities and this is reflected in their writing, in which the only goal seems to be for Islamists "to articulate their vision persuasively and manipulate its ideological dream" (48). Although, Hafez has not clearly expressed his skepticism of the Islamist counter narrative in this article, this, however, appears as underlying assumption that can be noted in regards to his use of language. For example, Hafez uses the term Islamist ideology and Islam in several instances interchangeably, so that the distinction is not always clear between Islam as a faith that is performed by Muslims and the political ideology of Islamists. Therefore, when he describes certain characters and their depiction in the text there is a problematic extension so that Islamist is utilized as a label for those who conspicuously display their Muslim identities, even if they do not adhere to any religious political ideology. This of course undermines the project of these writers who are trying to counter the narrative of the dictatorial regimes, which includes the Islamists response who may be working toward challenging corrupt regimes in order to redress social ills.

One of the rhetorical processes that dictators all over the Arab world, and most specifically in Egypt, have employed to sustain their power is religion. Starting with the premise that Islamists are terrorists, an idea that has always frightened the West of anyone identified as Islamists, specifically and Muslims who oppose the regime more generally, dictators use this stereotype to justify their arrest and arbitrary detention of any individual whom they see as a threatening factor

to their stable regime. By using this rhetorical strategy to play with fear and security in the hearts of both their citizens and the international community, the dictatorial regimes gain power in convincing both, the citizens and the international community, that "life is [im]possible without a dictator" (Znaidi 1). Although this is not the only strategy that they used to maintain their power, it is definitely one of the strategies employed.

Lā Yā Shaykh relates the story of Manṣūr, a dentist, who was incarcerated because he attends a mosque and prays with his friends. This action, praying, was sufficient for the authorities to accuse him of threatening national security. Manṣūr and his wife live a happy life until the police arrest him. In prison, Manṣūr stays for four months and he was punished, tortured, and interrogated every day. After his arrest, the narrator spends the entire novel portraying the experiences of many who were imprisoned and tortured only because of their oppositional opinions. Failing to force him to admit that he was planning to do what they are accusing him of, the police arrest his brother Fatḥī, who, while being a college graduate, is unemployed and a drug addict. He and everybody in his family were surprised that he was arrested to the extent that they began to think that Manṣūr's arrest was justified, but they do not understand why someone like Fatḥī would be arrested.

Fatḥī becomes extremely and unreasonably offended when the police arrest him and argues with them that he does not pray and is, in fact, a non-practicing Muslim. He drinks and was caught many times under the influence of drugs. The absurdity of this dialogue depicts an aspect of the history of the corrupted regime and sketches it in an incoherent way which makes the author, the characters and the book itself assume roles in hiding something but for the sake of torturing it more than it is being tortured. One day, Ḥamdī Zahrān, the most senior ranked officer in the prison where Manṣūr is imprisoned sends someone to call Mansūr for him. When Manṣūr gets to his office, he tells him about the imprisonment of his brother and threatens him with imprisoning the rest of the

family, mentioning them by names, if Manṣūr does not listen to what he commands him to do. Then he tells him of the reward that Manṣūr would receive if he accepts the deal and becomes their informant. Manṣūr was hesitant at the beginning but he accepts when Ḥamdī Zahrān reminds him of his wife. He leaves prison and simultaneously the authorities also release Fatḥī. Living in and through his internal conflict of feeling the guilt from being an informant, Manṣūr, decides to leave the country and tell his wife: "That is it Marwā! I have made my mind and I am leaving this country… We have to… I am not feeling safe here" (Ḥabīb136). Marwā rejects the idea at the beginning but ultimately accepts it after she sees how tortured her husband is in his country. One day, while he was returning home from work, Manṣūr gets killed by unknown person who drives by him in a black car. In hidden circumstances also his brother disappears two weeks later and Ḥamdī Zahrān is shot dead.

This is the first novel by Saʿīd Ḥabīb. Not much is known about this writer other than that he is a journalist and the son of Kamāl al-Saʿīd Ḥabīb, the academic and political scientist who is also one of the major figures of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. His father who not only belonged to the Muslim Brotherhood but also invested a great deal in trying to understand the relationship between Islamic parties and secular governments as indicated by the title of his dissertation, *Islam and the Political Parties in Turkey.* Kamāl al-Saʿīd gained fame for his book in the late 80's, *The Islamic Movement: From the Confrontation to the Contemplation*, which sheds light on the tumultuous relationship between the government and the Islamic movement in Egypt. The book not only traces the history of the relationship between the two but also argues that it is crucial for the Islamic movement to move away from the confrontational approach to a more peaceful, yet, critical and assertive approach. In 2009, Kamal Saeed also published a book entitled,

Religion and the Government in Turkey: the Islamo-Secular Conflict[65], which speaks to the very essence of the Egyptian situation that this novel engages.

Lā Yā Shaykh skillfully plays with the narrative structures to challenge the rhetoric of dictatorial regime. In this novel, the writer explores the interrelatedness of both history and fiction to construct a fictionalized account of Egypt and the rule of its dictator, Hosni Mubarak, as experienced by one Egyptian family. Along the way, the writer foregrounds the intrinsic tension between the historical and the fictional narrative. So much so that fiction becomes a tool used to unmask the reality of these dictators and create a space for the writer to converse with authoritarianism to say things they, dictators, did not want to hear or rather would not even allow in any other mode of expression. The writer resorts to fiction as a framing device to relate his story, as he states on the cover of his novel that it is based on a true story.

The novel opens with an epigraph by the late Kurdish Iraqi poet, Sherko Bekas[66]: "In the shop of a blacksmith, a bunch of strong bars rebelled and aimed the fire of its anger at the smith when they knew that there is a conspiracy against them. The conspiracy was to change them from a window in a public library to a gate for a prison" (Ḥabīb 7). From the outset, the reader notes the significance of the absurdity between what things are and what they seem to be. First, before we examine the actual words of the epigraph, invoking this rebellious, inspiring and freedom fighter poet sets the tone of the narrative—to challenge and counter a hegemonic construct. This specific poet is actually the pioneer of the Kurdish prose-poetry. In this kind of innovative genre, he brings

[65] The titles of both the dissertation and the books mentioned here are translated from Arabic.
[66] Sherko Bekas was born in 1940 in the city of Sulaimaniyah in Iraq. He joined the Kurdish liberation movement in 1965. While in Iraq, he was pressured and chased by the police until he finally decided to flee Iraq and go to Sweden where he lived in exile from 1987-1992. He then returned to what is known today as Kurdistan but could not find himself there to finally decide to go back to Sweden where he died of cancer in 2013.

together poetry, folk-tales and the collective popular memory to tell a story. The story being poetically told here is the story of a group of motionless bars which rebel against the orders of a smith upon knowing that he is planning on maiming them by transforming them from bars in a window in a library to a prison gate. The epigraph speaks to the very essence of the narrative project—to retell the story of the bars and the dictator, the smith. But the story is not presented from the viewpoint of neither the smith nor any of his cronies. This parallels the story in the novel which is not presented from dictator's viewpoint or the secularists who support him. It is a challenge of both at once. In so doing, Ḥabīb constructs a counter-narrative in a world of dissimulation where the Islamists' struggle is not depicted as a religious imposter. Rather, it is a universal struggle which argues that oppression and practice of random dictatorship can cause—even the non-human— to rebel and react.

The narrator is cognizant of how the story of Islam and Islamists have been manipulated at the hands of dictators who according to Lacan define the self by creating an image of the other where the relationship between the two, the self and the other, is always one of conflict. Or to put it in the words of Chritina Phillips, is a relationship of "ambivalent rejection and the dependency of the self upon another(s)" (Phillips 125). This ambivalent rejection and dependency at the same time explains why the regime entertained and is still entertaining the existence of Islamists in Egypt as a prominent political party which opposes not only the neo-imperialist hegemony in Egypt but also the autocratic and corrupt regime.

The narrator, in the second person, immediately begins describing one of the strategies employed by the regime to sustain its power and convince people of its wrong doings when he says "Try to tell a husband and a wife, for seven day non-stop, that beating the wife by her husband will make them happy, they will reach an unnegotiable conclusion that beating the wife is the key

of a happy marriage" (Ḥabīb 8). It is not only the employment of the lie as a discursive strategy that the regime uses but also the endless repetition of the same lie that the narrator is implying here. For in the analogy of the husband and the wife and the beating of the wife lie, what is more dangerous than the lie itself is actually the repetition of the lie. And this, of course, is the project that any hegemonic discourse would engage itself in to, as Homi Bhabha argues, "justif[ies] conquest and establish[es] systems of administration and instruction" (Bhabha 101). Notwithstanding here the narrator's obsession with the history of his country, although he might wish to understand it, his overriding question throughout the novel remains "Is that our destiny, or do we have a choice in it?" (Ḥabīb 8). Why and how did the will of the people allow a dictator like Mubarak to rule for more than thirty years? The key concern of the narrative is not defending Islam as a faith, rather it is the essence of a man casting himself in the image of God.

Manṣūr's quest to understand and confront the history— the narratives of the past— becomes the vehicle through which he juxtaposes the imprisonment of himself, as the religious person, and that of his brother Fatḥī. Manṣūr's imprisonment was attributed to an accusation against him of wanting to change the regime in Egypt, even though the only information about him is that he goes to the mosque and prays. Fatḥī, however, was imprisoned because he is Manṣūr's brother as we are told by the highly ranked officer at the time of imprisonment "this dog whose name is Manṣūr should, along with all his family, learn a lesson" (Ḥabīb 49). The narrator provides us with almost nothing about the conversation that took place between himself and the police at the time of his arrest. However, he narrates in detail the interaction that occurs between his brother and the police. This deliberate choice signals the arbitrariness of the regime which can never be explained but by the nonsensical. In almost about the dawn time one night, Fatḥī who

was returning to his apartment in Halawan found that the police was waiting for him. This is the conversation that ensues between them:

> Good evening! Fatḥī said! You mean good morning, the police responded! It is almost dawn time. Whatever you say your excellency, said Fatḥī! Do you want a ciggerate to enjoy the dawn time? Angry with his response, the police responded 'are you playing games with me?' And then asked Fatḥī, 'what is your relationship with Manṣūr?' Manṣūr who?' he exclaimed? My brother! Nothing we just met in a bus (Ḥabīb 48).

Absurdity is the embodiment of nonsense as it deliberately reduces and sometimes abandons logic to convey, as Esslin argues, "its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought" (Esslin 24). As a means of resistance against any limiting force in his life, absurdity becomes a key to success and sanity to Fatḥī by ridiculing the meaninglessness of life and bitter experiences. Fatḥī's insane world is one that is devoid of any sense of logic or reasoning. Only through the absurd that Fatḥī can express the prevailing discomfort and fear created by the police. He then moves to the next level to negotiate with, and in fact ridicule, the police by saying:

> You arrested Manṣūr, but I am completely different than him. Would you believe if I told you that I am an empty, womanizer person? You can even ask your colleagues, I was just about to be arrested in down town for the procession of Hashish. You can do a blood test for me right now and you will find that the percentage of drugs in my body is more than my blood itself. But to talk to me about praying, and belonging to certain groups, that is just non sense. All what I know about my brother, Manṣūr, is that he is a bearded man who is religious and prays and he has nothing to do with organizations or watermelon (Ḥabīb 49).

Absurdity is pushed to its highest level here when Fatḥī tries to prove his innocence by distancing himself from religion, which is portrayed as more dangerous than drug trafficking itself. Fatḥī has to admit that he had smoked hashish to save himself. The literary reality in this sense seems to reveal an absurd world which bears a close resemblance to what Egyptians see in their daily life. The reality of this absurd with all its aspects of artistic representations alters not only the form of the literary but its ideology in which the narrative becomes a way to not depict or describe reality but to interpret it. The author stays at distance here allowing one of the secular, at loss citizen, Fatḥī, to comment and interpret the chaotic reality by adhering to the absurd, the cynical and the impossible. The very misunderstanding between Fatḥī and the police is also attributed to the ambiguity of the actual language the latter uses. This ambiguity adds to the absurdity of the regime and its discourse which becomes hard to understand by Egyptian citizens. When Fatḥī responds incorrectly to the police, the latter said "anā mish aṣdī kida yā ghabī ya ḥimār" (this is not what I meant you stupid jack ass) (Ḥabīb 49). The police in this comes out as the one who has a weak sense of collective responsibility or any sense of morality.

Language is one of the means that Ḥabīb utilizes to illustrate the way in which Islam has been addressed in Arabic literature. Specifically, in the novel, he weaves together Egyptian colloquial Arabic with Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) to further challenge the problematic categorizations of religion and levels of adherence employed by regimes to describe their opposition. The linguistic situation of Arabic is often described as diglossic, where the spoken colloquial Arabic and MSA each occupy a particular function in the linguistic landscape. MSA is considered to be the literary language, more specifically the written language, and it stems from Classical Arabic, the language of the Qur'an. As such, MSA is considered to be a high form of the language as opposed to spoken Arabic. When it is used in novels, it is used to narrate and in many

cases in dialogues between characters. However, since MSA is never a mother tongue and requires some level of education, its use by some characters in various contexts is not convincing to the reader. Writers have struggled with this linguistic dichotomy as the use of spoken Arabic in narrative has been challenged since MSA is associated with the liturgical language and often deemed to be the only acceptable form to use in literary output. However, writers who do make use of both forms of Arabic argue that this is a more realistic picture of the linguistic situation of the region where multiple forms of the language are utilized in various contexts challenging this particular dichotomy.

In addition to challenging any clear demarcations between spoken Arabic and MSA, Ḥabīb is also questioning problematic frameworks that associate MSA with increased religiosity. Interestingly, while MSA is considered the literary language it is also used in many forms of cultural production to delineate characters with a conspicuous religious identity. Shaykhs, for example, are often shown to speak in MSA regardless of the context, while other characters speak in the spoken Arabic producing another categorization. Of course, MSA is connected to the liturgical language and thus has a religious dimension; however, it has also been employed in the service of emphasizing a secular pan Arab identity therefore existing in both the secular and religious realms. In the novel, Ḥabīb demonstrates this overlap in the way that both colloquial and MSA are used by the various characters and in the service of different agendas.

Manṣūr, who is falsely arrested because he is labeled as Islamist by praying consistently at a particular mosque, utilizes both spoken and MSA in dialogues with other characters. Although he is highly educated and devoutly performs his faith, he utilizes different linguistic registers depending on the context. Therefore, he uses both in the personal realm but also when he is challenging the false charges brought against him by representatives of the state, in other words,

the police. Fatḥī and the police officer, on the other hand mainly utilize spoken Arabic. While Fatḥī is educated as well, he uses colloquial Arabic in all the dialogues. The police officer, an agent of the state and a symbol of authority, not only speaks in colloquial Arabic but often times uses a vulgar form of the language, especially when he is interacting with prisoners like Manṣūr. This linguistic superiority which is given to Manṣūr, the Islamist, "is a skillful textual strategy that enables Islamists to control the narrative [and] articulate their vision persuasively" (Hafez 49). Linguistically, Manṣūr comes out as the exact opposite of the cruel police. Manṣūr is articulate, reasonable and convincing in his argument and thus he wins the heart of his readers in his interaction with the police, one of the regime's apparatus. This strategy allows Manṣūr to counter the narrative of the regime by challenging the binary division of rationalism and irrationalism which has been assumed for a long time as the strongest point of contention between the government, the secular, and the Islamists.

As such, the narrative of this novel undermines the regime's stereotyping project by focusing on the argument that the use of Islam and Islamism is becoming less rather than more powerful. It is no longer successful in creating the binary division between the supposedly democratic discourse of the regime and that of Islamism which by default signifies the resurgence of the irrational, and the stubborn persistence in rejecting any thing modern. Such a narrative functions ultimately to discredit the stereotype that Islam and its adherents are fanatical agents of regressive traditionalism.

In a very sarcastic scene in the novel, Fatḥī openly asserts his rejection of this binary division between what Ernest Gellner refers to as "Enlightenment Rationalist" as opposed to "Islamic fundamentalist" (Gellner 1). He, Fatḥī, is completely aware of the regime's project of othering, of divide and rule. In his cell with one of his cellmates who asks him a very silly question:

"Is it true that cucumber is ḥarām (forbidden) as the people of Sunnah argue?' (Ḥabīb 69). Fatḥī's response to this question is:

> This is the problem with the television, its series and films… Those people [the people of Sunnah] are normal people, everything for them is ḥalāl but that what God has forbidden. They are more conservative, they pray, fast, give alimony, they enjoy life, they like others and others like them. They eat and drink anything that is not forbidden. They go to Cinema and they also travel outside their countries. Look at my brother, Manṣūr, for instance, he is a doctor who fell in love with his colleague and they married each other. I really have never seen two people who like one another like this […] I have never also seen two people happier than them until they were arrested by the government. The problem is we watch and believe anything the television is telling us (Ḥabīb 71).

What is so interesting about this discussion is the very fact that it is taking place between two drug addicts behind cell bars. Although, they come out as people who are far from being religious, they discuss a very sensitive issue in their society—the issue of Islamists and their representation by the regime in Egypt. In the process of normalizing the image of Islamists and what they do, the discourse negates the depiction of religion as a hegemonic political construct and problemtizes the regime's refusal to engage religion because of the former's aversion to anything Islamic. Fatḥī's response does not seem to be to the question directed to him about cucumbers, as trivial as it is, rather it is an engagement with the regime's filth in building and spreading lies about Islamists. This focus on the regime's filth and absurdity is part of the post-dictatorial aesthetics that the narrative employs in its critique of the dictatorial nation-state. Or to put it in the words of Deina Ali Abdelkader it is in the rejection of including Islamists and "the unwillingness to understand and explain the Islamic vision of the state and Islamic peoples' aspirations for Muslim society

[which] has led to the current failure in communication with 'the other'" (Abdelkader 4). Rather than sounding like the other secularists, the narrative portrays Islamists to be deceived by their government. They are both in the same situation and they are both aware of their reality. In the midst of nation-state formation, Egyptian publics, the media, and even some scholars viewed Islamists and Islamic activists as violent and persistent enemies who worked uninterruptedly against the progress of the nation. And it is this assumption that this narrative is countering to dismiss the presupposition that the West has imposed that reason, as defined within a Western framework, and secularism are determinative keys to attain democracy. While Fatḥī accepts the Western framing of reasoning to be one of the keys to an aspiring democratic society, he rejects the way the state imposed secularism as its mutual. More specifically, he interrogates the work of the state in using secularism as a prerequisite for establishing a modern, democratic society. This discussion between Fatḥī and his cellmate that occurs in prison signifies the absence of real scholars who should be discussing the possibility of having Islamists as political Islamic leaders who can engage with their societies.

Another issue that Ḥabīb tackles is that of *takfīr*, which is the practice of excommunication. Specifically, this is when an individual Muslim or group declares one an apostate; therefore, excluding them from the community. Oftentimes, this practice has been associated with groups that are deemed to have more extreme leanings, the earliest being the Kharijites. This group, whose name comes from the Arabic root to go out, was the first group to separate from the mainstream Islamic Community because they questioned whether the leaders had deviated and thus had become apostates. Moreover, by declaring an individual a *kāfir* or non-believer it was then possible to kill them if they were considered a threat to Islam and the Muslim community. *Takfīr* is a practice that many Muslim leaders reject because it results in vigilante justice without sufficient

safeguards. Moreover, belonging to the community should not be determined through use of force and if it based on opposition to authority. In this novel, Ḥabīb addresses the practice of *takfīr* and problematizes those who accuse others of apostasy and are accused themselves, especially as it relates to the depiction of Islamists by the government. Specifically, the novel demonstrates that this practice can be utilized as a framework to underscore the process at work by the regime in regards to its opposition that often extends to include individuals that are not involved in politics. Individuals and groups that reject the hegemony of the government in some cases are labeled as Islamists and depicted as a danger to the state, especially in their presumed use of the concept of *takfīr* that could make targets of fellow citizens. In the novel, Ḥabīb illustrates this point with Manṣūr's imprisonment. He is labeled as an Islamist and thus a threat to the government because of his performance of the faith. He is a citizen who is unjustly targeted by the state; in this way, the question emerges if the actions of the government—determining which citizens belong to the nation and making it acceptable to issue a punishment without due process— can be read as similar to *takfir*. Manṣūr poses this question while in prison. He wonders about the dangers of a regime that excommunicates citizens if they oppose the state's hegemony. In one occasion in the novel, Manṣūr seems to be having a soliloquy when he says:

> You come to realize that the essence of *takfīr*, which you completely reject, is not any different from the environment that you are experiencing. The whole thing has nothing to do with any religion. It is just an idea that came as a result of the severe violence and punishment that you had received which forced you to pose some logical questions:
>
> Could it be possible for the police who is beating me up day and night to be a Muslim?
>
> Is it possible that the officer who ordered him to do so is also Muslim?
>
> Can the government which put this law be Islamic one?

> Is the violence which they perfectly know how to practice it with the imprisoned people from Islam?
>
> Why do they get shocked then if people react to them violently like they were? The whole issue then becomes a revenge issue not terrorism (Ḥabīb 53).

By addressing readers, using the pronoun 'you', the narrator signals the significance of our active participation as readers. An active reader who inhabits this text reads not only the actual words of the story but also the story of the writer, Ḥabīb, who reads the dominant his/story of the government to transform the history of his nation. It is this triangular process that eventually neutralizes the distinction between the factionalist/ historian and fiction/history. In his *Room for Maneuver*, Ross Chambers demonstrates how important this process of 'activating the reader' in oppositional texts is in order to shift the latter's desire away from the dominant narrative of the regime towards an alternative counter-narrative. In so doing, the narrator, Manṣūr, aligns us with him as the victim and showcases how he as a citizen who by being accused as an Islamist has been arbitrarily constructed by the regime and its discourse suggesting that "it is necessary to change the reality that has been constructed in this way, but starting—because there is no alternative—from the way things are now, that is, from the given situation of power. Theirs must be a politics of oppositionality, if by that is understood the form of resistance available to the relatively disempowered" (Chambers xi).

What Chambers is calling for is evident in the work of *Lā Yā Shaykh* in which Manṣūr situates his story and the story of what the regime refers to as Islamists within the larger historical framework of Egypt as a nation. The outcome of such a process ultimately fosters sympathy, at least in regards to the reader. We start to empathize with Manṣūr who suffers and struggles from being an innocent victim of the regime. As Ḥabīb shows us that his project is to challenge the force

of stereotyping and false construction, managing religion in the name of national community as Lila Abu-Lughod argues, which casts him and his alike as a political challenge to the state's modernization and progressiveness (Abu-Lughod 60). Since the goal of the writer is to counter the narrative of the dictator and his apparatus, he has to embed the fictional elements of the novel within the sympathized reader's historical reality to decrease—if not eliminate at all—any gap between the textual and the extratextual worlds.

The text interrogates that treatment of the history of Islamists as universal, as it is told by the West in its Orientalism or as it is told by the regime. It, however, problematizes the process of historization and its very arbitrariness. The history and the lies of the Egyptian regime are treated as the raw material which is transmuted through the narrative process into fiction that aims at explaining why Islamists "are understood as taking revenge on government forces, not engaging in an insurrection that is being repressed or constituting a social movement intent on changing the fundamental structures of governance and society to bring them in line with a vision of Islamic society" (Abu-Lughod 74).

This arbitrariness of the regime in writing and implementing the law which adheres to one's self interpretation is clear in a conversation that occurs between Manṣūr and Ḥamdī Zahrān, when Manṣūr exclaimed how unfair the condition and the process of his arrests is. Manṣūr exclaimed: "Your excellency, I am a doctor not a criminal prisoner. I am a political prisoner and I have my rights". Ḥamdī Zahrān, arrogantly responded:

> This is at your mother's house... my dear! Here, you have no rights and nobody even knows that you are here. What that means is that I could kill you now, very normal, simply because you are not here and nobody will ever ask me about you. And, if you want more evidence, let me tell you about something called 'multiple arrest'. Do you know what that is? It means

> that according to the third article in our constitution we have 'emergency law' which permits the arrest of anyone who is accused of or deemed dangerous to the security of the regime, and this, as you know is very flexible law. I can, if I want, say that you endanger the regime, it all depends on the mood of my mother[67] (Ḥabīb 54).

This interaction helps to show some of the dictator's notorious strategy of controlling people and having them under a continuous state of fear to ensure their absolute submission. This instance of situating the story of Manṣūr within a historical context that is very unique to the regime in Egypt, the emergency law and its arbitrariness, creates an empathetic feeling in the reader as they witness the unjust treatment of Manṣūr at the hands of Ḥamdī Zahrān who implements the dictator's law.[68] This emphatic understanding, along with the produced contrast of what the regime claims itself to be and its actual atrocities and cold calculations of the same action, strengthen the sympathy between Ḥabīb's readers and the victims of the dictator. Through the articulation of the emergency law and its notoriousness as told by Ḥamdī Zahrān, who admits as a spokesperson how damaging and dangerous this law is, the novel allows readers to experience, even if it is only through reading, the process of alienation Manṣūr and fellow citizens have experienced as they became familiar with the dictator and his abuse/s of his power over his citizens/victims. The story of Manṣūr is presented in a way that makes it generalizable for all Egyptians who seek freedom of speech. The above quote makes three assertions: that all Egyptians were implicated in the dictatorship; that freedom of speech, choice, and press and so on was lost under the dictator and his law of ruling;

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[67] I translated the phrase "bimazāg ummī" the way it sounds in Arabic to capture the poetic of arbitrariness implied in using it. This phrase can also be translated as 'if I want or say so".

[68] The emergency law is one of the tools in the hands of the executive power which strips away many basic rights and freedom guaranteed by the Egyptian Constitution. After the assassination of President Anwar El Sadat in October 1981, this law was enforced by a temporary resolution for one year and it was extended many times again until 2011.

and finally, that it is worth recovering from the coma imposed on the citizens by the dictator's regime, even if it is by rewriting the history of the nation which challenges the narrative of the dictator's and his cronies. It is this very last assertion that this novel is concerned with— a call to regain a lost agency. The loss of agency, which Mansur presents as an inalienable right becomes a call to action not only by Manṣūr but also by his readers and fellow citizens. Manṣūr's story underscores the novel's basic assumption that the Egyptian judicial system has been jeopardized under Mubarak's dictatorship to completely collapse in 2011 resulting in a chaotic environment which naturally provokes violence and revenge. In other words, lacking an established judicial system capable of dealing with the dictator's abuse of power, leads citizens to engage in, what might seem primitive cycle of vengeance as René Gerard argues, where a sacrifice becomes both necessary and inevitable to preserve a society (Gerard 91).

While using narrative to mirror, denounce, and deconstruct the narrative of Mubarak's regime, the novel simultaneously reasserts the very strategies employed in the dictator's empowerment by increasing the readers' suspicion of the artificiality of the dictator's structures. The work of this novel echoes what Roberto Gonzalez-Echevarria refers to in his, *The Voice of the Masters*, when he writes: "Dictator Novels […] undermines the myth of dictators and create a game of mirrors that corrodes the relation that [dictators' structures] had established between myth and history". […] "This new novel demonstrates in its very structure that in reality dictators are not powerful telluric forces, but ideological diversions, shadows cast by the true powers" (83). What this actually means is that by repeatedly calling into question and interrogating the resources of Mubarak's lies and laying bare his empowering process/es, the novel undermines the dictator's power through turning his empowering process against itself. In other words, in a process that uses the interplay between history and fiction, literature is being used as a means to debunk the very

process of dictation that once enabled authoritarian rule. Manṣūr in the narrative is not the terrorist, as he is accused of being by the regime, rather he is the victim of a regime that artifices its citizens through deceiving them. Although this artifice is foregrounded throughout the text, it is clear that Ḥabīb is exploiting the gap between fiction and reality, between the signifier and the signified, to symbolically challenge and rewrite the history of the dictator and possibly incite Egyptians away from the current dictatorship and any future deception and oppression. One cannot but sympathize with Manṣūr, the Islamist, in the quote above. He, through the inventive use of narrative in the novel, is not the one who instigates violence, rather it is the state which does so, as they are capable of doing it, in the words of the officer Ḥamdī Zahrān. This novel, unlike what Hafez says about the trilogy of Alī Abū al-Makārim, does not present Islamism as a "utopian thinking opposed to an aggressive police vent on using every means to destroy its opponents" (51). Rather, Islamism in this work, comes out as a counter-ideology to the dictatorial regime and its political system in which even the oppressive police is presented as a victim of the dictatorial regime.

In the final scene of the novel, Manṣūr and Ḥamdī Zahrān, the officer and prison guard, are shot and killed one right after the other. In his words to close the novel, the narrator tells us:

> The next day, newspapers published a news bulletin under the title: 'a dentist got shot by someone driving unknown car'. Two weeks later, the same newspapers published another news bulletin, but with bigger fonts, under the title: 'Ḥamdī Zahrān was shot dead'. This all happened where everybody painstakingly was wondering: 'where did Fatḥī disappear?' Nobody answers! Nobody knows! (Ḥabīb 142).

Though the two murders occur at different times, there is an eerily similar quality connecting them. Both of their deaths are announced in the newspaper in vague language, without a clear culprit. In addition to their deaths, Fatḥī disappears at the end, with the implication that it

was not voluntary. This ending illustrates a central point of the novel and that is the pervasiveness of the regime and the mechanisms at work to maintain its authoritarian governance. Specifically, these deaths and Fatḥī's disappearance underscore that while the Islamist is often depicted as the enemy of the state in the rhetoric of the dictator, the novel illustrates that anyone can be targeted by the state and become its victim. This is clear in all three of their endings. After being labeled an Islamist and being wrongly imprisoned, Manṣūr earns his release when he is forced to serve as an informant. Due to his inability to serve as an informant, Manṣūr remains a threat to the dictatorial regime in his refusal to betray fellow citizens for the sake of the dictator. His decision to emigrate and leave his homeland is unacceptable to the regime and therefore he must be eliminated. Ḥamdī, on the other hand, as a police officer is an agent of the state; yet, he like Manṣūr is targeted by the regime. It is Ḥamdī who demands from Manṣūr that he become an informant for the state and effectively admits to Manṣūr that they were aware that he was innocent when he was arrested. By rescinding on the agreement to serve as an informant and possibly revealing this demand, Manṣūr becomes a liability to the regime. Ḥamdī becomes a liability as well when he cannot fulfill his job to force citizens to follow the demands of the state. Ḥamdī's character illustrates that in a dictatorial regime the police serve the aims of the leader and not the citizens.

By accommodating the secular, the police, and the Islamist into the story, *Lā Yā Shaykh* emerges as a new manifestation to support its very basic proposition that the dictatorial regime, under Mubarak has collapsed—as evidenced by the murder of Manṣūr, the Islamist, and Ḥamdī Zahrān, the police officer, and finally by the disappearance of Fatḥī— resulting in an environment that provokes more violence. The only way to naturally avoid this cycle of violence and revenge will be to establish a judicial system capable of dealing with Mubarak's abuse of power. In this

context, the depiction of the dictator as a vampire who is willing to kill any and everybody to maintain his power in this closing scene is very significance. It is through this image that *Lā Yā Shaykh,* at least, symbolically unraveled the processes which previously led to the deification of the dictator as the god whom all citizens should sacrifice their lives for and turned these processes against the dictator who now becomes the object of sacrifice. The 'ungodly' description of him here and throughout the novel renders him as the false god whose abuse of power should not only be challenged but also removed by all Egyptians. The text redeems all Egyptians, the police, the secularists, and the Islamists who fell into the trap of dictatorship by testifying to and exposing the dictatorial regime and its ungodliness with the hope of educating Egyptians and simultaneously minimizing the chances that such dictatorship would happen again. Obviously, by turning the dictator's own method against itself breaks down his hegemony and subsequently replaces it with the will of the people for social and political justice. Unlike, the work of many earlier Arabic novels during their engagement with the colonized-colonizer relationship, where the "clash is between the national self and a foreign other, the conflict here is within the self, a fractured self" (Hafez, Islam 52). There is something admirable and undeniably clever in the way the writer uses narrative to turn the table over and successfully destabilize the dictator by turning his rhetoric against itself. While revealing the intricate shifts in how dictatorship is experienced, imagined and challenged, the novel's strategies challenge the normalized discourse on the history of dictators and sets the stage for those who have been marginalized to undermine this history and relay a counter-narrative through performative excavation of encounters.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have demonstrated how dictators have been represented and I also tried to explain the significance of such representation. I challenged the otherwise falsely stated premise of the absence of Arabic dictator novels, to argue that fictional representations of dictators suggest a different historical investigation which emerges from the interplay of dictators' actions and history and that of the novelists and their versions of history. The Arabic novel and the emerging sub-genre, the dictator novel to be more specific, has become a means for a new generation of Arab novelists who have been silent for a long time due to the censorship imposed on them by dictators who not only control the political arena but also through the dictation of cultural production. The door is now open for more writers to seize the 'room for maneuver' that fictional texts create to help in re/shaping the historical and cultural archives of dictators and their legacies. The gap between the history created by dictators and the experience of the people in their nations has given a potent ground for Arab novelists and their 'room for maneuver' (Ross, 1).

Rather than establishing or canonizing the genre, I utilized the concept of the 'room for maneuver' created by the novels under scrutiny, to identify a series of practices and techniques adopted by dictators. This 'room for maneuver' does not automatically mean that novelists will always succeed in altering the political landscape, but rather, one hopes that, their work will serve as a space to destabilize dictatorial power structures and perhaps elicit change. Using fiction as a platform, writers often speak out against the abuse, in any capacity, of political power in the Arab world. Thus, there is an intersection between the fictional realm and reality. In questioning, parodying, inscribing and challenging dictators and their history and manipulation of power, the Arabic dictator novel can influence readers by transforming their opinions and the way they view

the authoritarian regime and subsequently diminish the possibility that another dictator would ever rise to power again.

Arabic dictator novels are not any different than their Latin American counterparts— in the sense that they both are the products of oppressive political regimes. Starting with this premise in the first chapter and focusing on its aesthetics association as sites of embodiment of/in Arabic modern experience reflected by the writers studied in this study, I argued that the Arabic dictator novel not only lends itself to Latin American theoretical and fictional frameworks, but that it is, to some extent, constitutive of its aesthetics as well. And this was the main argument of my theoretical framework in the first numbered chapter. Thus, even though we do not have a genre that it is called dictator Arabic novel in and by itself, we do have evidence of writers, dating back to the sixties, using different trends to portray dictators and dictatorial regimes through fiction.

The depiction of these dictators was at times symbolic as in the case of Gabalawi in *Awlād Hāritnā* (*Children of the Alley*, 1959) by Naguib Mahfouz or that of the Imam in Nawal El Sadaawi *Suqūt al-imām* (*The Fall of the Imam*, 1987). Some writers employed even more creative narrative strategies to write about historical figures from the history of Arab rulers and their dictatorships to project on the current dictators such as that of the work of the Moroccan writer Ben Salim Himmich in his *Majnūn al-ḥukm* (*The Tyrant*, 1998) and that of Gamal Al-Ghitani's *Al-Zaynī Barakāt* (1974).[69] These are a few examples as I demonstrated in the first chapter of many other writers who engaged in new literary aesthetics to critique the dictators and to express the people's

[69] The reference in these two novels is to the two historical figures in Arab history, the Fatimid Caliph al-Hakim bi-amr Allah from the eleventh century and Barakāt Ibn Mūsā, the Mamluki ruler who governed Egypt in the Sixteenth century.

disappointments. There is, however, no one single study, at least to my knowledge, that looks at how such texts offer amalgamation of the current Arab dictators.

In the second chapter of this study, for instance, we are reminded of the father and founder of 'la novella del dictador', Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, and his work *Facundo: Civilización y Barbarie*. In this work which he wrote from exile in Chile, he tells the story of Juan Facundo Quirogo, an Argentine military leader. Lending his experience to that of the Latin American, as we have seen in the second chapter in my dissertation, the North African writers—the Algerian writer Ibrāhīm Saᶜdī and the Moroccan Rashīd Jallūlī—fictional dictator figures to project on a contemporary ones. Both Saᶜdī and Jallūlī, Saᶜdī specifically, attempt to depict the circumstances under which a dictator comes to power.

The story of *al-Aᶜẓam,* sets out not only to debunk the dictatorship of al-Aᶜẓam, the fictional dictator in the novel, but also, perhaps more urgently, to recall and reflect upon the circumstances that brought him to power. The story of al-Aᶜẓam and Sufyān al-Dāwūdī, then, is not far from that of the story of the Latin American "Caudillos", as autocrats who are the products of the peculiar combination of both colonization and independence movements[70]. Speaking to this phenomenon, in the Latin American context, William Beezly writes: "The colonial period had provided a convenient heritage of just such a consolation of authority on one person. The stage was prepared for the Caudillo" (348). What this means is that while colonization, no doubt, left a legacy of centralized authoritarianism, the independence movements in many third world countries opened a door of power vacuum that gave ambitious generals and military leaders momentum to see themselves as the leaders, and sometimes, the only leaders without whom the nations cannot move

[70] For more about this, please refer to William Bleezly. Caudillismo: An Interpretive Note. *Journal of Inter-American Studies* (1969): 345-352.

forward. A fictionalized history of the Algerian war for independence is narrated in *al-Aʿẓam* to problematize the coming to power of the dictator and how the stage was already prepared for him since he participated in the independence war. This is why in *al-Aʿẓam,* the novel announces from the very beginning his death. This death I argued not only raised questions about his presumed eternity but it also gives the people, the fictional inhabitants of the novel at least, the courage and the strength to talk about his divine dictatorship. It denotes the triumph of people's well over that of the dictator. In regards to the question of imitation and originality, I want to suggest that while Arab writers benefited from the experience of Latin American writers, they have appropriated the genre in a dynamic interplay—they share some characteristic with the Latin American dictator novel, but at the same time they also maintain a domestic specificity in which Arab dictatorships are fictionalized through the cultural, political, religious and social construct of the Arab world.

And we have seen this in both chapter two and four in this dissertation how religious discourse comes to play in explaining how it has been used by dictators to both garner more support and crush opposition. My reading of Arabic novels, through the lenses of Latin American theorists highlights a new articulation of literary appropriation of a genre that became exclusive to Latin America at the beginning of the twentieth century to inform and shape, I hope, intellectual debates about Arab dictators, Arabic dictator novels and literary authenticity. In other words, literary genres are dynamic, they travel, shift, and get appropriated.

Moving away from North African texts to Yemeni texts and focusing on the bodily account and encounter of dictators and their dictatorships, chapter three of this dissertation, examined the case of Yemen's dictatorship from the confusion and frustration while in Europe of both Ilhām and Nashwān. Through many processes and embodiment of the dictatorial practices which strips Ilhām of her human nature, the novel struggles to expose dictators' violent and ideological

production. In describing his reaction to dictators across Arab nations, and in Yemen specifically, Sarūrī unveils the play of contradictions at work in the history of the nation and the claimed history of the dictator who always sees himself as 'ḥāmi al-himā', the absolute protector. This reconstruction of Saruuri's dictator, *Ṭā'ir al-Kharāb*, the destroyer of Ilhām's body, ultimately robs the dictator of his ability to monopolize history by framing and reframing how he would be perceived by others despite all his efforts to impose and write a singular history of himself being in power. The writer's triumph, and Sarūrī's in this context, if we can call it as such, is the novel itself. It is his only way and means to expose the atrocities of a dictator as experienced by one of his victims whose body is read as that of the body of the whole nation. In so doing, the writer not only takes part in the literary corpus but also in the making of a history that counters the official history propagated by the dictator and his cronies. It is hard for me not to think of this considering that for more than three decades, dictators such as Salih in Yemen were systematically mythologized, deified and in some cases even became the God and saviors of their nations.

The novel seems to be an attempt at seeking meaning from what one might call a different source, the narrative process. The aim of which is to unveil, reveal, demythologize, decentralize and probably to write the history of not only their nations but the history of dictators as well. It is confusion and frustration that drove Nashwān, the protagonist, all the way from Europe to Yemen to involve himself and his readers in a systematic confrontation with and deconstruction of Saleh's dictatorship in Yemen from his early time of coming to power onward. As such, Sarūrī's novel brings to existence a trajectory of rupture in the vicious cycle of the dictator and his history calling attention to what he refers, allegorized in the body of Ilhām, as the nation 'wall picture as drawn at the hand of Ṭā'ir al-Kharāb" (Sarūrī). The novel, like the other novels examined in this dissertation, tells stories of and about the subjects of dictators. These stories coincide with

innovations and play to deterritorialize and rewrite the history of the dictators by challenging it, and to use Layoun own words, to "propose discourse(s) of liberation, [and…] to recognize the possibility of discourses that enslaves" (244). What this suggests is that there is greater potential to influence readers now in texts that arguably reached a sophisticated level of maturity that enables them to offer a profound insight/s not only into the work of dictators and the history of their atrocious dictatorships but also into their inner minds. The success of such writers and their mention, I argued should not only be measured by their ability to help the citizens of these dictatorships to break free but rather of their ability to speak of and to the horrors dictatorships depicted.

My last chapter looked at dictatorship from Islamists' point of view, a group that suffered from most dictatorships in the twentieth century. In this chapter, I problematized the issue of how Islam and Islamists are depicted in Arabic literature and how writers use fiction to draw parallels between fiction and reality in order to explore the idea of the fantastic in order to portray collective memory of reality in the texts. *Lā Yā Shaykh*, by Saʿīd Ḥabīb lucidly dismantled the use of Islam as an ideological process that empowers the dictatorial regime in such a way that turns the rhetoric against itself. In other words, the chapter argued that the monolithic representation of Islamists is oversimplified and misleading at the same time because it conceals an extremely complex reality and that it is among the strategies of the regime to maintain its control over the political landscape. Through the analysis of the novel under scrutiny, I tried to break open the preconceptions and the stereotypes about Islam and Islamists as an 'other' in Egypt by looking at Islam as a rudimentary religion rather than a heterogeneous one—individuals who identify themselves as Islamists are not one thing, rather they oscillate from and within religion and secularity. This specific chapter gave me the chance to bring together history, literature and religion in one boat to provide an

understanding on how religion in the postcolonial Arabic nation-states has been employed by Arab dictators as a means of deceiving their citizens through the reified negative and static images attributed to anyone who actively practices the faith. I tried to demonstrate how the novel showed that Muslims' performance of the Islam can be very diverse just as the interpretations of the religion are diverse and are not defined by extreme images.

My dissertation is significant for those who are interested in the new political Arabic novel where calls about and for human rights are resonating from and through re-narrating history. In this process, Arabic texts are not only representing dictators but also decentering and reproducing their discourse in an effort, not only to challenge it, but also to move it to the margin. Neither the novels I studied nor this dissertation itself are to be mistaken as definitive surveys in the field of dictatorship and literary texts in the Arab world. I hope, however, that this dissertation will serve as a contribution to future research and scholarship in this field where literary and political arenas are spaces of experimentation – they influence and influenced by each other. Just like the experience of the writers of the sixties and the seventies incited a change in the norms of narrative in the Arab world, the upheavals and experience of the Arab world at the turn of the second millennium will incite literary innovations which will then transform the aesthetics of writing.

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